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De'Ja Smiley

Introduction to Social Justice

Dr. Houser

13 December 2019

Personal Credo: What is Social Justice?

When I first thought of the definition of social justice, my initial thought was that there was no clear definition, but then I thought about the many things that the Bible says about justice. Deuteronomy 16:20 says, "Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you." It also says in Psalms that the Lord is righteous and that he loves righteousness and justice (Psalms 11:7, 33:5. The verse that resonates with me most is Micah 6:8. It says, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Not often do I sit and ponder on such a question, but it is so often that I am able to acknowledge injustices with no hesitations. I think that it easy for many to acknowledge social injustices, but it has allowed me to evaluate myself in that regard. As one who is able to acknowledge injustice, I should also be able to acknowledge the opposite. I see social justice as being many things. I believe social justice is truth, peace, and mercy. Social justice is transforming inequities into equities and restoring freedom. Social justice is equality, fairness, compassion, and all of the fruits of the Spirit. Social justice embraces the values of what truth, equality, compassion, and mercy are and what they look like through actions and people. Most importantly, I see social justice as one of the most important things of life.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding 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." That quote speaks volumes to me because I

can feel the passion and the drive that Dr. King had for equality. Darkness cannot drive out darkness and hate cannot drive our hate. It only causes those things to grow; not to deteriorate. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was an advocate for not only equality, but also for freedom, love, and social justice. He was an advocate during a time when inequalities and privilege were normalized amongst one group of people, rather than being deemed wrong and unjust amongst all people. He was an advocate during a time when racism was at its peak, and we continue in a time today where racial injustices are still a social justice issue. Dr. King and many other social justice activists fought tirelessly for equality and freedom. I graduated from Little Rock Central High School; a school historically landmarked as the place where nine African American students made history by attending and intergrating an all-white school. Students at Little Rock Central High have the opportunity and privilege to learn about the nine students who integrated the school and I think that is so necessary. I think being able to learn about the nine courageous students and how they brought change and integration into our community influences the ways in which we are able to create change and justice within and outside of our communities as well. Racial injustices continue to be a social justice issue today because there is a lack of love, a lack of equity and equality, and a lack of fairness. When thinking of the lack of fairness and equality and how they affect people, I proceed to think about the Central Park Five.

Earlier in the course, we discussed truth, peace, and mercy, and what each student thought defined 'social justice' the greatest. At the time, I felt that truth defined social justice the greatest because I have always been told that "the truth will set you free." But as I thought about that phrase, I continuously thought about the Central Park Five, five teens who were falsely accused of rape and faced magnitudes of injustices. At the time, truth resonated with me so much because I was always told that it was better to tell the truth than to lie. I was also taught that it

was better to know one's own truth and not the truth that someone else has tried to create for them. In this case, the five teens knew their truth and even then, their truth was not enough to receive peace or justice until many years later. I constantly thought about how young black boys were targeted because prosecutors felt that regardless of who committed the crime, African Americans needed to be put away to make society better and/or safer. This ideology continues to be active among many people even today. Their inequities were transformed into equities with freedom and exoneration, but exoneration would not make up for the years of confinement, the lack of opportunities for education, and not being able to see family. Their freedom was taken from them and that was an injustice in itself. Social issues stem from hate and hate is a social construct; hate is taught. It has become the norm that anything profoundly greater than hate cannot seem normal or comfortable to society. Social justice is the restoration of freedom that is frequently taken away from those whom it should not have been taken from originally. It is the restoration of freedom and peace to the five teens who spent many years without. Not only do people face social injustices when they are innocent but still face time in jail and prison, but people also face social injustices when they are forced out of their homes.

