

UNMERITED JUSTICE

ISAIAH 65:17-25

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well.

Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

In 1921 Lewis Lawes became the warden at New York's infamous Sing Sing Penitentiary. No prison in the country was tougher with more incidents of violence recorded during the period, but when Warden Lawes retired some twenty years later, Sing Sing had become a humanitarian institution. Those who studied prison reform in the period gave the credit for the institution's turn around to Lawes, but when he was asked about the transformation he had a different story. He once stated, "I owe it all to my wonderful wife, Catherine, who is buried inside the prison walls."

Catherine Lawes was a young mother with three small children when her husband became the warden. Everyone warned her from the very first day that she should never set foot inside the prison. But that didn't stop Catherine. When the first prison basketball game was held, she walked into the gym with her three children and sat down in the crowd with the inmates. Her attitude was simple but very profound: "My husband and I are going to take care of these men and I believe they will take care of me. I have nothing to fear or to worry about." Catherine wanted to know the prisoners and their case histories. She discovered that one convicted murderer was blind, so one day she paid him a visit. Holding his hand in hers, she asked, "Do you read Braille?" "What's Braille?" he asked. His response prompted her to learn Braille and teach the prisoner how to read in this manner. Later, Catherine discovered a deaf mute in the prison. She went to school to learn how to sign so she could communicate with the man.

Catherine Lawes was for many in Sing Sing Prison the Body of Christ. She did everything for all people and never feared for her safety. She was a true disciple who was always present to encourage, support, and bring light to situations shrouded in darkness.

One day Catherine was killed in an auto accident. The next morning Lewis Lawes did not come to work and the acting warden took his place. Almost immediately all in the prison knew something was terribly wrong. The following day Catherine's body was resting in a casket in her home, about a mile from the prison's main gate. As the acting warden was taking his morning walk, he was shocked to see a large crowd of the toughest, hardest-looking criminals gathered like a herd of animals at the main gate. He came closer and noted tears of sadness and grief; he knew how

much they loved Catherine. He turned, faced the inmates, and said, "All right, men, you can go and pay your respects. Just be sure and check in tonight!" The acting warden opened the gate and a parade of criminals walked without escort the mile distance to the warden's house. They filed by one-by-one and offered their condolences to the warden and his family. And every one of them checked back in. Every one!

Catherine Lawes was one woman who changed the lives of many hardcore criminals and allowed them to see the face of God in a truly powerful way by the manner of her life and the support she gave. She created a new environment where men convicted of the most vicious and heinous crimes could, even for a moment, change their views and make a break from their sordid past. For the inmates of Sing Sing she was a savior who brought light to those in darkness and through her actions created a new world with all sorts of possibilities and opportunities.

This is exactly what the church is called to do. We are the Body of Christ sent into the world to bring about the dream of God that Isaiah is describing in this morning's text. God says "I am about to do a new thing". God's dream is a world where children are fed, where babies don't die of preventable diseases, and when disaster does strike help is immediately on the way. In God's dream of how things can be and will be, meaningful work is available for all and just wages are paid. In God's dream world those who were once enemies are now friends, and those who were once excluded from the temple and the church are now included.

If God's dream is too big for us, then we have no right to call ourselves the church, the body of Christ! The church is not a club that exists for its members. The church is the body of Christ that is called to work to bring about God's vision for the way things can be. The transformation, God's dream, must begin with us! We must be changed! We must be willing to let go of our small vision of thinking that the church exists for me and open up to a new vision that says I exist for the church and the church exists to be the place where God is changing the world. If that vision isn't for you, let me recommend the Lion's Club, the Rotary, the Masons, or some other civic organization. They do excellent work, but they are not the body of Christ that God is using to transform the world.

We gather here on Sunday morning's so that we can lift up to God our praise, express to God our gratitude, and to give of our financial resources so that we can do our part to bring about God's incredible dream. I want to be a part of that and I believe you do as well. I want to know that by what we do here is making a difference in our community and world. From where we stand we may not see the mountains that God is moving, but we do want to be a part of what God is doing in the world in bringing about a new world, a new kingdom.

Do you know what the word grace means? It means unmerited favor. It is the most important word in the Christian lexicon. It means that all of the wonderful blessings we have received from God were not earned by us but were solely given to us because of God's goodness. Everything we have is a gift from God that we did not earn. When our hands are closed to God we cannot receive the unmerited justice from God, but when they are open we can receive surprising gifts.

I know that there are a lot of needs out there, too many needs for one small church to handle. Sometimes, not often, but sometimes I hear that the church is always asking for money. It is true. We are always asking for money. I plead guilty to that. But if we didn't ask, which person we have helped would we turn away.

Would it be Michael, the chronically homeless man whose apartment we furnished so that he could finally have a home? Michael had witnessed the murder of his mother at the hands of his father when he was 4 years old and never recovered from the trauma of being in and out of foster care. Michael got clean and sober 2 years ago, but then had two heart attacks while living on the streets of Middletown. But you said yes to Michael, and now Michael has a home he can call his own.

Would we have turned away Amanda, the 28 year old former Navy Corpsman who had become addicted to drugs and had her children taken away from her? When Amanda had a near death experience and she decided she wanted help, the hospital was going to put her right back onto the streets and there was no room in any shelter or treatment facility, and no help from the Veterans Administration. But we helped, didn't we? Amanda has now been clean and sober for more than nine months, she is in the process of getting back her 15 month old baby, and she talks to her 6 year old daughter every day in between working two jobs so that she can pay her rent. You furnished her apartment and you have given her a new life.

Your words of encouragement as she has handed you your coffee have been a blessing to her.

Would we turn away our youth whom we take on mission trips, serving meals to the homeless and opening their eyes to the injustices in our world? Or maybe the person who died without a church home but needs a place for a funeral service so that they can receive God's words of hope and comfort.

I ask you to give because I believe that your giving makes a difference in the world, and I believe that it makes a difference in you. We are blessed to have this place, which has been the body of Christ for Haddamites for more than 300 years. This is a place where all people are welcome, and no one is turned away. We have wonderful music, inspiring worship, and compassionate people who care for each other. We have an outstanding Christian education ministry for our children. This is the place where we come to celebrate baptisms and weddings, a place to watch children grow in their faith, and also a sanctuary where we gather to mourn the loss of those who have died. We provide meals for families in need, raise money for those who have no heat in their homes, and provide assistance to people in need.

Like Catherine Lawes, we must be willing to use the gifts we have to bring out the best in others. In essence we must encourage others to be the best they can be in every aspect of their lives. Catherine Lawes touched the lives of people, the likes of whom the majority of us will never encounter, because of circumstance, situation, and desire. She made an overt effort to reach out to those whom others had discarded, cast aside as irredeemable. As Catherine Lawes brought light to those in darkness, so must we be confident that God stands ready to assist us.

Basking in the knowledge and experience of God's love and support for us, we, in turn, must do what we can to bring a new day to those troubled in mind and spirit. Let us be grateful of God's call, the certainty of God's love and support, and may we answer the call and challenge to bring unmerited justice to those in our community and world.