

What Is Justice vs. What Just Is

by A.D. Carson

Sometimes it's easy to see what we were supposed to see when we look back,

It's in the moment when it's most difficult...
we're too close to it to know it for what it is.

I imagine many people seeing young Dr. King and his comrades and thinking them troublemakers—
idealists, wasting time on changing what's always been
with no real tangible idea of what might be instead.
I imagine him trying to explain the concept of *different*
and it sounding as foreign as explaining a color never seen before by human eyes.

Imagine what blue means to the man who's born blind.

What does justice sound like?

History tells us it's chants and songs, coded language meant to inspire change,
boots on streets and sidewalks, arms locked against police dogs, water hoses, cops in riot gear
fanning flames of fires ignited hundreds of years previous,
and today I know that justice doesn't sound like silence.

Justice doesn't sound like, "Michael Brown was a thug anyway,
and I just wish those people in Missouri would get jobs, go to work, and be productive members of
society."

Justice doesn't sound like, "I apologize if the picture of the noose and the shadow of the hanging
body offends anyone on the plantation campus. If you're offended, wait. We'll be silent until you get
over it."

Justice doesn't sound like, "If you're not breaking the law you should have no problems with cops
pulling you over or searching you for what they surely won't find."

Justice doesn't sound like, "We know your classmate died suspiciously, but we have no updates
because you're not outraged enough to ask the progress of the investigation."

Justice doesn't sound like using your position of power to shout down a student campaign for
uncomfortable conversations only to turn around and instigate more discomfort in the community
for those same reasons in the name of research.

And justice certainly doesn't sound like the silence surrounding the institutions harboring all those
things that justice doesn't sound like.

Some people might believe justice took place on that street in Ferguson.

And the same people who believe *that* may believe justice took place on that sidewalk in Staten
Island.

And the same people who believe *that* may believe justice took place in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921.

And those people might believe justice took place in Hamburg, South Carolina just 45 years earlier.
Those same people probably see nothing wrong with the name of the building we're celebrating in
this evening.

50 years ago, with eyes and opinions focused on Selma, Alabama, this nation was asking itself the
very questions it's asking now.

What is justice? What does it look like?

Sometimes it's easier to see what we're supposed to when we look back.
In the moment, for some, it's too difficult because we're too close to it.

But historically,
when people saw and felt what they thought was wrong, they stood up.
That's been the American way since before America was America.

It's at the very foundations of those truths we claim as self-evident.
It was the cause of the American Revolution.
And with every turn of the planet,
every turning of the pages of history,
we return to what is common in the course of human events—
the audacity to stand up to history,
to stand up to what has always been,
to stand up to scrutiny, to stand up to hate,
to stand up to tradition,
to not bow down in the face of oppression,
intense pressure or the presence of the masses
who seem to not yet see what *can* be beyond what *now* is.
We tend to think that some things just *are* with little concern for what just *is*.
We tend to be okay with what just *is* with little concern for whether or not it is actually *just*.

History tells us justice is a seat at the table—the proof, beyond a reasonable doubt,
that we are more than the lies society tries to impress upon us as truth—
that *you* are just as important as *you*—
that *we* don't need separate sets of rules based on the hue of your skin...
or your gender...
or who you love and how...
And today, I know that justice doesn't sound like silence.

Justice doesn't *feel* like the anxiety of all eyes on you.
Justice doesn't *sound* like, "If you don't like it, leave."
Justice doesn't *work* like *ignore it long enough and they'll just give up*.
Justice doesn't *look* like a Top 20 university who's most recognizable building
is named for a white supremacist, racist and domestic terrorist, still, in the year 2015,
as we celebrate 50 years after Selma.

But what do I know? I'm standing just as close as you are.

I imagine Dr. King and his comrades would be glad the questions are still being asked.
Maybe not so much that the circumstances still exist, but that a tradition of resistance
to what is just is, when it isn't just, lives in us,
and that we carry on that obligation, that duty, that audacity
to challenge what's always been
with sincere hopes that what *can be*
will be much better than what just is.