

# Voices: Justice looks like the church serving in the community

July 19, 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 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.*

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In [the preamble to the U.S. Constitution](#), the authors state the document will "establish Justice" as a wish of "We the People." Looking throughout America's history and into America's present, we can deduce the accomplishment of that goal still is a work in progress.

A century ago, Langston Hughes wrote the following words in "[Who But the Lord?](#)":

"Now, I do not understand  
Why God don't protect a man  
From police brutality.

Being poor and black,  
I've no weapon to strike back—  
So who but the Lord  
Can protect me?"

Sadly, these words still are relevant today.

As a nation, our treatment of Native Americans, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, women, Catholics, refugees, immigrants, the poor, the oppressed and many others has been unjust.

While the words of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution proclaim an intent of establishing justice and hope for an oppressed world, we have not always been faithful in practice of that virtue within our borders.

However, as a representative democracy, we are able to address these shortcomings and strive for a more perfect union.

## **Addressing justice justly**

The privilege of addressing injustices is not without its difficulty, as Reinhold Niebuhr recognized in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*: "The question which confronts society is, how it can eliminate social injustice by methods which offer some fair opportunity of abolishing what is evil in our present society, without destroying what is worth preserving in it, and without running the risk of substituting new abuses and injustices in the place of those abolished."

This sentiment was shared by James Madison, who eloquently discussed the difficulty in balancing freedom and faction in [Federalist Paper No. 10](#). For a democracy to root out injustice without causing greater injustices has been a long discussed and deliberated topic in this nation.

Too often, Christians find more comfort in remaining safely within the confines of our churches, rarely addressing complex issues of justice faced in our communities, for fear of being perceived as too radical.

However, responsible Christian stewardship requires us to engage. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

No matter our country of residence, our calling as Christians must compel us to address the injustices in our societies.

## **The moral voice of religion**

In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, James Cone wrote: “Theology can never be neutral or fail to take sides on issues related to the plight of the oppressed. For this reason, it can never engage in conversation about the nature of God without confronting those elements of human existence which threaten anyone’s existence as a person. Whatever theology says about God and the world must arise out of its sole reason for existence as a discipline: to assist the oppressed in their liberation.”

Cone continues: “Yahweh takes sides. ... In the New Testament, Jesus is not for all, but for the oppressed, the poor and unwanted of society, and against oppressors. ... God is active in human history, taking sides with the oppressed of the land.”

Although the church seemingly has waned in influence over the years, congregations still have prominent roles to play when addressing issues of injustice. The ability to organize people and to speak with moral authority against issues of injustice often has been a strength of the church.

Where would abolition be without the moral voice of religion? Where would civil rights and the nonviolent protest movement be without the moral

authority found in the gospel?

## Voice of the disadvantaged

Howard Thurman, in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, wrote: “In a society in which certain people or groups—by virtue of economic, social, or political power—have dead-weight advantages over others who are essentially without that kind of power, those who are thus disadvantaged know that they cannot fight back effectively, that they cannot protect themselves, and that they cannot demand protection from their persecutors.”

Injustice is prevalent in our society today.

Although the church competes in a cacophony of so many other voices in our society today, the church still can utilize its moral authority to drive toward justice by being the voice of the disadvantaged. The church has the ability to proclaim a narrative with moral persuasion that can strengthen the effectiveness of enacting justice in a community.

Justice looks like the church serving in the community, prophetically calling out those in power, sacrificially serving the oppressed, striving for the rights of others before themselves.

Our “more perfect” union, our establishment of justice in this land, will only be realized truly when the church embraces and lives out Micah 6:8, seeking to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.

Only then will those crying out for justice be able to share in the words of Langston Hughes when he wrote, “I’m still here!”

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