

GROWING Together

ISSN: 1481-9465

SEEKING JUSTICE

In biblical times, as now, the scales of justice are weighted heavily in favour of those with political power or wealth, and often against those most vulnerable, especially women and certain minorities. Yet individuals have won justice through surprising and bold action.

Under Mosaic Law only sons could inherit property. A descendant of Joseph had no sons, but he had five daughters. When he died the daughters came before Moses and asked, "Why should our father's name be withdrawn from his clan merely because he had no sons? Let us, therefore, have property among our father's kinsmen." As a result of their pleading, Moses changed the laws of inheritance to allow daughters to inherit (Numbers 27:1-8).

Tamar, a gentile, was the widowed daughter-in-law of Judah, whose wife had died. When Judah refused to give Tamar to his third son, thus depriving her of her right to remarry and have children, she used a daring trick to secure justice. Knowing that Judah had completed the period of mourning for his wife, and would be passing by, she disguised herself as a prostitute and waited by the roadside.

When Judah asked for her services, Tamar bargained with him for a lamb in payment, and as security received his staff, seal and cord. When Tamar's pregnancy became apparent, Judah would have had her stoned, and demanded to know who the father was. She presented the cord, seal and staff. Shamed, Judah pronounced her more just than he was (Genesis 38).



Similarly, Ruth, also a gentile, secured justice for herself and for Naomi, her mother-in-law. By being faithful to Naomi, by gleaning in the barley field belonging to Boaz, and by choosing him over younger men, she found favour with Boaz. He secured Naomi's property for her and married Ruth.

Somewhat different is the case of the woman "caught in adultery." The elders brought her before Jesus and said, "Moses has ordered us in the Law to condemn women like this to death by stoning. What do you say?" Seemingly, they had failed to notice that Mosaic Law ordered that both the man and woman should be stoned. They thought they had trapped Jesus. If he said to let her go, he would be breaking the Law. If he said she should be stoned, he would be contradicting his own teaching about judgment and forgiveness.

Jesus avoided their trap by saying only, "Let anyone among you who has no sin be the first to throw a stone." One by one the elders walked away. When they were alone, Jesus said to her, "Woman, has no one condemned you?"

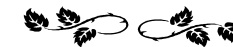
"No one, sir."

"Nor do I condemn you. You may go."

By addressing her as a person, Jesus granted her the justice of full personhood, with choice, and hence with responsibility for actions – good or sinful. In doing so, Jesus challenged the ancient law of capital punishment.

Throughout the centuries individuals and groups have worked with some success to gain justice: slavery has been abolished, prison systems improved, and workers granted rights. In our time, Benenson established Amnesty International; Joyce Millgard worked tirelessly to clear her son's name; Nelson Mandela brought down apartheid in South Africa. Like the widow in the parable (Luke 16:2-5) who kept calling on the judge for justice, they persevered in their quest.

"Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed....For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." (Isaiah 56: 1, 8)



GROWING TOGETHER is a series of five Sunday bulletin inserts for the ecumenical education of Christ's faithful.

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