

Voices: Justice looks like being free of worry

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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.

When I was 13 years old, my parents set my sister, brother and me in our small living room and told us we were moving to the United States. That news came as a big shock to us, even though many of our family members already had left Brazil in the 1990s to pursue a better life in other countries.

I did not know it then, but my parents—like many others—were faced with the task of making major decisions every day just to survive.

My parent's decision was based on a strong commitment to provide for their family and rested on the reality that freedom to seek a better life is intertwined with a commitment to justice—specifically, the ability to choose what the life of their family should look like.

Furthermore, it speaks to the incredible amount of life-altering decisions vulnerable families must make every day.

Poverty affects life choices

Some of the challenges brought on by poverty my parents faced on a daily basis included deciding between paying the rent or utility bills for the month versus the ability to buy fresh meat and vegetables. They even found themselves faced with the decisions of which of their children would attend school and who would stay home. This is the reality for most people living in poverty.

Much [research](#) has been conducted in the areas of poverty and decision making. Researchers agree people living in poverty make many more life-altering and complex decisions compared to those in higher socio-economic status.

This reality creates a life characterized by high levels of stress, social exclusion, lower confidence and many other negative conditions that impact the psychological and physiological brain structures of people living in poverty.

Poverty along the border

Besides my own experiences with poverty, I have had a front-row seat to the impact poverty has on vulnerable families. For the last seven years, I have served with [Buckner International](#) on the Texas-Mexico border, working closely with vulnerable families in the Rio Grande Valley to strengthen them through education on finances, job skills, parenting and more. We have helped numerous families open their first checking and savings accounts or implement their first budget.

The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the levels of stress vulnerable families have experienced lately. As parents lost their jobs, they were faced with the harsh reality of figuring out how to support their families. As schools closed, parents became educators. As days became weeks and weeks became months, the pressure and stress of the future is leading to an [increase in child neglect and domestic abuse](#).

Although we collectively have experienced higher levels of stress, the reality is my socio-economic status and privilege has provided me a safety net many vulnerable families do not have. This has led me to believe justice not only is about “just behavior or treatment,” it also is about the privilege of not having to make life-altering decisions constantly.

Justice in light of our status

In its most simplistic and practical form, justice means I am able to write this piece, and you are able to read it without having to worry about how we will put healthy food on our tables tonight.

As people of faith, and as people with strong social justice convictions, we must use our privileged statuses to build a more equitable and loving world for those for whom “the long arc of the moral universe” has not yet “bent towards justice,” to quote Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Justice also means we design programs that take the perspective of the people we are trying to help. As explained in a [Chicago Booth Review research article](#), we must be diligent to avoid designing programs that would appeal to people with the luxury to devote careful thought and attention in their consideration, because “poverty imposes a heavy attentional ‘tax’ that prevents people from devoting that kind of thought to new opportunities.”

Although my parents had to sacrifice so much to give my siblings and me a

better life, I understand now that even then they had a moral responsibility to stand up and stand out for justice.

They taught us no matter the circumstance, we always had a responsibility to make decisions that would build the kingdom of God instead of our own kingdoms. Ultimately, that is the one thing God will ask of us when we see him face to face.

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