COMMUNITAS is a term anthropologist Victor Turner uses to describe the temporary but intense community that develops among pilgrims for the duration of the journey (remember the pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales). For us in the church, it might describe the community we develop with the successive churches we serve, or the community of cohorts of the College of Pastoral Leaders, gathering to study together for a brief period of years.

Turner also employs the concept of liminality to describe that pilgrim experience of leaving the domain of the familiar to travel and to experience new potentialities and powers that lie afield. We leave home, travel light, expose ourselves both to the unknowns in the world of the horizon and the unknowns within our own souls, now freed to be heard in the silence of the road. Again, the cohorts of the College of Pastoral Leaders leave the parish momentarily to hear the experiences of colleagues and to contemplate the ministries seeking to emerge from their own souls. So we are pilgrims in the College, our experience shaped by communitas and liminalities.
CONTENTS

2
WELCOME  . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Theodore J. Wardlaw

3
INTRODUCTION  . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Janet Maykus

4
TEACHING FELLOWS REFLECTIONS
Michael Jinkins and David H. Jensen

14
COHORT REFLECTIONS
Greg Rickel, Helen Nablo, Beverly Sonnier, Jenny Lannom, Gary Bell,
Janet Beatty, and Patricia Boyd-Wilson

The College of Pastoral Leaders is funded in part by a grant from the
Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program of Lilly Endowment Inc.
As I have reviewed the thoughtful and provocative articles that lie ahead in this issue, I have recalled over and over again a certain Christmas in Atlanta when I was pastor of Central Presbyterian Church. One of the many ministries of this downtown congregation was a cold-weather Night Shelter. For almost half of the year, the congregation’s gymnasium was outfitted with cots, laundry services, and supper tables for the provision of meals, and some seventy-five homeless men slept there on a nightly basis.

Volunteers from the church, and from numerous other congregations in the city, staffed the operation each night; and sometimes, frankly, finding enough volunteers was a persistent challenge. On this particular Christmas, though, there were some seventy people who swamped the church switchboard with calls expressing their willingness to staff the Night Shelter on Christmas Eve—virtually one volunteer per shelter guest. The staff person in charge of coordinating volunteers, with tears in her eyes, said, “Where are these volunteers when we need them in the middle of February?”

She was drawing the distinction between Christmas charity (a wonderfully sentimental seasonal rush of good will) and daily justice (a disciplined, ongoing system of attending to the persistent needs of people, day after day and night after night). Charity is providing the annual food basket to an obviously needy family. Justice is codifying a meaningful response to the daily human deficits that plague that family, and every other needy family in the world, whether it be Thanksgiving or Christmas or Easter or just a hardbitten, cold, and gritty day in the middle of February. Charity is an impulse; justice is a comprehensive long view—the often-unheralded, unsentimental work of the faith summoned from us by the Gospel.

This issue of Communitas explores what our practices look like at street-level. Read on, and you will find help moving away from the cruel vagaries of charity toward the mature, faithful work of justice.

Theodore J. Wardlaw
President, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary
Welcome to the 2008 edition of *Communitas*. This year, our theme is “Seeking Justice.” The pursuit of justice is certainly a duty of all called into ministry. It is something we act out in myriad ways. Yet, we often fail to identify the justice work we do unless ours is a calling into a “justice” or “peace and justice” or “activist” ministry.

Talking to those in the College of Pastoral Leaders, I am reminded that seeking justice is the day-to-day work of those in pastoral leadership, those in chaplaincy, those in judicatory administration, as well as those in what we call justice ministries.

Part of the work of the minister is helping those she serves imagine that which seems impossible. What does it mean to turn the other cheek when we live in a society primed to seek revenge? We are called to serve the least, but so often the least look and act and believe in ways that we find reprehensible. We are taught to pray for daily bread yet we hoard our wealth and deprive others of even our crumbs.

In the writings that follow you will see that the pursuit of justice is at the heart of the ministries of those in the College of Pastoral Leaders. Each minister approaches the topic with his particular lens for his particular ministry. I invite you to engage in the act of imagining God’s holy work and to remember that your ministry, too, has at its base the work of seeking justice.

