



Day 4 | Friday, March 11, 2022
Presenter Will Rutt

I am thankful for the opportunity to reflect and pray with you all today because it has provided me the space and accountability to wrestle with challenges that I encounter both as an individual who aspires to create a more loving world and as someone who works for and leads an organization oriented toward justice. Tonight, I'd like to share a story and an image that I have continually returned to as I prayed with today's readings. The first relates closely to our Gospel reading, and the second with the first reading, but both speak to a difficult reality present in justice work: discerning the difference between performative and authentic action for justice.

In today's Gospel, Jesus offers a rather difficult challenge. I was immediately caught off guard because Jesus opened by outlining the requirement of righteousness greater than that of the scribes or Pharisees to enter the kingdom of God. This was perplexing, as I have often read, heard, and experienced the scribes and Pharisees as villains and representations of false righteousness. This raised an important question for me: What does Jesus mean by righteousness?

Continuing through the Gospel reading, Jesus offers a number of insights and challenges to this question, most notably he says, "Whoever is angry with his sibling will be liable to judgment, and whoever says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna." Talk about being called out. This line is actively challenging what I have perceived to be righteousness. Growing up, one of the phrases I said most was "that is unfair." Early on in life, right and wrong, justice and injustice, felt clear and unambiguous. If I felt like something was unjust, you would surely be hearing about it ... many times. This was especially true in college. During my sophomore year of college, I had a transformational experience of studying abroad in the Dominican Republic, through a service learning program at Creighton University called Encuentro Dominicano. As the saying goes, the experience ruined me for life, reorienting my passion, energy, and career hopes towards justice work. Upon returning from time abroad, as I tried to make sense of the culture shock and integrate this new experience into my life, I would often rant or call out folks who I perceived "didn't get it" or "didn't care enough." This resulted in the burning of a lot of relationships, but several of my friends graciously bore my arrogance and self-righteousness, helping me to check my ego and learn to be more charitable, loving, and generative. As I began to see the damaging nature of this way of being, I tried to focus on building relationships, listening to people, and drawing on people's goodness rather than pushing people away or intentionally making them feel bad for my perception of their lack of commitment, knowledge, or experience. I continue to fight the

desire to correct or lecture people when they aren't acting the way I think they should act. I do believe there are moments when we need to call people out, to interrupt injustice actively being acted on, but more often than not, we need to opt for the harder and more authentically righteous act of leaning into relationship and calling others in.

As I reflected on the first reading, specifically the lines, "When someone virtuous turns away from virtue to commit iniquity, and dies, it is because of the iniquity he committed that he must die," when I read this, my self-perceived, virtuous vow to live a life committed to justice felt targeted, and, frankly, I found myself becoming a bit defensive. As I tried to open myself up to this warning and invitation, I kept returning to a central image: the Black Lives Matter sign that sits in the front window of our house. Shortly after the murder of George Floyd, my wife and I decided, among other things, to buy a yard sign from the Black Lives Matter website and put it up in our front yard in Arizona. We felt like this simple act of solidarity was one way to participate in a foundational social upheaval to uproot racism in our country and world. About a year later, we were selling our house and moving to Seattle. As we were getting ready to put our house on the market, our realtor asked us to take down the sign because it might dissuade potential buyers. After very little thought and reflection, we obliged and took down the sign, and our house was under contract within 24 hours of being on the market. I am not sure what impact having the sign up would have had on the sale of our home, but this decision stands out as a moment of false righteousness in my life. I was happy to put up our sign during the height of the movement, when it was largely socially acceptable and encouraged, but when the time came for me to take a risk, I caved. Instead of having a difficult conversation with our realtor about the importance of keeping the sign up or potentially allowing our house to spend a little more time on the market or not sell for top dollar, I chose the path of false righteousness.

As I lambasted myself for this moment, I was taken back to the second week of the spiritual exercises when Ignatius invites us to face the moments where we fail to live up to who we are made and intend to be in the world, the moments where we act out of fear as opposed to freedom. As I sat in prayer, I began to think about the life of Jesus, looking for some sort of guidance for how to prevent this sort of false action, arrogance, and virtue signaling. Time and time again, I returned to the fundamental ways of being that Jesus embodied: He invested in relationships and he took risks.

In both experiences, I defaulted to performance, rather than an authentic pursuit of justice. I gave into my ego, a desire for control, a fear of rejection, and an aversion to discomfort and risk. Jesus seems to be inviting us into a new righteousness, one that invests in relationships centered around meeting people where they are at, speaking honestly, being open to messy and tension filled moments, and deferring to lived experience. A righteousness that considers the risks that marginalized communities live under constantly and without choice, and chooses to love without regard for the cost. Jesus invites us to this new righteousness.

As we continue to reflect and pray together, I invite us to consider two questions:

- What relationships am I being called to invest in, renew, or discover?
- Where am I being called to take a risk for love?