

Moderate Justice

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Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Ariana D'Angelo]

And for the final step today, I want to share the artist's own statement, to continue building our understanding. So, she says, "This piece is a remix of my 'Migration Is Beautiful.' The monarch butterfly represents the natural act that is migration. Human beings have been migrating since the beginning of time. We are a part of nature, and it's in our human nature to move, just as all other species move. Borders were created by governments, but they are meant to keep people in or out. They are not a natural part of our environment. This artwork imagines a world without walls and borders. My butterfly symbolizes the rights of all living beings to move freely. Like the monarch butterfly, human beings cross borders in search of safer habitats. Like the monarch butterfly, human beings cross borders in order to survive."

[Voice of Jeanne Proctor]

I'd like to read to you the scripture today: Amos 5:18–24.

"Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thank you, Jeanne, for that reading, and thank you to our Social Justice Team for the really incredible and hard work they've put into this project for Borderlands Support. Maybe it's because I know what my sermon contains today, but as I was doing that art meditation I was thinking about, particularly in hearing the artist statement about migration and borders and

2020-01-19 Moderate Justice

governments and all those things, I was thinking about how thorny a political issue immigration is, even if you leave aside much of the rhetoric that surrounds it right now. And you know, we are going to talk about politics in church here, politics and religion. Whenever I talk about those two things I just say, “Just be glad I’m not talking about the third thing that you’re not supposed to talk about in polite company.” [laughter] Politically, I still think of myself, really, as a moderate. If you know me well, that may not surprise you. But for a long time, and especially during the last few years, I have just generally found that my political views don’t really fit neatly anywhere. Certainly not into the official platforms of the major American political parties. And you could say, especially if you’re one of the people who know me, you could say and you might not be wrong, that’s really just because I am obstinately nonconformist—that I have made a deliberate choice in my life never to fit into anyone’s boxes just for the sake of saying that I don’t. Or you could say if you’re an Enneagram nerd that maybe I’m just an Enneagram 9 and I’m always able to see both sides of every issue but never able to choose one strongly enough to actually upset anybody. Or you might say, “No, no, you’re an Enneagram 5 because seriously, who else would think about this stuff that much and talk about it at such length. So I usually add the two together and just say I’m an Enneagram 14, which is enough to make Enneagram people stop talking to me [laughter]. I love you, Enneagram people, I really do. And if you don’t know what I’m talking about, God bless you [laughter]. Anyway...

Lately, political moderates have been taking quite a beating. At least in the extremely online communities that I am sometimes a part of. And there’s a few reasons for that, but one of them is that in our country, political polarization is at an all time high. You may be familiar with a study that the Pew Research Center did that they released in 2017. And what it did is it contained and displayed data about people’s political views that they had obtained by surveying people seven times over the course of the years between 1994 and 2017. What they tried to do was see how consistent ideological people are. In other words, here’s a list of views that are considered conservative and here’s a list of views that are considered liberal, and as a member of this population how much do you completely agree with one end of that spectrum or the other. And if you were to look at the chart of this data from 1994 you would see sort of like two mountains, but they’re overlapping each other in the middle so it looks like maybe an upside down W, sort of, right? And then as the years pass, every time they take that study the mountains separate from each other to the point that in 2017 there’s almost no overlap in the middle, and there’s two big spikes on either end of the spectrum. That’s the political reality that we live in right now, and if you were to go Google like “political polarization study” or something I’m sure it would be among the first results and you could go look at that. They even have an animation of it, which is possibly quite troubling depending on how much you identify with one of those sides of the spectrum.

2020-01-19 Moderate Justice

Anyway, why am I talking about all this? Today is our Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., observance, and for reasons that I think will become obvious fairly quickly, I think it's a good time for me and for us to be talking about what it means to be a political moderate. By the way, if you're a regular at Artisan and over the last several years you may remember that we are very often worshiping at Baber AME Church on Martin Luther King Sunday. That's a wonderful tradition that we love. Obviously we're not there right now for a variety of reasons, including my sabbatical travel and our construction project. It just didn't work out to put the logistics together for us to go visit them today or for them to come visit us over the summer as would have been the other half of the tradition. But the good news is that Pastor Simmons and I had lunch a couple weeks ago and we have put some dates on the calendar for the Baber and Artisan worship exchanges. So if you'd like to get those on your calendar and be thinking ahead, we're going to host our friends from Baber here at Artisan in our new expanded facility on May 31 and they are going to host us back at Baber on Aug. 30, so we will have those two experiences to look forward to.

