

One New Book for the Preacher

David Neil Mosser, Sr.

Salado United Methodist Church, Salado, Texas

Brooks Harrington, *No Mercy, No Justice: The Dominant Narrative of America versus the Counter-Narrative of Jesus' Parables* (Cascade Books: WIFP and Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 2019)

I once had the treasured experience of hearing Dr. Carlyle Marney preach, and as I read Brooks Harrington's book *No Mercy, No Justice: The Dominant Narrative of America versus the Counter-Narrative of Jesus' Parables*, something Dr. Marney said kept stirring in my head. Marney quoted the Gospels and said, "You always have the poor with you . . . and you make the poor" (Matthew 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8). Harrington's book reminds those who are thoughtful and open-minded of the truth of that statement.

Regarding the US criminal justice system and poverty, Rev. Brooks Harrington has done much and perhaps has seen it all. Prosecutor and minister, Harrington's highly qualified insight into these social issues rings disturbingly authentic. He has served in several capacities including functioning as a criminal prosecutor, a pastor of inner-city church in an impoverished neighborhood, and as the founder of a legal ministry protecting indigent victims of family violence and child neglect and abuse. In the spirit of Rauschenbusch and Gladden, *No Mercy, No Justice* exercises biblical norms and Jesus' gospel principles to inform believers' treatment of the poor and homeless—our American Achilles heel.

Harrington's key notion is that the dominant narrative of American culture has defined both justice and mercy in self-serving ways. One version suggests that justice and mercy are contradictions. Mostly, our culture devalues mercy and hinders its practice. Yet, within God's counter narrative disclosed by means of Torah, the prophets, and the life and parables of Jesus, justice and mercy become aspects of God's truth. There is no justice without mercy. There is no mercy without justice. Harrington writes, "The dominant narrative of a culture . . . is the culture's story of life's meanings, values, marks, and measures of success and failure, approved and disapproved manners of behavior, and paths to honor and happiness" (p. 18). From the start, Harrington illustrates how the target of acquisition is for the poor always whatever objective the dominant American culture determines it is. Of course, this objective is impossible to obtain by those who have not been privileged to achieve such lofty aspirations. The poor, who by living on the flimsy and fragile side of life, do not comprise the dominant narrative. Via a series of riveting personal stories, Harrington establishes how brutal "holding the bag" is for chiefly those women and children who have few options for protection.

For example, some "Pay Day Loan Companies" will somehow have "computer troubles" when underprivileged borrowers, after employers pay them at week's end, come in late on Friday afternoons to settle their debts, usually by cash. Unsurprisingly, the computers "are down," and the attendant cannot take a payment at that time. The attendant then tells such persons that without the computer, no receipt can be issued.

The attendant then tells these poor people there is no recourse, as he cannot track down the manager or the owner. All he can tell them is to return on Monday morning to pay up. The catch, of course, is that on Monday the indebted will owe substantially more interest than if they had paid on Friday afternoon. It is all perfectly legal—and perfectly unethical.

After analytically defining justice and mercy in our culture, Harrington then turns to the counter-narrative of God. By means of emotive stories of several individuals he pastored in his impoverished church in an impoverished neighborhood, our author illustrates the toll that the dominant narrative exacts mainly on innocent people. The victims are simply Harrington's rank and file parishioners. They are folks who get it wrong by being born to the wrong people in the wrong place and at the wrong time. Yet, Harrington also holds out theological and biblical hope. His dialectic runs thusly: "The dominant narrative provides no meaning or satisfaction to anyone" (p. 26). Despite this glum assessment of the status quo, Harrington goes on to write, informed by a Pauline perspective: "God's counter-narrative proclaimed by Paul was that true power was found in weakness and sacrifice, and not in conquest and fear, and that true peace would come from love and not force of arms" (p. 37). Friedrich Nietzsche would have simply howled at this quotation!

Harrington devotes the second half of *No Mercy, No Justice* to "commentary-worthy" exegesis on thirteen parables. After Mark's parable of the sower, he writes about eight of Luke's parables, one of Luke/Matthew, and finally three of the parables found in Matthew. He does this to turn from abstract concepts/definitions of justice and mercy to the particularity of Jesus' parables. In a neat hermeneutical move, Harrington demonstrates that God does not hold mercy and justice in some oppositional tension. Rather, these divine bequests "are integral and complementary aspects of the same Truth and Way" (p. 128).

Harrington's penultimate chapter summarizes his discoveries about justice and mercy from his exegetical work on the parables. The concluding chapter is a midrash on Mark 4 and 5. Here Harrington tells this Marcan story about Jesus from the point of view of one of the disciples.

Publishing houses publish good books each year. We read many of them. Yet this is one of those extremely rare books that can drastically change our perspective on several fronts. First, *No Mercy, No Justice* will change how we view the poor, and how public policy, especially of the last few years, punishes people who least likely merit it. Second, for preachers especially, Harrington's exposition of scripture will provide a new sort of path to and through many scripture texts. He handles the Bible with deep care, but also with a sort of playful challenge to people who think they already know everything they need to know about these biblical parables. Finally, the book is well written and a pleasure to read—which is important because the subject is less than pleasant. It is well worth the time and effort.