

## **It's Not Fair! Turning Points of Justice, from Adolescence to Adulthood**

**Andy Bachmann**

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"Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire. It was given to us to learn at the outset that life is a profound and passionate thing."

-- Oliver Wendell Holmes

### **1 Samuel 16:6-13**

*When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD.' But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.' Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the LORD chosen this one.' Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the LORD chosen this one.' Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The LORD has not chosen any of these.' Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.' He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.*

To all my teenage friends out there: the next time you want to borrow the car, or stay out past your curfew, or go somewhere there will NOT be an adult present, or spend your hard earned cash in self satisfying ways that might be deemed wasteful by adults, or make ANY choice regarding your personal time and energy that might not receive parental or societal approval, after you receive the token "NO" response to your request, you should say, "But David was anointed to be the king of Israel when he was still a teenager. God found him to be trustworthy. Shouldn't you trust me, too?"

Have you heard that passage before? Did you know that David wasn't even in the running to be king of Israel? Too young, they thought. Even in Biblical times, the teenagers get overlooked. When he goes to the battlefield with food for his brothers and start asking about this Goliath guy, his brother hushes him and hurries him along, and David says,

"What have I done now? It was only a question."

His persistent questioning gets him an audience with the king, Saul; and David offers to go out and take care of that pesky Philistine. So Saul takes him up on his offer and loads on his sword and armor, but little David can't even walk straight, so he says, you know what? Let me do this my way. Which he does. You know the rest of the story.

David is not the only biblical hero who had his big break when he was a teenager. Mary was just a "young woman" when she gave birth to Jesus. The first time Jesus preached in the temple, he was 12 years old. Andrew and Peter were called to be Jesus first disciples, as well as James and John who were all mending nets and fishing with their father. Think of Joseph (and his amazing

Technicolor dream coat), Esther, the teenage beauty queen who rescued the Jews from extinction, and even Samuel the prophet first heard the voice of God when he was just a child. Biblically speaking, though often assumed to be too young at first glance, all are given the opportunity to take charge, and all do so with life changing success.

As we've taken a closer look at the concepts of justice these past few weeks, particularly those times in life when the very concept of justice changed for us, I can't help but come back to my beloved teenagers and adolescents, and think of how the world of justice looks to them.

Last week we had a seminar led by three local psychologists on the issue of bullying for our middle and high school aged friends. It was a good seminar, where together we broke down not just what it means to be a bully, but also what it means to be bullied and what our role is in the scenario if we are simply a bystander. One interesting angle was that as bystanders, we too bear responsibility when we witness bullying. By not getting involved, we become a part of the problem.

I'm happy to report that the young people in this church, when compared to national averages, feel less inclined to submit to peer pressure, less likely to feel left out, and are less likely to feel angry when someone said something bad about them. Possible explanations as to WHY UCG youth fell below the national averages were that they have healthy and supportive families AND outside groups besides school peer groups where they can turn for support and care.

While this is good news (and makes us look pretty good, too), the data wasn't all roses and chocolate. Because 26 % of our youth DO submit to peer pressure, 85% HAVE felt left out at some point, and many of them have also felt betrayed by friends and people they have trusted.

My initial thoughts were that, you know what, I did too. When I was a teenager I felt the same challenges and pressures that these young people are going through. I had to deal with them, and I survived relatively unscathed. But the truth is that I grew up in an in-between time. Since the 1960's, teenage and adolescent freedoms have diminished to a point where, today, an 18 year old incarcerated felon is more likely to be treated as an adult than an 18 year old student. Over 90 laws dictating teenage freedoms and behaviors have been enacted since the 1960's. It's no wonder the 60's have taken on such mythic proportions! Freedoms have never been the same since. In the 60's the youth movement was empowered to act for justice; becoming the leading marchers in the anti-war, women's lib and civil rights movements. But since that time we have swaddled, sheltered and pushed aside our young people so much that empowered justice has been transformed into smothering judgment that is inspiring our young folks to stand up against the very barriers that have been put in place to protect them. They are forced to create their own worlds of power and accountability since acknowledgement from the "adult world" is so hard to come by.

A result in diminished freedoms and responsibility is that we have extended childhood beyond the twenties and some would say even into the 30's. You've heard of helicopter parents, or the tiger mother of china? Consider this: Health care reform made it possible now for people to stay on their parents health insurance until they are 26 years old. Do you know how old Dr. King was when he led the Montgomery Bus Boycott? 26 years old.

One psychologist (Dr. Robert Epstein) believes that we have stunted today's teenagers, by removing them from roles of responsibility and freedom that could potentially make them more capable and productive adults. He argues that we have stretched out childhood well beyond ages that are healthy and helpful. And the result is teenagers are being turned off and tuned out at a time when they have the most to give, and in a way that not only deflates them but even causes societal depression.

By removing the possibility of adulthood, and individual control over one's own life, adolescents have found new and alternative ways to exert their power and assume responsibility in anti-social and anti-cultural ways. One example of this adolescent created world of power and accountability is the recent spate of suicides brought on by what most believe to be intense pressures and bullying from peers.