So what I'm actually happy about is that I get to speak about the ideas of Dr. King to a predominantly white congregation, which I think is important for us to engage with in that context. Now when you heard the reading from Amos 5 just a minute ago, you might have noticed at the end of it there's a very famous verse that's included in that passage. That's one of those verses from the Bible (and I need to come up with a name for what this is, so if you have a clever name for it, you can give it to me later today); but it's one of those verses that you would probably have heard and taken in, even if you're not a church person at all. Even if you never really read the Bible very much, you might have received that particular verse just from its inclusion in some of our popular culture. And the verse is 5:24 that says, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Now one of the reasons why many people will have heard that verse even if they're not church-y people or even if they are church-y people that don't go to churches that read the book of Amos very often, which is most of them, is that Amos 5:24 is quoted by Dr. King in his Letter from Birmingham Jail.

And so let me tell you a little bit about that letter because we're going to engage with it some this morning. This is a letter that he wrote in response to an editorial that had been published in the Birmingham newspaper. The editorial had been written by several white clergymen and it was entitled, "A Call for Unity." Now these were clergymen who said yes, there are social injustices that exist in our world, but they all thought that the battle against segregation which was the significant issue of the day should be fought in the courts rather than in the streets. And so when Dr. King came down to Birmingham and was part of organizing protests in the streets of Birmingham, these white clergymen thought that was the wrong thing for him to have done. And so they wrote this editorial and it was published in the newspaper. He read it in

2020-01-19 Moderate Justice

a copy of the paper that was smuggled to him in jail where he was awaiting his prosecution process. And so he wrote the letter from Birmingham Jail in response to that editorial by these fellow clergyman who had a different perspective on the world than he had. And so I'm going to read you the pertinent portion in the book of Amos even though you've already heard it, because I want you to notice something here. It may be that (I think is true for most of us) when we hear something that Dr. King has written or said, we can hear it in the cadence, the spoken voice that he used because he's such an omnipresent part of our cultural imagination, thankfully. And so you could hear the words, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream" in that kind of Dr. King, black preacher voice that seems very inspirational. But if you were listening carefully to the passage from the book of Amos, you know that wasn't a particularly inspirational passage. And so the context in his letter where he says that one verse from Amos, is in response to his being called an extremist. This is the word that was used of him and his fellow protesters because he was not willing to wait patiently for equality, and instead he took to the streets leading these demonstrations. They were peaceful demonstrations, but they were intended to, and did have the result of, disrupting commerce. And that's the one thing in America that you really are not allowed to do.

So this is the pertinent part of the letter from Birmingham Jail where you get that quote from Amos 5:24. He said, "Though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you.' Was not Amos an extremist for justice: 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.' Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.'"

Now lest you think that Dr. King is stretching the truth or the reality here, maybe attributing a more radical viewpoint to the Scriptures than would be justified, I am going to read you a little bit more from Chapter 5 of the prophet Amos because, well, it's really something. I encourage you to read this book on your own sometime, but it's not an easy thing to read. Here's just a few of the verses from from this one chapter in the book of Amos. Verse 6: "Seek the Lord and live." Sounds pretty good, right? "...or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire and will devour Bethel with no one to quench it. Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood and bring righteousness to the ground." Verse 11: "Because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of human stone but you shall not live in them. You have planted pleasant vineyards but you shall not drink their wine, for I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins. You who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe and push aside the needy in the gate." And then moving into the portion that was actually read in

