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Erica Wilmath

Dr. Houser

Intro to Social Justice

December 2nd, 2019

What is Social Justice?

"Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."

— Martin Luther King Jr., Strength to Love

There is this infamous question that has dangled over our heads for hundreds of years, starting back to B.C. The question is simple but complex at the same time, what is social justice, and how does it have anything to do with me? I myself have thought this question long before taking this course. I had no clue the impact injustice had on me nor the calling I had to make a difference.

Throughout our day to day lives, especially when we are younger, social justice or even justice alone isn't a part of our vocab or daily thoughts. It isn't really until we experience first hand or witness injustice that we begin to formulate opinions and morals when it comes to the justice system and humanity. While approaching the final few weeks of class I finally became sure of what

social justice means to me. I believe that social justice is about pouring out the love of Christ, offering mercy to all people, and believing in humanity. In this paper I am going to break down all three of these things, the outpouring of love, the offering of mercy, and the choice to have hope in humanity.

'Love God and love people' has been one of my favorite quotes and my mantra for the majority of my teen years. We need to radiate love, the type of love that surrenders self, is sacrificial, all-consuming, biblical, Jesus' love, the love of the cross. I believe the first step in social justice is an outpouring of that kind of love. Love is a common answer to most of the issues in our world, but love is the greatest, most powerful solution to injustice alone. So many injustices in today's world exist because of carelessness and selfishness. If we were to build our foundation on the love of Jesus and see the light in everyone and treat people like that is all we see, the world would be better for it, but more importantly, we would be better. We were created to be loved and created to carry the love of Jesus. Injustice is a product of us not fulfilling that desire of The Lord's heart. Micah 6:8 says, ``He has told you, Oh man, what is good; and what else does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love, show kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?'. This verse is my favorite verse that addresses justice because love and kindness go hand in hand. Justice is love, it really is that simple of a first step. My argument for love can be supported by many of the books we read throughout this semester, starting with *Far From The Tree* by Andrew Solomon. Solomon focuses on so many issues in his book, but a

common topic and emotion throughout the chapters we read in class was an absence of love. Solomon was desperately on the search for something he had yet to identify. I believe that thing was love. He needed a reason for why things were the way they were, why families were the way they were, and why they survived all the things he could only see as a deformity or an issue. The answer to Solomons questions all pointed back to love. Solomon wrote "The love of a parent, the love of a child, and the love of a significant other. Our love for our children is almost entirely situational, yet it is nearly the strongest emotion we feel." One of my favorite things Solomon wrote in this book was in the chapter I read for our chapter response assignment and it portrays what I believe is a wonderful description of the love Jesus has for us, that we should strive to offer to others. Solomon wrote, "Most of the parents I interviewed for this book said they would never want other children than the ones they had, which at first seemed surprising given the challenges their children embody, But why do any of us prefer our own children, all of them defective in some regard, to others real or imagined? If some glorious angel descended into my living room and offered to exchange my children for another, better children---brighter, kinder, funnier, more loving, more disciplined, more accomplished--- I would clutch the ones I have and, like most parents, pray away the atrocious specter." Another book we read in class that touched on the subject is Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson, which was probably the most eye-opening read for me personally in this class. This book really shook my understanding of justice and reshaped it to the actual

definition I have given. Stevenson writes "The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned." I love this because it points directly to the love and kindness referenced in Micah 6:8 that I wrote about earlier. Throughout the entire book, Stevenson focuses on love and mercy but the main story specifically stood out to me. Stevenson was contacted to take on one of the biggest cases of his career, at the time, by the family members of Walter McMillian. Even though Walter had been caught in an affair his family wanted justice for him because he was wrongly convicted. The last book we read in class was called A Riff of Love by Greg Jarrell. Jarrell's book is about the impact of community and how love is a crucial part of the community especially in his neck of the woods. Jarrell wrote about how true friendship and Christianity is wanting justice and equality for the people around you. "This is the justice that friends will work together for, and pray together for, and stand together for. It brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly, creating from a song the kinds of spaces where all of God's children can thrive." To me, the first step in standing up for justice is embracing the love that God has for us and sharing it with everyone, even people who need a second chance.