After reading a book intitled Evicted by Matthew Desmond, I realized how flawed and deceiving some people in the housing system are. Something that caught my attention in the beginning of the book was when Desmond explained how tenants are not just forced to move out by cities, but also by landlords. Some landlords will go as far as paying the tenants hundreds of dollars to be out by the end of the week (Desmond, 4). Desmond also said, "Fewer and fewer families can afford a roof over their head. This is among the most urgent and pressing issues facing America today (Desmond, 5)." It is important to recognize that this is a social issue. As a result, evictions cause homelessness, force families to go to shelters, and ultimately, widens the

idea and reality of poverty. Things that result from evictions are social injustices. When I was younger, my mom, my brothers and I lived in a shelter for six months due to unfortunate events. I have had the experience of knowing what it feels like to not have a permanent and/or solidified place to call home. I also have experienced not knowing when and where my next meal would come from. I was able to see myself and my family in many of the stories discussed in the book. I was also able to realize that I too faced social injustices. For some of the families in the book and for people in the world, justice for them may be having a home and having food; knowing that they can wake up the next day without worrying about their next meal or how they will pay their bills. But most of all, whether they wake up in a comfortable bed or not, justice for them may be not having to worry about others looking at them negatively because they do not possess the same luxuries as others. People are taught norms and what is socially right and/or wrong. When people intentionally or unintentionally rebel against the norms or social constructs of society, they become outcasts, sometimes seen as inhumane. They are not shown or given compassion as a person with riches and wealth may be given or expect to receive. I watched a documentary and in it, a homeless man received a job at a restaurant bussing tables and washing dishes. He said that he would rather sleep in a shelter than to be on the streets because being on the streets would increase his chances of going to jail. Regardless of his income or housing, he was still loved; loved and accepted and that is how it should always be. That is an example of social justice. In the end of the book, Evicted, Desmond talked about what influenced him to create the book as well as the journey of it. He talked about his experience of studying poverty and something he said left me intrigued and wishing that I had read the book sooner. He said the “poor were being left out of the inequality debate, as if we believed the livelihoods of the rich and the middle class were intertwined but those of the poor and everyone else were not (317).”

That statement was a lesson in itself and moved me profusely. So often, people think about racial inequality as if it is the only issue in the world, when though it is an extreme issue, it is not the only extreme issue. As Bryan Stevenson said in his book, Just Mercy, “the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice (Stevenson, 18)”. In his book, Stevenson also says, “an absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as we victimize others (Stevenson, 18).” Whether one is living in some sort of poverty, a different race than our own, or of older age, we should still be compassionate and loving to them as we would want them to be to us because that is what social justice is about.

In Evicted, Walter McMillian, one of the prime characters, was an example of an individual who fell victim to the system; he was a victim of social injustice. He was falsely accused and convicted of murder and was put on death row where he would await the death penalty. So many injustices occurred within his case, that reading the book caused me to feel extremely upset and frustrated but remembering that similar things have happened before. People involved in the case were paid to lie so that they could continue to enjoy their freedom, meanwhile it was taken away from an innocent black male. I cannot help but to think about how different the world would be if everyone in it loved everyone and saw everyone equally. Thinking about this issue that took place in the book caused me to think about the many excuses that people make when instead justice should be served, and actions should be taken. People so fiercely believe that if something does not pertain to them, then they have no right to get involved. Sometimes silence is just as worse as speaking. Standing by and allowing an injustice to happen is just as bad as committing the injustice. So many people knew that Walter McMillian

was innocent; so many people stood around and kept quiet. Whether they were black or white, they knew that telling the truth was the right thing to do; but it probably was not what people thought was the safest thing to do. Participating in bystander interventions and trainings, I have been able to learn and realize the importance of intervening in situations that can escalate whether it is “my business” or not. I grew up around the saying, “stay out of the Kool-Aid unless you know the flavor,” but I have also learned that sometimes it is better to be in the Kool-Aid because if someone is in a dark situation, they need a light to guide them out of it. How fulfilling it would be to help bring someone out of a dark situation before it becomes more of an injustice than it already is. We need to transition from the mentality of believing that something has nothing to do with us and start figuring out how we can help and promote change and justice. Social justice is not about taking the responsibility of social change by one’s self but working towards that change with others. As we hear, one cannot change the world alone.