Janet Maykus
Principal, The College of Pastoral Leaders
Christianity has a problem. The problem has a name. His name is Jesus Christ.

What I mean is simply this: It would be far easier for us as Christians to define justice and to pursue it if it were not for Jesus of Nazareth standing in the middle of the doorway of the Christian faith. We could, with impunity and unrelenting consistency, for example, justify revenge as a logical form of justice. “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” makes perfect sense to me. “If a person sheds blood, his blood should be shed.” Sure, why not. Were it not for the rebuttal of Jesus, I could sleep with such “justice” on my conscience. “But,” says Jesus, “I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. And if one strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matthew 5:39).

Even the more extreme versions of this sort of justice could make sense, certainly for the sake of national security and national pride. The whole notion of our nation’s making a “proportional response” to another country’s violence against us is predicated on this concept of justice. And, what is more disturbing still, I cannot imagine mounting a legitimate and rational argument against the doctrine of “proportional response” purely as an American citizen. My citizenship does not provide sufficient moral structures to support a meaningful ethical critique of the doctrine. But, as a Christian, I am placed in a position of considerable tension with the doctrine of “proportional response.” The same might be said of other issues related to justice, such as capital punishment.

In some ways, the greatest threat to one’s Christian ethics is not, then, the obvious immoralities engaged in by the pathologically violent, the natural born killers in our society who periodically go on their deadly sprees. Most of us Christians are not tempted to do that. At least, we are not likely to do that. No, the greatest threat to the Christian ethics of most of us is our temptation to justify the rational, perfectly legitimate (at least in the eyes of the world-at-large) violence of revenge which we have given the

---

The Reverend Dr. Michael Jinkins is academic dean and professor of pastoral theology at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He is a teaching fellow for the College of Pastoral Leaders.
name of justice.

Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, once observed that Christians have a responsibility to understand all aspects of life through Jesus. When we want to understand love, grace, goodness, generosity, or justice, for example, we must run to Bethlehem to stand beside the speechless infant Jesus in Mary’s arms. We must rush to the foot of the cross where this same Jesus, charged by some with blasphemy against God and by others with sedition against the state, hangs dying at the hands of people he blesses even as they crucify him.

A few years ago I remember visiting in a church in which the pastor had been preaching a series of sermons on the teachings of Jesus. Week after week I heard him read powerful, simple, clear texts from the Gospels in which Jesus calls us to follow him, to live as human beings devoted to the love, life, and Spirit of God, to return no one evil for evil, to bless and not curse, to show a family resemblance with God, our heavenly Father, by acting mercifully as God is merciful to us, sinners. And week after week I listened to this pastor in his preaching try to convince his congregation that Jesus didn’t really mean what he said. It is a strange business for a Christian pastor to try to save his church from Jesus.

Jesus does not call us to the consistency of worldly wisdom, but neither does he call us to the consistency of legalism. And this is just as disturbing.

Any good idea can be converted into a law. Dietrich Bonhoeffer realized this when, as a young pastor, after years of personal struggle with the problem of Jesus he became a confirmed pacifist. This required a significant shift in his understanding of Lutheran theology. Bonhoeffer’s great classic, translated in the United States as The Cost of Discipleship, reflects his pacifism, his dedication to hear and take seriously Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” as a call to live a particular way, the way of peace and non-violence. But when Hitler’s Nazi machine trampled underfoot Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and anyone who opposed his nationalistic totalitarianism and idolatrous cult of personality, Bonhoeffer found it necessary as a follower of Jesus of Nazareth not only to stand with those whom the Nazis rejected (Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and everyone else pushed to the margins of society), but to participate in a plot to assassinate Hitler and to bring an end to his regime. Bonhoeffer did not try to justify his decision, nor did he rationalize it. He simply sought to follow Jesus of Nazareth.