2020-01-19 Moderate Justice

our service already today, verse 18: “Alas, for you who desire the day of the Lord.” Do you know anybody, by the way, who desires the day of the Lord? Whose main kind of spiritual imagination is centered around waiting for the rapture, or for God to send Jesus back to earth and make everything right and take away the good people so that the bad people receive the fruits of— you know. That’s not new, it’s not just a Christian thing. That kind of sensibility existed in the Hebrew Bible as well, and this is Amos inveighing against that (that’s an S.A.T. tests word). “Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord. Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light, as if someone fled from a lion and was met by a bear.” That’s very poetic, isn’t it? And he goes on to say, “The Lord says, ‘I hate, I despise your festivals and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Take away from me the noise of your songs.’” [Singing] Lord, I lift your name on high. “I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

Do you see the problem with pulling that one verse out in a way that makes it sound inspirational? Because it’s intended to inspire something, but not good feelings. So that’s the book of the Bible that Dr. King is quoting from when he uses that one verse in this letter to his fellow clergymen. Now, having given you some of the words from the prophet Amos in a little bit more depth, I now want to give you some of the words from the prophet Dr. King. And I use that word deliberately because he spoke in the same sort of voice as the biblical prophets, the same kind of urgency, the same uncompromising demand for justice, the same refusal to accept pious language and harmless religious practices in place of concrete action toward righteousness and justice. So I printed out the Letter from Birmingham Jail. It’s 10 pages, 11 point type, 1.1 spacing with 4 points in between each paragraph for those of you who care about that sort of typographical decision. I’m not going to read the whole thing to you, but I’m going to read more than one or 2 sentences to you. And the reason I’m going to do that is because I need to hear it, and I’m pretty sure that most of you need to hear it, too. And on Dr. King Sunday I cannot possibly give you a sermon that would be better than you hearing some of the words from the Letter from Birmingham Jail. So, I don’t typically just read stuff during my sermons but I’m going to do that for a few minutes and I hope that you’ll be able to bear with me.

So, in response to the criticism that these other pastors had made that he should stay in his own city and not come down and bother them in Birmingham, essentially, he said, “I could not sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned with what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” He said that, and you know that sentence. Then he said, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of

2020-01-19 Moderate Justice

destiny.” So when you think about the migrants at the border as a problem that’s “down there”.

He talks about some of the tension that has been caused by their protests in Birmingham and he says. “My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking, but I must confess that I am not afraid of the word ‘tension.’” Yeah, Dr. King was not an Enneagram 9. [crowd chuckles] “I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.” And then he says a little later, he starts to name names—these names might not mean anything to you; they don’t mean anything to me, but they meant something to the people who were in Birmingham these days—“We are sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Albert Boutwell as mayor will bring the millennium to Birmingham. [chuckles] While Mr. Boutwell is a much more gentle person than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to the maintenance of the status quo. Lamentably, it is a historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was ‘well timed’ in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say ‘Wait.’ But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of affluent society...” (I’m skipping like 20 lines right now.) “... when you are harried by day and haunted by night and by the fact that you are a Negro, constantly living at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness’—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.”

And in response to the law and order types—not the TV show, the phrase that’s used to keep people in line—he says, “[T]here are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to *disobey* unjust laws. Now what is the difference between the two? A just law is a manmade code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.”

2020-01-19 Moderate Justice

He goes on to describe further the civil disobedience that he and his cohorts have committed, and he says, “Of course, there’s nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. ... We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was ‘legal’ and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was ‘illegal.’”

And here’s the point for today. He says, “I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a ‘more convenient season.’ ... We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

He commends certain white allies who have been in the streets with him, who have been in jail with him, who have experienced the same suffering under the law that he is suffering at that present moment, and then says, “[D]espite these notable exceptions, I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church, who was nurtured in its bosom, who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings, and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen. ... Some have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.” Thank goodness we don’t have any stained-glass windows in here, right? [crowd chuckles]

“In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: ‘Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.’ And I have

2020-01-19 Moderate Justice

watched many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which makes a strange, unbiblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.”

