

Do Justice — Keep It Simple

BY PETER VANDER MEULEN

In baptism we are freed to resist evil and to serve God, our brothers and sisters, and the creation. How do we do this? Of the three requirements in Micah's prophecy, doing justice is the command we least understand and most avoid. It sounds complicated, threatening, and worse—political.

Our world belongs to God, but it is not as God intended. It is achingly beautiful and yet ugly as sin. It holds creatures — humans, you and me — capable of breathtaking kindnesses and gut-wrenching cruelty. It is a world of goodness where we can thrive in communities. It is a world of abundance in which 820 million people suffer from the effects of hunger.¹

Economic globalization may help or may hurt the cause of justice and peace. But whichever it does, it will not change this basic fact: our world is an unfair place where the powerful prosper while the weak struggle to survive a day at a time, most without much human hope for a better future. We need only to look around.

In Liberia I encountered children with brutal, empty eyes carrying guns bigger than they were. There may be up to 300,000 child soldiers in the world today.² In Kakuma, the world's largest refugee camp, 80,000 Sudanese wait for a peace that never comes. Twenty million people currently live as refugees.³

North America is not exempt. In my community, babies born to African American women die at two-and-a-half times the rate of those born to white women.⁴ To avoid raising our taxes we have stopped giving dental care to those on Medicaid — except in emergencies. In the United States, inequality in income has risen to levels not seen since the early twentieth century. In

2005, the top 300,000 of us collectively enjoyed almost as much income as the bottom 150 million of us.⁵

Our world is an unfair, unjust place where relatively few enjoy the biblical vision of shalom — thriving and flourishing in communities of peace and abundance.

HEEDING A SIMPLE BUT HARD DEMAND

Christians in particular should not be surprised at this. We are broken people living in a broken creation. But God has, as Bishop N. T. Wright says, “mounted a rescue operation.” Christ’s new kingdom, putting wrongs to rights, has arrived and we are its first citizens. In our vows of baptism we have been freed to resist evil and to serve God, our brothers and sisters, and the creation.

And how do we do this? What are our instructions? What does our King want of us? The prophet Micah says it succinctly: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Doing justice. Of the three requirements, doing justice is the least understood, the most troubling, and the command we most avoid. It sounds complicated, threatening, and worse — political.

Could it be that we, particularly those of us in the evangelical community, have made this requirement way too formidable? Have we gone the route of charity rather than justice because of fear rooted in ignorance of what is required of us?

Truth often comes packaged in paradox. The Bible is full of them. “For my yoke is easy and my burden is light,” says Jesus (Matthew 11:30), but a little later he tells a rich young seeker to “go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8), but Jesus makes it clear that our eternal futures depend on how we treat the poor and oppressed we encounter in our daily lives (Matthew 25:31-46).

There is truth in these apparent contradictions.

The Christian’s central responsibility for doing the King’s justice is simple but hard. This sounds contradictory but isn’t. For example, in order to be cured of leprosy Elisha told Naaman to go to the river Jordan and wash three times. This was a simple set of instructions but hard for Naaman to carry out (2 Kings 5:1-19).

Too often, we avoid the simple demands of doing justice by making them complicated — and therefore undoable. All the talk of globalization and the complicated interconnectedness of everything is a great excuse to quit trying. But although the economic, ethical, and religious issues are complex, our lived response need not be. It is as simple as it ever was — and as hard.

CULTIVATING HABITS OF JUSTICE

As I have struggled to act justly over the years, I think I have learned some things that work (and, alas, some that do not). In fact, there is a certain technique to living and doing justice. There is a certain set of habits that we must cultivate.

First, we separate the three requirements at our peril. To do justice

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requires walking humbly with God and loving mercy. Like complementary colors on a color wheel, they depend on each other for their existence and definition. There is no other authentic and sustainable way for Christians to do justice.