Violence has become the loudest megaphone for young people seeking recognition and acknowledgement. Who knows what it was that drove Jared Loughner to open fire at that Safeway in Tucson, but the 22 year old man grabbed the world's attention and continues to make headlines in the same way made popular by Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris. There is a disconnect; a psychopathology that removes empathy and emotion from the equation. When you read the doings of his daily existence, though certainly odd, also can sound like most any other early twenty-something caught in an unwelcoming world.

Dr. Epstein believes that if a young person wants to be treated as an adult in today's culture, they have three options. Get married. Get pregnant, or get arrested. Surely we can come up with some better alternatives than those, can't we?

Perhaps it begins with us hearing our young people when they shout, "It's not fair!" Because they are right. It isn't fair! Fairness is supposed to be a balance between culture and societies rules. But at a time when young people long for responsibility, acceptance and equality, they are turned away time and time again from real life experiences of any of those things. In California, you have to be 18 to have a paper route!

Young people today bump up against the rules left and right, when all they are looking for, all they are seeking is a world that hangs together and makes sense. So they have to find responsibility, acceptance and equality in alternative places, by alternative means that might end up being more detrimental in the long run. They create the culture for themselves, using what little freedoms they have to exert authority, dictate acceptable norms and define who gets to be equal. But when the concept of justice is skewed to begin with, we should not be surprised that the predominant power that dictates acceptability is so judgmental. And when we inflict judgment on others instead of justice FOR others, of course there is a rise in the issue of bullying, of anger and frustration.

So how does this play out in the realm of justice?

My fear is that when we stunt human development, we stunt faith development as well. Typically faith development mirrors human development, with particularly strong influences being our parents or guardians.

Children typically approach God like they approach a parent; with their arms up and out, hoping for a loving and nurturing God to swoop in and comfort them in times of trouble. God takes on an otherworldly presence, a sweet Jesus with the children gathered around him, smiling, or a mythological character in the clouds, watching over us, like one of Santa's elves.

But as we grow into adolescence, a time when we are naturally inclined to question and to ponder our place in the world, God takes on more of a mystical dimension; a presence that envelops, a feeling of strength and comfort, a guiding force (not unlike the Force from Star Wars!) that helps us navigate the good and the bad of the world.

It is often through the "wandering and wondering" years of our teens and twenties that a sense of corporate and social responsibility takes hold, and our lives take on meaning through our relationships and life experiences.

Before one of our recent Work Tours, where our high school youth group goes to the Gulf coast to help rebuild homes, one parent asked me if we were REALLY going to let their teenage daughter use power tools. Of course! Yes! And I'm here to tell you, they listen closely when Mike and Steve teach them how to use the tools, and they use caution and care every time!

Think back to your own turning point of justice. When did you first encounter an issue of justice that shaped or changed your perspective on life?

I'm going to bet it was around the time of your adolescence, when you first had a taste of what the real world might be like. Now think of the first time an adult actually treated you as an equal. I'm going to guess that these two experiences go hand in hand.

I believe that when we witness and participate in life and in death, in poverty and in wealth, in struggle and in triumph, our understanding of the world expands to include more and more of Creation, and we get a renewed sense of what our role in this creation can or should be. And again, our relationship with God evolves: Jesus is no longer just a deistic idol who says nice things to children and tells us stories; but is instead a human manifestation of the love of God; and a power for that love which changes the world. By his example we are called to live more righteous lives, and that righteousness is manifest in the ways that we treat one another and the least and the lowly among us. We are called and inspired to dedicate our lives first and foremost to bringing about the beloved community of God, setting aside our personal wants and amplifying the love of God through the value we place on others.

When we give young people opportunities to experience the realities of life, and treat them with a sense of respect and equality, a broader vision of the world and our roles in it can come to fruition. But IF it is true that our culture no longer allow teenagers the space to explore, the opportunity to fail, or even the option of making their own choices in life, then we are failing in our role as their providers. If we accept the role of bystander to the bullying culture that has been created, aren't we becoming part of the problem? Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire. It was given to us to learn at the outset that life is a profound and passionate thing." But if we don't let our young people get near the fire for fear they might get burned, aren't we robbing them of an important and life shaping opportunity?

I believe it is our responsibility, our call, to reignite in adolescence the passion and power of the justice movements, and relieve the pressures applied by a judgmental and controlling world and culture. I believe it is important for young people to be given true responsibility and real opportunities to make their own choices and to clean up their own mistakes when they fail. I believe that, when given opportunities for responsibility and leadership, more often than not they will have life changing success.

I pray that we can take a clue from Samuel on his quest to find a king. For the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.' May we open our eyes, and look on the heart, and may we pray that the young people will do the same.

The next time you have an opportunity to look on the heart and inspire a young person, I pray you seize the moment—and I pray that YOU will be inspired, too.