And, toward the end of his letter, he says, “Before closing, I feel impelled to mention one other point in your statement that has troubled me profoundly.” (Speaking now to these white churchmen who wrote the editorial.) “You warmly commended the Birmingham police for keeping ‘order’ and ‘preventing violence.’ I doubt that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I doubt that you would so quickly commend the policemen if you were to observe their ugly and inhumane treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you were to watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you were to see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys ... I cannot join you in your praise of the Birmingham police department. I wish you had commended the Negro sit inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation.”

So, I realize that not everyone here, not everyone at Artisan, not everyone maybe listening to this podcast or reading the transcript, would identify themselves as a white moderate. You might be only one of those two things, or you might be neither; I’ve already told you that I’m probably both. But I wonder today if Artisan Church—if you and I—need to heed the call of Dr. King in our own place and time. I wonder in what ways those criticisms might still apply to us today. You know Jim Crow segregation has been abolished, thanks in significant part to Dr. King’s work and the work of those who were alongside him, but that doesn’t mean that we have solved all the problems any more than the abolition of slavery meant that we had solved all the problems. And so if you hear that argument, just know that it was used during the time before the abolition of Jim Crow to say that that’s not something we have to worry about anymore. Many of you will be familiar with Michelle Alexander’s amazing work called *The New Jim Crow*, which talks about the criminal justice system in America and mass incarceration as a new version of this same thing. So, we need to be aware of that.

I wonder if some of us are afraid to name names. Did you notice that he named names? He gave specific names of specific politicians—local politicians. I’m not necessarily very comfortable, sometimes, naming names. I don’t want to ruffle too many feathers. There certainly is more work to be done on racial justice in our society today, here in 2020. It may be that God is calling you to put yourself put yourself into that work. It may be that there are other issues of injustice in our world that God is calling you to. Immigration, LGBTQ equality, war, economic injustice. “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” So whatever the work is, particularly that God is calling you to, I want to

2020-01-19 Moderate Justice

encourage you to go out into it boldly, putting yourself at some risk, perhaps. And if you and I are willing to do that, particularly those of us who occupy, you know, a place of more privilege in our society—did you notice he used that word, by the way, decades before it became a buzzword—if we're willing to do that, I think we will be honoring Dr. King's legacy in a way that is so much more meaningful and, I would say, so much less pointless than posting his picture on Facebook or Instagram.

So I'm going to give you a few questions for reflection and then a moment of silence before we come to take communion and sing our last couple of songs together. Will you please ask yourself these questions?

- Is God calling me to abandon a safe moderate position that I hold?
- Who are the people who need my voice or my body between them and their oppressors?
- And then perhaps the most important question: What is one step I can take, what is one thing I can do today to respond to God's call in my life?

Don't believe the lie that if you can't solve the entire problem yourself before the sun sets that you should do nothing. Take a moment; prayerfully reflect on those questions. I'll ask our band to come back up, and in just a minute I'll offer communion for us.

Perhaps hearing the sermon made you feel kind of inadequate or bad. Preaching it made me feel kind of inadequate and bad, to be honest with you. [sighs] Without just dismissing that feeling so that it doesn't actually call us to something better, I want to offer you some words of encouragement and affirmation, which is that it is in your deepest brokenness that God is able to meet you most significantly. It is your areas of most profound failure that God is most able, I think, to break through to you and begin to change your life and your heart. Which is why I think that the symbology of our communion table is so powerful, that it's in receiving in your own body Christ's body, broken, shedding its blood, that you are partaking of God's goodness and grace.

And so, Artisan's communion table is open to all who want to have that experience; you don't have to have it all figured out, you don't have to be a member of a church, you simply want to be saying yes to Jesus in this moment. The table is in place to do that. And so, I invite you to come as we sing these last songs and take a piece of the bread and remember that Christ's body was broken for you and for me. Dip it in one of these cups—there's wine and there's juice—remember that Christ's blood is shed for the forgiveness of the sins of the world. Take and eat. Do it in remembrance, do it in expectation, do it for inspiration, do it for community, for *communion*. There's a member of our prayer team at the back of the room; if you'd like to

2020-01-19 Moderate Justice

receive personalized prayer, you can go and speak with them. Our table is open; let's continue to worship God in song and sacrament and prayer. Come if you will. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).