Second, ask for the gift of (what Wild Goose Resource Group's Alison Adams calls) *epiphany eyes*—and then sharpen

that gift. To have an epiphany is to see the truth of the matter behind the smoke and mirrors. To have epiphany eyes is to have eyes that see through the façade to the real. Most of us do not recognize wrongness or injustice, even when we are staring straight at it:

“We do not take food stamps or WIC coupons!” said the sign on the door of my local grocery store. I had passed that sign for months—seeing it but not seeing it. I didn't use food stamps or WIC. One day I saw what it *really* said: “If you are poor and on government assistance you cannot buy your groceries here.” And that flash of understanding called for a very simple response on my part. I sought out the manager, objected, and shopped at another store.

Epiphany eyes are eyes that pay attention, eyes that look twice, eyes that ask the “why” questions. Epiphany eyes see by the light of Christ's word. They are eyes that we can only receive as gifts from God. They are eyes that can only be sharpened through use and by others.

The third habit is humility, realizing that we are not the only game in town. God has other options, lots of disciples, and unlimited creativity. Most of the time my role in God's providence is just a walk-on role. Personally, I have stopped planning grand outcomes requiring massive efforts and started looking for the next right thing to do—the thing that is in front of me, the thing that looks too simple.

Five years ago, a Christian missionary working in Mali learned that the poor herders with whom she worked were about to lose their land due to misguided U.S. assistance. Moved by this injustice, she asked people in U.S. churches to pray for those about to lose their land. She also asked them to act — to call their congressional representatives and object to the mishandling of government resources. It only took one phone call from a man in Oklahoma to set off a critical chain of events that circled the globe and gave three thousand Malians title to their land.

This story is not about the missionary or about the churchgoer in Oklahoma. Both played a critical role in the outcome, but there were no stars. Justice was done through the regular, simple, and direct actions of an ensemble cast. No one foresaw the scenario, no one wrote the script, but each saw their part, accepted it, and played it faithfully.

The final habit to be cultivated by those who would be Christ's instruments of shalom is the simple but immensely difficult habit of asking for directions — of asking for help.

One Christian book store manager in Guam visits prisoners in the local jail every week because that is what Christ said we should do if we want to meet Him. During one visit he noticed a large number of new prisoners — some with children — and discovered they were illegal refugees seeking asylum from oppression in Burma.

Through well-trained epiphany eyes, the manager knew that all humans — even illegal immigrants — are created in God's image and have a birthright to just and respectful treatment. Feeling righteously angry, the manager did a very simple thing: he looked online for an organization specializing in refugee resettlement. Recognizing that he was neither capable nor called to do justice alone, he sent them an email requesting help. That simple email led to a waterfall of action resulting in immediate relief to the refugees; in eight short months, they were resettled in the United States.

One person seeing a massive wrong, then doing a simple, wise, and right thing, flips the switch to power up a massive network of God's people. This network generates and channels so much energy and light that nothing could stand in the way of heaven breaking through and justice being done.

I wonder what reality you and I will see with our epiphany eyes today? How will we do justice as freed citizens of God's Kingdom? Will God use our strengths or our weaknesses? Will heaven break through?

NOTES

1 *State of Food Insecurity in the World 2006* (Rome, Italy: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006), 8. This report is available online at www.fao.org/docrep/009/a0750e/a0750e00.htm (accessed May 30, 2007).

2 "Child Soldiers: A Global Issue" (web.amnesty.org/pages/childsoldiers-background-eng, accessed May 30, 2007).

3 For more information on the status of refugees in Africa and around the world, see the Basic Facts page of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, www.unhcr.org/basics.html (accessed May 30, 2007).

4 *Child Health USA 2005*, a report of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, is available online at www.mchb.hrsa.gov/mchirc/chusa_05/index.htm (accessed May 30, 2007).

5 David Cay Johnston, "Income Gap is Widening, Data Shows," *New York Times* (March 29, 2007), Late Edition-Final, Section C, Page 1, Column 6.



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