

I know some of y'all know this about me, but I think it's time I made it public. I am an honest to God hillbilly. I grew up with hollers and rut-filled dirt roads and delicacies like fried squirrel and chocolate gravy. I grew up with Family with a capital F being about the single most important thing a fella could have. The government was never to be trusted, and neither were outsiders, especially since the one was almost always the other. Tied up with all that, I also grew up around music, dulcimers and banjos and fiddles and a dreadnought geet box. Harmony sounded like a train whistle. And the same song could make your toe tap and your eye weep and great-grandma set to telling stories. And those stories of grandma's always had a few themes. There was a bit of backwoods magical realism. There was a clever aw-shucks protagonist. There was a judge or a lawman or some other elected official in out-of-place go-to-meetin' clothes, and there was always, always some sly trickery afoot. And the hillbilly's steel trap brain always won out. In those stories, The Law wasn't what mattered. What Was Right was what mattered. And What Was Right was a funny thing. For my hillbilly people, What Was Right had some real odd vibes, especially to cityfolk's ears. I've heard stories told with pride that would make your arm hairs stand up and curl. Weirdly violent and never completely true, but always in search of righting a wrong or serving up some country justice.

In one such story, my family had a plot of land out past Denver, Arkansas, and a good size creek ran through it. My great-grandpa Wyatt loved fish, but he didn't have the time to do all his other chorin' and get out there to catch what was bitin'. So he got his hands on a few sticks of dynamite to speed the process along. He thought he'd put those ingenious hillbilly brains to work, so he paddled his canoe out to the middle of the water, lit a stick of dynamite and then paddled like the furies were hot on his overalled tail. The stick boomed behind him, everything went silent for a moment, and then cold creek water and river trout rained down from the heavens. His boat filled with dozens of fish and a few buckets of water, and his cackle echoed off the limestone bluffs. Well, great-grandpa Wyatt's neighbor on the next farm over heard the blast and immediately knew what had happened. So the next time he went into town, he ratted Wyatt out to the local authorities. Now, mind you, this was not because he was a do-gooder himself. This was purely selfish motivation. Wyatt's part of the creek, you see, was upstream from the neighbor's, and the neighbor recognized the boom-silence-cackle soundtrack because he'd been using dynamite to fish for himself. In fact, he was the guy that got Wyatt into dynamite in the first place! He was just mad that Wyatt had such great success.

So, when the police came knocking one Saturday, great-grandpa Wyatt had to think fast. There was dynamite in the barn, you see, a canoe perched on the creek banks not a hundred yards from the front door, and a freshly fried filet of mostly boneless fish sat on the lunch table. As soon as he swung the door open to see a uniform standing on the other side, he took charge and sorta lied through his teeth. He threw his hands in the air and said, "oh thank God, am I glad you're here." And he pointed with one hand, took the officer by the bicep with another, and walked him straight over to the dynamite pile talking as fast as his hillbilly mouth could take him. Wyatt told the truth, he just didn't tell all of it. The truth he told was all about how his neighbor had been dynamite fishing and gave him the supplies he'd need and the instructions on how to go about it. And he pointed back to the house where his fish fry waited, getting colder by the minute, and said how much he loved fish but it was just so much work for one or two meals, and he's got this canoe -- pointing now down to the creek -- and if he could just drop a stick in the water like his neighbor'd been doing, it'd be just so much more efficient, sir, but is that even legal? For the first time in ten whole minutes, Wyatt took a breath and the officer just stared at him, dumbfounded by how he got to the inside of this man's barn and he couldn't believe his luck that he'd just scored a pile of contraband dynamite and a complete story of how badly Wyatt's neighbor had

messed this thing up. Wait until the captain hears about this! And before he knew it, Wyatt caught his breath and talked him out of the barn and all the way back to his squad car, where he got in, turned on the siren, and drove the half-mile up the dirt road to the turn-in for the neighbor's house where there was, apparently, a greater score to be had. Now, I am certain he got the exact same treatment there, too, seeing as how Wyatt's neighbor was an equally good con and also happened to be his first cousin. Justice down in those Ozark hills meant getting the authorities to leave you alone, and when they didn't to make 'em wish they had.