Christianity has a problem. The problem has a name. His name is Jesus Christ. Perhaps this is why we call him the “pearl of great price.” Pearls are formed at the price of considerable discomfort. They are worried into existence.
Daily work matters for Christian faith. Our ordinary labors—cleaning, cooking, caring for children, gardening, sculpting, trading, and building—are responses to the life God gives to the world. Christianity is distinctive in its claim that the ordinary materials and practices of life are charged with the holy. Basic foods of bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ in a holy meal; human flesh becomes Emmanuel in a first-century carpenter, a man who worked with his hands; water, indispensable to life, becomes the promise of new birth in the community of faith. Bodies, baths, meals, and labor are central to Christian faith. Our daily work matters because it responds to the life God gives to the world.

A Christian understanding of human work grounds itself in good news that before we ever lift a hand in labor, God is already at work for the world’s sake: creating, sustaining, grace, redeeming. We work, as one form of thanksgiving, because God is already at work, work that proceeds from abundance. God does not work so that some may have more and others less, but so that all might have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10). The assumption, in other words, is that there is always enough work and fruits of labor to go around. In the church, no matter how many are gathered at the table, there is always room for one more. How different this assumption rings in American consumer society. As Methodist theologian Douglas Meeks notes, the reigning assumption in our context is one of scarcity, that there is never enough to go around; therefore, I need to work all I can to hang on to what I’ve got, and maybe in the process to accumulate a little more. Work, in this context, appears less as a response to God’s work, and more as something we hoard to ourselves. As a result, we experience all kinds of scarcity: not enough time, not enough money, not enough things.

What are the consequences for a society that assumes there is not enough to go
around? How do Christian practices of worship and assembly at the Lord’s Table affect our understanding of daily work? These are the two questions that frame my address. The first leads me to note, however briefly, some painful realities of work in our economy of scarcity. The second points toward hope in the transformation of work: fed at the Eucharistic banquet, we live out of God’s abundance, working and sharing with others.

The pain and problem of work in America

In an economy of scarcity, joblessness is something to be expected; indeed, a certain degree of unemployment, we are told, is a sure sign of a healthy economy, as it raises incentives for the jobless to participate more fully in the economic engine that drives the United States. Recent statistics on unemployment in the U.S. hover around 5 percent. These numbers represent a rather steady decline in the ranks of unemployed since 2003, falling within what some would call the “natural rate,” to the delight of White House spin-doctors and their supportive economists. Beneath these “acceptable” numbers, however, lurk alarming levels of unacceptability. Unemployment levels of African Americans, for example, were double that of the population at large over the same time period. Official unemployment statistics, moreover, only include would-be workers who are actively seeking jobs.

The U.S. Department of Labor does not include in its monthly prognoses “marginally attached” workers, who want work, and actively sought work during the previous year, but because of family situation, illness, or disillusionment did not seek gainful employment during the four weeks prior to that month’s survey. And if one stops looking for a job actively, one falls off the radar screen. Live without a paying job long enough, and you don’t even count. In an economy of scarcity, we accustom ourselves to saying—without a hint of irony—that it’s acceptable for some who want paid employment to be denied it.

Another myth in our economy of scarcity is that when you’ve found a job you can hold onto, you will earn enough to make ends meet. Those who work hard, we are told, will surely reap their just reward. But the economy of scarcity, when viewed more closely, reveals that those who work hardest often live below the poverty line. In the United States, the number of persons living near poverty levels is a staggering 31 percent. Focus the lens more sharply, and the statistics become even more frightening. Women who maintain families are twice as likely to number among the working poor than men. While the ranks of the working poor have increased over the past two decades and the purchasing power of the minimum wage has declined, earnings for those at the top have mushroomed. In 1964 the average CEO earned 24 times the average worker; now s/he earns 300 times as much. In an economy of scarcity, hoarding becomes the only option, and one can never have enough.

Fueled by that economy, Americans are working more than ever. For some, overwork is a necessity: the working poor typically work more than one job in order to pay rent, utility bills, and put food on the table. But for the middle class, many of us work more simply because we want more. Economist Juliet Schor has noted that American
productivity has doubled since the middle of the 20th century. That means, theoretically, average workers could sustain the same middle-class standard of living at the beginning of the 21st century in half the working hours of the 1950s. But that standard of living, it seems, was not enough. Each family now “needs” a bigger house, at least two cars, and mounds of electronic gadgetry to soothe our ennui when we’re not working. As a result, we pile on the hours: the United States now outpaces all but two nations on earth in time spent on the job, outstripping “workaholic” Japan, blowing away Europe, and only lagging a few meager hours behind South Korea and the Czech Republic. Americans typically work 100 hours more per year than the average Canadian, Japanese, and Mexican worker—and almost 200 hours more than the typical European.