A current social issue that is named to be life threatening and indeed catastrophic is the lead exposure in water in Flint, Michigan. It has been a major health concern and continues to be. Any water consumed in Flint must be from bottled water and plastic bottles. A now twelve-year-old, who is many years younger than me is an activist who at the age of nine, began raising awareness for the water crisis that is occurring in Flint. She is the start of social change and justice. She has organized fundraisers that have influenced the city of Flint such as school supplies, clean water, and many other resources to help children and families throughout the city. At one point, the state decided to stop paying for bottled water, so she began to raise money to provide citizens with safe water. She then decided to partner with a company to distribute water filters to communities all over the country to help those who were dealing with water toxicity as well. This twelve-year-old has raised so much money because she had developed a passion for

people, social change and justice within her community and eventually outside of it. There is so much hope in knowing that at some point Flint will one day have clean water. That does not mean that is the only social issue that is occurring in Flint, Michigan. Nor does it mean that it is the only issue anywhere in the world. That also does not mean that that twelve-year-old has to be alone in promoting change, peace, or security. She sought out for change and all people should do the same.

Greg Jarrell is another person who saw a need for change in himself that he made himself uncomfortable to live in a place that was unfamiliar to him. In his book intitled a Riff of Love: Notes on Community and Belonging, he talked about the displacement of people from their homes and property. He said, “The practice of forced displacement, where the ambition of a white power structure removes people from land, and land from people, is repeated over and over in the history of European settlers and colonizers... the doctrine of discovery to urban renewal, displacement continues today (Jarrell, 121). Displacement of land is primarily an issue because of economic interest. Forced displacement of land is not the only problem present. People are forced to change their identities; they are forced out of countries and experience various other social injustices. I have learned from reading Far from the Tree by Andrew Solomon, that everyone has different identities; that everyone is different no matter how similar characteristics or traits may be. I have learned the importance of acceptance and understanding regardless of race, socioeconomic status, sex, or religion. Learning and reading about vertical and horizontal identities taught me that not everything is in our control. I learned that being a student is a part of my identity, but it does not make me who I am. Social justice is about being able to own one’s self or something without having to worry about power structures stealing that part of an individual. Jarrell also talks about community and belonging. Community is defined as

a group of people living in the same place or sharing a characteristic(s) and belonging is defined as being a part of something. Something about community and belonging that I find to be so correlating is the idea of acceptance. It is fascinating to see the similarities of love, community, and belonging as they all can create and stimulate social change and social justice.

When I first began the semester in Introduction to Social Justice, I thought that it was a class in which there would be enriched discussions. Though I assumed, I did not think that I would have to really ponder on what social justice was. I only thought that we would have really good conversations and read really good books. Then there was enriched discussions and good reading material which all allowed me to reevaluate myself, how I respond and view situations and how I can positively impact situations; not to make myself look better but simply because it may be the right thing to do. Being in Introduction to Social Justice allowed me to understand the importance of social issues that go beyond my own knowledge; social issues that are not always spoken of but are always happening. Ignorance has lead many to believe that unless it pertains to us, it is not for us. It has also lead us to believe that our own social issues and injustices are the only important ones. Understanding and the fruits of the Spirit are what should lead us to believe that social justice is possible with love, community, belonging, hope, compassion, truth, equity and equality. Dr. King, Bryan Stevenson, Andrew Solomon, Greg Jarrell, and that twelve-year-old girl are some of the leaders and examples of people who care to understand the importance of social justice and how to demonstrate it first in their lives and then to others. I hope to grow and be an example and fight for social justice and all that it means just like them. To me, social justice is the fruit of the Spirit, compassion, hope, mercy, fairness, equality, restoration of freedom, and the transformation of inequities into equities.

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