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**By Rev. Drs. Casey and Bob Baggott
Community Church of Vero Beach**

Rules of the Playground

If you've ever watched children play together for any length of time, you've probably noted how often they appeal to the principle of fairness in ordering their lives. Jumping ahead in line is "not fair." Claiming extended personal use of playground equipment is "not fair." Allowing some children to participate and excluding others is "not fair." Intentionally harming others or thwarting their efforts is "not fair." And on it goes. There is a code of behavior that children understand and fiercely defend. Their rules are often simple, but very clear. Children, we have observed, are advocates of justice. Did we adults teach children this passion for justice, or is it a universal human characteristic to want it, seek it, defend it, expect it?

If we are to trust the Biblical testimony on the matter, the desire for justice must be both universal and eternal in human hearts. Justice is mentioned 135 times in the Bible. Kings are expected to dispense it. Nations are called to live by its dictates. Individuals are reminded to do it in all their dealings. But failures to achieve justice are recorded in abundance.

And over 2000 years after the last recorded events of that sacred text, we're apparently no closer to the realization of justice than the Biblical writers were. While genocide, armed conflict, civil war, terrorism, border disputes, security breaches, prejudice, poverty, wrangling over politics and religion are all part and parcel of modern life, real justice may seem too much to hope for. We may all want justice, but we're apparently unable to achieve it. What could help us to bring it about, do you think?

Theologian Frederick Buechner suggests in his book, "Whistling in the Dark," that if we are ever to see a reign of justice in this troubled and divided world of ours, then justice must come with a tempering partner. It must come with its twin, mercy.

Actually, the word "mercy" occurs around three hundred times in scripture – over twice as often as the word justice does. Maybe we'll need to offer twice as much mercy as justice if we're ever to establish an environment where justice can finally thrive and grow. Justice may simply be unable to survive on its own, without the tempering of a healthy dose of mercy.

What ratio do you offer of these two in your life? For every time you exact justice, do you offer twice that much mercy? For every time you pronounce judgment, do you grant twice as much forgiveness? For every time you provide correction, do you give twice that much affirmation? Can you imagine a world based on those proportions?

It might seem impractical at first to advocate abundant mercy as a foundational element for justice. But maybe it is precisely what's called for. Just imagine it – more mercy – much more mercy in our relationships, our workplaces, our communities, our lives. Maybe if mercy were more readily offered, then our world would finally resemble the long awaited utopia of fairness we've sought since we were all children on the playground, first trying to order our world.