RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND THE BIBLE: AN EXPLORATION
Part I

Justice and justice alone shall be your aim, that you may have life…
Dt 16:20a

The Little Book of Restorative Justice, revised and updated in 2015, does not reference the Bible. It was written by Howard Zehr, considered by many to be the “grandfather” of restorative justice in the United States. Interestingly, in his extensive earlier writings he formed his concept of restorative justice from his peacemaking Mennonite grounding in Scripture. Over time, however, as his vision expanded, he recognized the value of framing restorative justice in language accessible in a variety of contexts and settings. He also realized the contribution of values, principles and approaches of indigenous traditions throughout the world. However, he maintains a concern that restorative justice is susceptible to co-optation, and he insists that the faithful step up to their responsibility to further the Kingdom of God on earth. For this reason it is important to consider the Bible and its place in the understanding of restorative justice.

Both Biblical scholars and restorative justice scholars have said that the Bible is fundamentally a revelation of God’s justice. The overarching meaning and message of this justice in Scripture present a paradigm of law very different from our predominant current Western understanding and practices. Some have suggested that these Western concepts are selective distortions and co-optations of the works of God. How then are justice and law appropriately viewed Scripturally as restorative, and, moreover, restorative to what?

Bereshit in Hebrew opens the first book of the Bible which Christianity calls Genesis. It means “in the beginning” and what we learn is that God created a good world and good people who were in holy and right relation with one another, with their world in Eden and with God. This right relationship was disrupted by The Fall when Adam and Eve did not adhere to the one law which God gave them, thus demonstrating that human beings indeed have free will and that there are consequences to unfortunate choices. Humanity, now excluded from the garden, was still good albeit flawed, and was not abandoned by God. But life was now a struggle. The relationship changed and the dynamic now in place was the journey of humankind to return to right relationship, toward restoration to the original vision of God.

After the events of the primeval story which include fratricide, various human shenanigans and the Great Flood, God connected once again with humanity by calling Abraham to lead this journey as the founding patriarch of the Jewish people. An important relationship developed between God and Abraham, and it was with him that the first covenants were established. Fast forward to Moses and The Exodus when the Great Covenant was secured with the Ten Commandments and the extensive body of Hebrew law. The remainder of the Torah (first five books of the Bible) expands on God’s fidelity and justice, relationship and community, covenant and law. How is this instrumental in restoring humanity to the original vision of God and why is this significant for restorative justice?
There are several Hebrew terms in the Bible that represent justice. The most significant is *sedeqa*. It is often translated as righteousness, but it has a much deeper and broader sense, a meaning that is embedded in the Judaic religious culture with constant awareness of its covenantal involvement with God. By virtue of this covenant, God promised to remain with the Israelites forever, guiding and assisting them in the journey toward full restoration to divine life. In turn, they promised to obey God and follow his laws in order to honor God and the gift of the created world as a community living in peace with one another moving together toward *shalom*.

EXPLORING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND THE BIBLE
Part II

For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you …
John 13:15

Part I of this article presented the importance of considering the Bible and its place in understanding restorative justice. The grounding in Scriptural faith is vital to preserving its value-based nature. These values are sourced in the covenantal relationship between God and the Hebrew people whereby the laws presented by God were meant to show the way toward *shalom*. The meaning of *shalom* lies not merely in a personal peace of mind, but more deeply as a mystical harmony among persons because restoration to right relationship with God has been accomplished.

It is within this context that *lex talionis* – the law of an eye for an eye – can be understood not as demanding retributive punishment and pain, but as restoring in equal worth to the extent possible what was lost, harmed, destroyed. This applies then not only to matters of individual harm, but also to the greater application of the consequences of The Fall in the Garden of Eden for all of humanity.

Thus, for Christians, this movement toward restoration is not considered complete without the coming of Jesus. This is the final covenant of God with humankind that allows for the fulfillment of return to the original justice of creation. Through Baptism the Christian is united with Christ and thus drawn into life with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Yet restoration is not complete until the Kingdom of God is made manifest.

This happens through the daily actions of Christians living out their lives as brothers and sisters of Jesus. His mandate to serve others resonates with the restorative justice call to address the needs of those who have been harmed. Respect for all honors the Christian understanding of the dignity of the human person as made in the image and likeness of God. In Christ’s world every person is worthy and a member of the community. Thus the Christian addresses the needs not only of those affected by harm, but those causing harm in order to build and heal the entire community.

The Bible is the revelation of God’s justice. It is the story of the return of humanity to right relationship with God through divine grace and mercy. Every act of restorative justice is one repair in the torn tapestry of the original holiness and justice of God’s creation.