Because of our work habits, we also have become a time-starved nation. If you are like me, you, too, wish that the day contained just a few more hours. We want more time in our fast-paced world, but time keeps slipping away. In an economy of scarcity, there is never enough time. Between demands of work, family, and other commitments, there seems to be little time to rest. In our fast-paced world, we want more time, but time keeps slipping away.

This lack of time has affected even our sleep patterns, as we sleep significantly less, on average than previous generations. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild has observed that working mothers speak of sleep like starving people speak of food. The work-saving technologies of the new millennium, such as e-mail, teleconferencing, and even “family-friendly” workplaces, are little help in saving time, as they typically blur distinctions between work and home. If I can take a child to work, then I am more likely to log long hours there; if I can take e-mail home with me, domestic space becomes an extension of the office.

This maddening rush is exhausting, compressing our days, confusing our sense of place. The end result: are we satisfied with our work? Are we happy with the fruits of our labors? Hardly. A recent survey by the Conference Board indicates that two thirds of us are not motivated to meet employers’ goals, and 25 percent of us are merely showing up for a paycheck. Dilbert is so funny because it rings so true in the American workplace.

The time of Eucharist
Patterns of worship around the Lord’s Table disrupt our tendencies to hoard work and the fruits of our labors. They do so by reorienting us in the midst of ordinary time. As Christians gather on the first day of the week, worship occurs not as an escape from the workweek, but as our work begins. Liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop notes that very early in Christian practice, Christians gathered on the first day of the week to celebrate the Risen Lord:

Christians originally did not establish a new Sabbath, their own holy day and their own structuring of the week.

Through Christian history the day of meeting has certainly been dealt with that way, as if the observance of the day were a new religious institution. But at the origin, when the first day was another work day, and in continuing
intention, it is not so. Rather, the old beloved week still exists and, juxtaposed to it, there is the Christian meeting. It is as if the meeting were after the week, beyond the week, free of the week, and opening to a thing the week cannot contain.¹⁰

Christian worship does not simply occur as a pause at the end of the week; rather, it begins the week, the time that we have, by announcing good news to the world for all time. As God gives time to the world, there is always enough to go around. Christian worship both occurs in the midst of ordinary time, at the beginning of the work week, and beyond time, as God breaks into an ordinary day and promises communion to a time-starved and often bread-starved people. In this narrative, there is always enough time, even in the midst of daily routines. Situating Christian worship at the beginning of the week hallows our working days and rids us of the illusion that time is something we control by programming dates and appointments into a Palm Pilot.

At the Lord’s Table, time is not subject to our manipulation or management, but is given to us excessively and abundantly.

The words of institution invite us to remember both a distant time and a time that is ours: “We give you thanks that the Lord Jesus, on the night before he died, took bread, and after giving thanks to you, he broke it and gave it to his disciples.”¹¹ These words draw us into a story that gives life to a broken world. We are invited back in time to remember the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples, and are promised that the same Host is present at table right here, in our time. As often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim his coming for all time. Eucharistic time, in other words, suggests that time is not placed on us as a demand, but given as gift. All the time that we have—at work, at play, in worship, in struggle, in joy—is God’s time.

Christian liturgy does not attempt to control time, but to be formed by God’s salvation that occurs in the midst of ordinary time. Salvation history always occurs in time: a covenant established with a displaced people ages ago, the coming of the Redeemer in the flesh to live for thirty-odd years, the promise of creation’s fulfillment at the end of time. Salvation, for Christians, does not occur by escaping time, but by being formed by God in time as history marches on. The liturgical calendar, then, is not a calendar upon which we schedule events, but the remembering of God’s saving acts in time, and our incorporation in that story. As the church celebrates Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and ordinary time, it is drawn into a grand narrative that began long before we arrived and will continue long after we have left it. In the small amount of time that God gives us, we, too, become a part of the story of creation, covenant, redemption, and consummation that God narrates in the midst of time.

