

# Voices: Justice for mental illness is personal and systemic

September 27, 2021

*EDITOR'S NOTE: "Justice looks like ..." is a special series in the Voices column. Readers will have the opportunity to consider justice from numerous viewpoints. The series is based on each writer's understanding of Scripture and relationship with Jesus Christ. Writers present their own views independent of any institution, unless otherwise noted in their bios.*

*You are encouraged to listen to each writer without prejudice. Then, engage in conversation with others around you about what justice looks like to you.*

*[Click here](#) for more information about the series. [Click here](#) to read the full "Justice looks like..." series.*

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While working toward my master's degree in counseling, I imagined I'd be a very wise, very successful couples therapist who would arbitrate discussions about how one should fold the socks and which one should put the kids to bed, all while deftly addressing underlying hurts of childhood and wounds of adult life.

When I graduated at the fresh age of 25, and almost immediately moved to a city where I had zero professional connections, I was not offered the private practice job of my dreams, but an entry-level position at the county's mental health agency.

I was lucky enough to find myself on a team serving the clients with the most severe mental health struggles. Although the work was different, my

calling to couples counseling led me to see not only how complex family life can be, but also how the struggle of mental health becomes compounded through the injustices of public health, poverty, isolation and loneliness.

As I see it, justice is a calling—something innate within each of us, a key part of how God made us in his own image.

Justice is righting the wrong, mending the fracture, healing the ache. Justice is a promise to us from God that God is working for our good and gives us the same work ethic.

## **Mental wellness and justice**

I quickly realized the folks I was working with—people with severe diagnoses and intense battles with drug and alcohol use—needed someone to get down in the trenches and join them in the fight for justice.

You may not think of the mental wellness journey as a “fight for justice,” but for those who are experiencing a persistent mental illness combined with unrelenting poverty, every day can be a fight.

My clients were trying to keep track of complicated medication regimens and working through past traumas. At the same time, they were trying to survive in a bureaucratic system. The system had, among other things, given an annual increase of monthly Supplemental Security Income disability payments of \$2, but lowered monthly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program payments by \$2.

Where was the justice? Where was even the potential for justice?

In a system so inherently broken by political maneuvering, unfounded fears fueled by stigma, and outsider-led policy making, there currently is little opportunity for healing or restoration.

# Individual ways to fight for justice

To help change this current situation, individuals can fight for justice on a deeply personal level. You can make eye contact and small talk with people you usually would avoid in public places. You can talk about your own experiences with therapy and check in on friends going through difficult times.

Congregations and community groups can fight for justice on a bigger scale. They can pay for mental health services for members who cannot afford them. They can talk about depression, anxiety, paranoia and other “symptoms” from the pulpit. They can institute trauma-informed care practices starting in children and youth ministries and radiating out from there.

Some of these ideas probably seem intuitive and may be steps you already are taking. However, these steps must be coupled with an even bigger response.

Justice is personal, and it also is systemic.

## Addressing the system

In Matthew 25:32, the Son of Man addresses “all the nations” and names the “righteous” as those who took care of “the least of these.”

To continue the fight for justice, we must address systemic—statewide and nationwide—issues.

There must be social workers and counselors in all schools. There must be a way to access mental health care even without private health insurance. There must be available interventions before a person is considering suicide as the only option.

Oftentimes, we confuse the political with the partisan. These issues certainly can have political solutions, but they do not need to be partisan.

## **Known by our love**

Whenever I need a reminder of my calling, I remember doing a routine assessment with a client one day. I asked him if he believed in God. He answered, “I believe in God, but I know he doesn’t care about me.”

I take Jesus’ words in John 13:35 very seriously: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” So, it felt like a gut punch to hear his answer.

I believe in a God who cares for all so deeply that he sent his beloved Son to die for us. We are to show God’s love in everything—from our personal interactions, to working for meaningful policy and legislative change—always fighting for a society that cherishes one another, no matter who they are.

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[Click here](#) to read the full “Justice looks like...” series.