

Billy Collins' poem, "The Lanyard" is a favorite of mine. I've shared it before with you one Mother's Day. This morning I'd like to share it again, this time, thanks to virtual church, we can hear Collins read the poem himself. [SHOW VIDEO](#)

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly—
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

Poets and prophets illumine truth in powerful ways. Sometimes,
as with Billy Collins, the truth is offered by employing a
metaphor, like a lanyard in a humorous, disarming way, through
first person confession many can identify with—“not the worn
truth that you can never repay your mother, but the rueful
admission that when she took the two-tone lanyard from my
hand, I was as sure as a boy could be that this useless, worthless
thing I wove out of boredom would be enough to make us even.”

We laugh in resignation, realizing at some point on the journey we've all played that game, assuring ourselves we've done enough for those who gave us life to make things even.

Prophets tend to be more direct in communicating their truths. Micah certainly was. He also employs metaphor. In our reading this morning, the metaphor is a court room. God is the plaintiff; God's people are the defendants, and all creation serves as the jury. The previous chapters have laid out the complaint. It is aimed particularly at the leaders of Judah. They have not done justice, rather they have used their influence to exploit the vulnerable and to create even greater inequalities in their society.

God brings the passionate complaint in Micah 6, "O my people, what have I done to you?" I brought you out of the land of Egypt. I freed you from slavery. I sent you Moses, Aaron and Miriam to lead you through the wilderness." During that time God provided manna in the morning, quail in the evening, water from the rock, a law to live by. God brought them into the promised land, giving them victory over their enemies,

establishing them in a land flowing with milk and honey. God gave them life and land and love. How did they respond? Not even with a lanyard.

Judah's response is injustice for the least of these. Self serving policies that advance only the leader's interest. When God calls them on the carpet, they respond with defensiveness. "What do you want from us, O God? Burnt offerings, calves a year old, thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? How about our first born?" Then the prophet offers the faithful response. "He has shown you, O Mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

Note that this is not a way for Israel to get anything from God. God has already provided everything they need. God saved them. God freed them. God fed them. God delivered them. God gave them life and land and love. Like a mother's love, God's love is not conditional, nor can it ever be "repaid," whatever that might mean. Even ten thousand rivers of oil would

be like a lanyard in an effort to make things even. Doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly are not some means to receive a sought after end. They are the faithful response to all God has already done. And they don't make things even, rather they offer a thank you to God, a just response to all God has done for us.

So what does it mean to "do justice?" In our society, we tend to define justice as people getting what they deserve. Biblically, justice is more about people getting what they need. In his book, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes us Just*, Tim Keller writes, "Over and over again, [in the Bible] *mishpat*, (the Hebrew word for justice,) describes taking up the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor – those who have been called 'the quartet of the vulnerable.'"¹ He goes on to say, "God loves and defends those with the least economic and social power, and so should we. That," Keller concludes, "is what

¹ Tim Keller. *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*, (Riverhead: New York, 2012,) p. 17.

it means to 'do justice.'"² Again, we do this not to earn God's favor, but in response to the favor God has already given us.

This year's stewardship theme is drawn from Micah 6:8. What does the Lord require of you? It's a risky thing to use this passage for an annual campaign. The implied answer may just be, "a pledge card." While submitting your financial commitment for the coming year will certainly help our church's leadership with budgeting and planning in these uncertain days, let me be clear in saying that's not what the Lord requires of you. In the grand scheme of things, our pledge card could end up being a lot like that lanyard, especially if we do so with the self-assurance that it would make us even with our maker.

To avoid that possibility, I would encourage you to take a different approach. Consider your life. Consider the blessings of God that make life worth living. Consider your breathing body and your beating heart, the many gifts God has given you in your life. Having considered all that, now ask yourself, "With what

² Ibid., p. 18.

shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?" After all God has done for you, how will you respond? What will you do with the life God has given you? How will you live your life? What will you do with the resources entrusted to your care? That's what stewardship is all about.

God has shown you what is good. As Christians we believe God has shown us in an incredibly profound way, by coming among us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Today we will celebrate communion, hearing the words of Jesus to his friends, words that remind us of what he did for us all, indeed for the whole wide world, embodying the justice of God made complete in a grace that gives us all we need. "This is my body, given for you...this is my life blood poured out for the forgiveness of sin...do this remembering me." Do this remembering me. Offer yourselves in love for this broken world, do justice, love kindness, walk humbly, not to get anything more, but to respond faithfully to all you've already received. This, beloved, is the just response. Amen.

Communion—do this in remembrance of me.

After all God has done for you, what will you do for others?