What does this Eucharistic time mean for our daily work? One consequence is that all of our living moments are lived from God’s gift of time. A test of good work, then, is what kind of attitude our labors generate toward time. Does our work encourage us to view time as a scarce commodity, demanding more out of us in less time? Does working time overwhelm time for rest? Does work encourage me to see others as constraints on my time? Answering affirmatively to any of these questions suggests that the
rhythms of daily work are out of sync with the narrative of God’s time. Good work, by contrast, extends the gift of time to others, where the time I spend working in some way redounds to others’ enjoyment of the time they’re given.

**The things of Eucharist**

An economy of scarcity fosters materialism: we work so that we can hoard more things. The Eucharist is also materialistic, reminding us that God blesses the material work of our hands, calling us to share that work with others. Whereas an economy of scarcity urges us to use up material for ourselves, the economy of the Lord’s Table encourages us to value basic things of life—things like bread and wine—and to give them away.

The bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper remind us that God is no stranger to work.

The central things at the table are not wheat and grapes, the raw stuff of creation, but bread and wine, the products of human labor. Countless hours—indeed, years—of work go into the bread that appears at the Lord’s Table each Sunday: tilling soil at the beginning of planting season, sowing seed preserved from last year, watering seedlings, praying for sufficient sun and rain, harvesting grain when it is ripe and golden, threshing wheat from chaff, grinding wheat into flour, mixing flour into dough, stirring in yeast, baking the loaf, bringing bread to market, to say nothing of the hours of planning, research, and transportation involved in each of these steps. The wine, likewise, is the product of endless hours of cultivation, trimming, pressing, fermentation, bottling, and marketing. Vineyards, moreover, do not produce an immediate yield, but require years of labor before even the first fruits appear. These holy things of bread and wine are the products of human hands applied to the bounty God has given; they are there because we work. Without human labor, there is no Eucharist.

Our work alone, however, does not secure the place of these holy things. The bread and the wine also represent a life lived gently on the land. God gives us rains that water the earth, soil that nourishes the seedling, sun that radiates upon the land. If we work the land too much, it will yield no more fruit; plant water-intensive plants in regions of the earth where water is scarce and wells run dry. The good work of human hands is cooperative labor, attending closely to the needs of the land. In a manner that hearkens Israel’s Sabbath practice, good work looks for sustainable yield rather than the absolute maximum. Good work does not control or master the land, but considers the land as co-worker. Exploit our co-worker earth and bread becomes scarcer and wine more costly.

When we present the bread and wine at the Lord’s Table, these products of our labor, God takes them, blesses them, and gives us life. To our small response, God gives us God’s very self over and again. Our offering thus becomes God’s gift to us. Many contemporary attitudes toward work see human labor (and the fruits of human labor) as a zero-sum game. In order for me to have a job, someone else must be out of work; in order for my family to secure enough bread to live, some others must invariably go without. I must, therefore, compete with others for jobs that are scarce and things that are even scarcer. The Eucharistic economy, however, reveals unimagined abundance
when work is shared. God gives, we respond in tokens of work, and God keeps on giving, empowering us to give.

Such work satisfies because its bounty is shared among many. In contrast to fruits of work that we “earn” for ourselves, the food of the Eucharist is public, given for all. As Meister Eckhardt once claimed, “There is no such thing as ‘my’ bread. All bread is ours and given to me, to others through me, and to me through others.” Having partaken of this holy meal, sharing in Christ’s body and blood, we rise from table to share this meal and ourselves with the world. It is no coincidence that offerings for the poor accompany celebrations of Holy Communion; without giving and sharing, the meal devolves into gluttony. We come to the Lord’s Table hungry, responding to God’s work with tokens of our labor in bread and wine; God takes these elements, blesses them, and gives us life, nourishing and satisfying our hungry hearts. Yet we leave the table not sated, but yearning for this food to be shared with all, recognizing that the Reign of God is not yet among us, that injustice suppurates in all corners of the globe, that thousands die every day because of hoarded work and hoarded bread. Nourished at the Lord’s Table, we also go away hungry, rising from this meal to share ourselves and the bread of our labors.

