

Voices: Learning justice demands all of me

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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 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.

"The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed" (NIV, Psalm 103:6).

"God makes everything come out right; he puts victims back on their feet" (The Message, Psalm 103:6).

Christian Scriptures give great hope for the oppressed and victims of oppression. No matter which translation of the Bible we read, it is clear in Psalm 103:6 that God *knows* about the oppression and the resulting victimization.

The Bible is full of admonitions to followers of the way of Jesus about our actions toward the oppressed and victimized. We are to treat all people with love, dignity, honor and justice, because we all are made in the image

of God.

Our actions should flow naturally from a heart filled with God's love. Learning to see people as God would have us see them, with loving actions toward and on behalf of all people, comes with a commitment to do this hard work with the Lord. That commitment, I have discovered, is a life-long journey.

Learning about justice as a child

As a child, I never heard about justice. In church, we studied about social issues, but justice was not a concept ever taught to me then.

During my elementary school years, I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pa. Over the July 4 holiday week, my father's company always would close, and we would drive to Patmos, Ark., to visit my father's family, who were farmers in this rural area outside of Hope, Ark.

One summer, as we drove through Mississippi, we stopped to get gas and for my brother and me to run around the grassy area by the gas station. I was thirsty and went to the water fountain to get a drink of water. As I got to that public water fountain, a little boy who was Black came up to me and said I could not drink from this water fountain because it was only for people who were Black.

Thinking I had done something terribly wrong, my father told me he wanted me to understand it was not right, that the water was the same and that the little boy could drink from the water fountain designated for people who were white, and I could drink from the water fountain designated for people who were Black. There was absolutely no difference in the water, and it was for everyone.

I remember saying to my father it was not fair if the little boy or I got in

trouble for drinking from those water fountains. That occasion was my first experience with justice and injustice.

Learning about justice as a teenager

Then in high school, two different events occurred. One of our church friends got pregnant and was not married. In church, we were taught not to have anything to do with people who had “sin” in their lives. If we did, their sin would rub off on us. So, sadly, instead of surrounding this teen friend with our support and love, we basically left her alone.

At the same time, we had a member of our girls’ basketball team have a crush on one of the other girls. No one knew she was gay and, again, we basically left her alone.

In these examples, we were acting in ways we understood Christians should act. We were so very wrong. We definitely were not treating both of these girls with honor and dignity, nor were we showing them any type of Christian love. These were experiences where justice should have been practiced. These were my first experiences with what I now sadly refer to as a gospel of exclusion.

Studying justice in all of life and the Bible

My high school and college years were spent in the turbulence of the 1960s, with racial unrest, assassinations of our leaders, free-flowing drugs, disrespect for authority and for the U.S. flag, and so much more.

Cities being burned and people protesting for just employment practices, better housing, better education and more opportunities were a part of daily life. It was during those days justice became something I began to

study.

Our inhumanity toward each other was profound. As I studied and observed our human behaviors toward each other, I began to understand *everything* we read in the Bible is aimed at focusing on treating each other with the deep love God has for all of us as God's children.

It was then I began to understand it is most important we learn how to walk alongside each other without labeling people, but being supportive, encouraging and loving in the ways God asks of us. I was starting to understand what justice meant in a relational way through the examples Jesus gave us.

Learning just what justice demands of me

Our actions show what is in our hearts. When I first went to Philadelphia as a career missionary, I had no idea what it was like to be as economically poor as this community was. I had no idea what it was like to be kicked out of the church because I was not married and had multiple children. I had no idea what it was like to be sexually exploited. I had no idea what it was like ...

What I did understand was, all my life, I thought I was sharing with others about God's love. What I came to understand was I was sharing God's love with only those people who were just like me. Through the patience of those marginalized in multiple ways, I learned the gospel truly is about inclusion, not exclusion.

What God wanted me to do was to be working with all people, with no qualifiers. That was a major revelation in my life.

The Scriptures tell us the parable of putting new wine into old wineskins

(Mark 2:22). God needed my heart to be emptied of the old stuff before he could fill my heart with the newness of God's ways I now understood, and that I am continuing to understand.

Only through that lengthy experience was I ready to do what God called me to do in loving people and working for justice. Justice demands all of me.

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