That brings us to the next part of my definition of social justice, the offering of mercy. According to the dictionary online, the definition of mercy is 'compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.' Mercy is the hardest thing to offer up to others.

Especially if you haven't decided to walk in the love of Jesus. Forgiveness and second chances don't come easy in today's world. I think that the lack of forgiveness and the dominance of bitterness and blame genuinely does show in our society today. Everyone has someone they don't think deserves more. In those situations I think mercy should be offered not because the person receiving that mercy is perfect and completely faultless, but because mercy is offered to people who don't earn it but they do deserve it. It is especially hard when you can't convince yourself that the person who needs mercy deserves it. In *Just Mercy*, Stevenson wrote the most impactful quote to me that I will hold onto for the rest of my life. He said, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.". This quote is really where this part of my understanding of social justice came from. Life would be so poor and meaningless if the worst thing each of us did was our identity forever. I think that if you don't want your greatest sin to define you, allow others to make that choice too, support them in it and offer them love, support, but more than anything mercy. Another quote from *Just Mercy* that hits home when it comes to giving second chances and choosing mercy is, "There is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise. You see things you can't otherwise see; you hear things you can't otherwise hear. You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us." I know that mercy is not an easy choice, but

it is the right choice, and like Stevenson said, when you choose to show mercy and give people a second chance, you open your own eyes to humanity.

The final thing that I want to address as a dire part of social justice is choosing to believe in humanity. Humanity, over the years, has become less and less believed in. Collectively as a whole, our world has lost its hope for humanity. Between the hate, racism, poverty, rape, prejudice, sexism, crime, and inequality, we have lost our desire to believe in and support the good in all people. Nothing breaks my heart more than to hear someone of the older generations talk about how hopeless and lost the younger generations are 'these days'. Not just because I am considered part of a younger generation, but more so because the foundation of justice and hope for all people, and our country has to start somewhere and when social media and adults everywhere are bashing the children they raised, it just continues that cycle of hopelessness and stagnant beliefs in humanity. An example of this would be from *A Riff of Love*, in the third chapter of this book there is a story about a youth camp and how there was an adult leader that got mad about some young boys making some noise. When their leader went to check on the issue they found that one of the boys had forgotten a blanket so another boy helped him move their beds together so they could share his. The initial reaction of the first adult was an annoyance with the students, there was not even a moment where she questioned if what the boys were doing had any positive influence, I believe that this is a truth in our world as we speak. We have no hope in one another, we are so quick to assume that

everyone around us is wrong, that every criminal is guilty, that every colored person is a threat, that every female is incapable, that every gun owner kills. We have zero, literally zero hope for humanity. In *Just Mercy*, Stevenson argues for hope in humanity, quite often. He addresses how not only should a person not just be the choices they have made but that every person deserves the respect to build from that choice they are known for. Stevenson wrote, "Sometimes we're fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we're shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurture and sustains our capacity for compassion." Here is the truth that I have learned, it may be hard to stare at all of the injustice in the eye and believe in people, it may be hard to look past the statistics, news, and social media, but don't you want someone to believe in you? You and I make up humanity, we are the people fighting for justice. "The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned."

In conclusion, I think that my understanding can be applied to any single injustice known, or even unknown, to man. I believe that social justice can be biblical, and I believe the only way to deliver to people suffering from injustices is to include Jesus. We have to pour out the love of Christ, offer mercy to all people, and believing in humanity. All it takes is one small step towards loving people who need it the most, fighting for people who can't fight for themselves,

and speak for those who are voiceless. "Mercy is just when it is rooted in hopefulness and freely given. Mercy is most empowering, liberating, and transformative when it is directed at the undeserving. The people who haven't earned it, who haven't even sought it, are the most meaningful recipients of our compassion."

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