

Voices: Justice looks like a church playground where all can play

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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 prejudgment. 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.

Thirty-eight years ago, on a Sunday morning, I led a revolt.

My family and I were members of a small Hispanic Baptist mission in North Central Texas. Our mission church held the worship services in the chapel of the "mother church," the Anglo church.

The Hispanic children of the mission had been instructed to play in the toddler play area only. There was a fence that divided the smaller play area from the big playground. On that Sunday morning, I decided to open the gate that divided the playgrounds and invited my friends to join me in the revolt.

My reasoning was simple. It was not fair that we should not be able to play on the big playground. Most of my friends said we should not go to the other side, and yet, I convinced them it would be fine.

Our time of fun on the playground ended abruptly when a church leader from the Anglo church noticed us and came outside to tell us to get off the playground.

I never forgot his words spoken with such anger: “Don’t you know you kids belong on the other side of the fence!”

Even as an 8-year-old, as my friends and I ashamedly got off the playground and walked back through the gate, I knew in my heart this was not the way God intended the church playground to be used.

What made us any different than the other kids? Why was it not equitable for the Hispanic children to play on the church’s playground like the other children?

The reason for inequity was based on our ethnicity and skin color alone. I knew our painful experience with systemic racism probably hurt God’s heart more than it did mine.

For me, justice looks like a church playground with children of all backgrounds and ethnicities playing together equitably, celebrating childhood. I know this probably is not how others would say justice looks, but for me, it does, because this image is very personal.

Justice is action

Justice is action, and many times, justice needs to be corrective action against systemic sin that has been ignored or simply just tolerated. Justice not only calls out for equality, but for equity as well. Equity is the action part of justice that pushes for fairness.

The prophet Micah calls believers to “do” this type of justice, which makes it more than just lip service. Christians no longer can ignore systemic racism. We must engage it and correctively eradicate it, especially when it is in the church.

Growing up, I never forgot that painful memory, and I knew it was wrong based on God’s word and his love for all the nations. This event should not have happened on a church playground, and I was set on actively correcting this experience. I needed to do justice.

God led me to pursue a Ph.D. in the School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University. I wanted to learn how to bring cultures and ethnicities together through the gospel and his church and, yes, even through a playground.

In my studies, I learned what I already knew in my heart: God despises systemic racism and all discriminatory actions. Xenophobia and nationalistic ideology are the prime sinful catalysts for racism and discrimination.

Racist discrimination should never be a part of those “called out” from the former way of thinking and acting to be the church. As the *ekklesia*, we are called out from our sinful patterns to experience a transforming power over our sin nature and to be a community that welcomes all ethnicities in Christ.

Seeing the results of action

Before finishing my doctorate, I was the pastor of a multiethnic church in Southern California. On one particular Sunday morning, as I rushed into the church, God turned my attention to the playground. It was then I saw children of all backgrounds and ethnicities playing together and having fun. It was a great site to see.

What I saw that morning was justice, and any hurt and pain I harbored, because of my previous painful experience on a church playground, melted away in such a powerful moment.

At Wayland Baptist University, I am the associate dean of the School of Christian Studies, and I teach ministry students biblical truths and methodologies to continue to bring cultures and ethnicities together.

I want my ministry students' future churches and their playgrounds to be places of God's welcoming acceptance. This continues to be my revolt for corrective equitable justice.

Dr. Joe Rangel is the associate dean of the School of Christian Studies and teaches Christian ministry at Wayland Baptist University. He most recently served as executive pastor at First Baptist Church in Weslaco. He is married to Sara, and they have one amazing son, David.

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