These days, we have all sorts of issues with justice. I'm not sure how many great-grandpa Wyatt encounters there are anymore, but I know that justice is a hot topic. Most of the time, it has less to do with whether or not you can go dynamite fishing on your own land (and let's be clear, you can't and also, you shouldn't).

Justice seemed to have more to do with making sure I got mine, whatever "mine" might be. But just like those hillbilly values, what justice is depends greatly on who you're asking. Maybe it's about legality, maybe it's punitive, maybe it's even a tad sadistic. But what we don't see enough of, or maybe we don't see enough of coming to fruition, is the kind of justice that scripture points us to. In Isaiah, justice is learning to do right and defending the oppressed. In Leviticus, it's seeking the best for the weak among us. In Deuteronomy, it's loving foreigners, regardless of how they got into our land. In Micah, on those t-shirts we're gonna be wearing for CropWalk, it's tied up with mercy and walking with God. Ultimately, God's justice leans heavily on favoring folks that don't have much by this world's standards, whoever that is and no matter how unlikeable they might be.

I love the set up to this parable. There's a judge who knows nothing of God's justice but some widow just keeps coming to him with a problem and he finally gives in, not because he learned what true justice means, mind you, but because she drove him nuts. It's a weird parable. He doesn't learn to do right and then seek justice. He just gives in. And you know what, there might be something to that. In the past several years, we've talked about racial justice and LGBTQ rights and food insecurity and immigration reform and the maltreatment of prisoners and wealth disparity and so many social justice issues I've lost track. And most of the time, a lot of what we've done has been to educate ourselves and then try to educate others. Surely, if the other side just had the same reading list as us, the world would be set right, right? But it's just not the case, at least not fully and certainly not quickly. So, I wonder about this widow and her mind-melting persistence. Jesus says, "Listen to the unjust judge!" And what does the unjust judge say? "For no other reason than this woman won't stop knocking on my door, I'll do the right thing, whatever it takes to make her leave me alone." No, our societal problems won't go away and leave the judge be if he does right just this once, but it's a beautiful thing when the unjust turn to justice because of the unceasing efforts of a few. That's where we've been heading as St. Thomas' for years now. There's been a fire kindled in this place, one set long before I ever got here, there's been a fire set in this place and in your hearts for a mighty long time, and something's been fanning those flames. Something's been drawing energy and power and hope and determination from all of us, and unless I'm misreading the room, we're positively blazing, alight with a growing, sparking, consuming fervor for true justice. This afternoon, we'll join people all over the country for the CropWalk, fighting hunger with our feet and our finances. But we don't stop once the walk is done. Persistent calls for justice and annoyingly persistent action still need our determination. And so we walk. Or we talk. Or we give.

Now, I have no illusions that great-grandpa Wyatt's idea of justice was what God had in mind. His was a wonky twist on justice that was more self-preservation than anything else. But it's a more common conception of justice than what we're trying to be about. And when we show up for that true justice, we're gonna run into all kinds of Wyatt's trying to fast-talk or misdirect us out of justice and out of mind. Maybe the Wyatt's of the world need a little pestering, too.

One last thing. I know it's uncomfortable, and maybe even scary, to do this work. It puts us out there, vulnerable in our stand, and it means we have to say or do some hard things that some people we love aren't gonna like. But this is our work, to bring about God's justice in spite of all the stumbling blocks that are sure to pop up. This is CropWalk, this is the Ukrainian family, this is migrant workers and Colgate students and Madison Lane residents. This is dairy farmers and retirees and Sunday School students. This is trans kids and professors and just good hearted people. This is St. Thomas', and if we're doing right, this is justice.