When work is hoarded, hunger increases as famine; when we are fed at the Lord’s Table, shared work intensifies our hunger for righteousness and justice so that our work issues forth in bread for the world. Good work satisfies because it is caught up in God’s labor for the world, seeking to extend God’s bounty to all; but this same work leaves us restless when we recognize that many do not partake in that abundance. A mix of hunger and satisfaction, therefore, characterize the Christian journey into the Reign of God. As our thirst is quenched and hunger satisfied every time we eat and drink at the Lord’s Table, we hunger that God’s Reign will come. Hungering, we also know it is already here, summoning our response and our work on behalf of the Kingdom, where all things, basic and holy, are shared.

The satisfaction that the Eucharist offers the world is different from the abundance of things promised by an American work ethic. Amid the holy things at table, we are reminded that only the basic things of life, shared in fellowship with others, is what truly satisfies. Fulfillment is not found in work that constantly seeks more things, but in work that acknowledges its insufficiency but offers itself nonetheless. When we respond to God’s grace, we come to the table empty-handed, offering in bread and wine tokens of our labor, desiring that they, too, might be shared.

The gifts of Eucharist

A society bent on working for things does not expect gifts and cannot accept them. As recent attempts at welfare reform during both the Clinton and Bush administrations have insisted, the good life comes only to those who deserve it by working hard enough. An economy of scarcity makes a distinction between the deserving poor who may be beneficiaries of government largesse and the undeserving poor who get what they deserve. Giving simply does not enter the calculus of a society that expects hard work to reap its own rewards; nor is gift a factor in a society that assumes an acceptable level of unemployment. In an economy of scarcity, gifts are odd; on the rare occasions that
they do appear, the typical response is that one should repay the giver in order to express appreciation and to stay out of the giver’s debt. Gifts easily become media of exchange, and when they do, they mirror other media: barter, money, credit. In the Eucharistic economy of abundance, however, gifts are really gifts: they expect nothing in return, but in a contagious movement of grace, they equip the receiver to give as well. The Eucharistic economy is not a zero-sum game, where only a limited number of gifts may be given away lest the goods become exhausted. Rather, the more we receive at table, the more we are able to give ourselves.

At table, we bring nothing but ourselves and tokens of our flawed work: hungry, broken, longing for communion. In these small gifts, Christ is the offering and the offerer, giving himself over and over whenever we gather. Because this gift is complete, bestowing life, it points to work that we cannot accomplish on our own. Indeed, the gift at table indicates that the main work in the world is already finished. As Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann writes, “In Christ, everything is ‘done’ and no one needs to add anything to his work.”

Owing our lives to God, we respond in joy and thanks, in the freedom of gratitude rather than the compulsion of trying to please others, God, or the observers of our work.

At one level, we who have received this gift can do nothing. Graced with our lives, there is nothing we can give God in return that God does not already have. Yet we rise from the table, depart in peace, and return to the world with the lives we have been given. The gift of life enables us to respond with joy: we leave a sanctuary and return to work in the midst of the world, knowing that God animates and sustains that work.

God’s giving cannot be reduced to an exchange of commodities. Having received God’s gift, we in turn seek to share with others. Contrary to marketplace assumptions, giving does not result in depletion, so that some have more and God has less. Rather, the divine giving operates out of a reality of fullness, pleroma. As God “empties” Godself in the incarnation, creation is fulfilled and God’s fullness is revealed. God gives not out of scarcity, but out of excess, so that the divine giving enables us to give to each other. In the divine economy, pleroma and self-emptying, kenosis, go hand-in-hand. The former without the latter amounts to a hoarding of goods; the latter without the former devolves into self-abnegation. The gifting economy of God points to a third way, in which communion among creation and the Creator is intensified by gifts that keep on giving, goods that are shared, and relationships that flourish in the midst of these gifts.

To these gifts, we cannot but respond with gratitude and gifts of our own. But we give back not to compensate for the gift we have received. Divine giving subverts “tit-for-tat” assumptions that permeate contemporary practices of gift exchange. By responding to God with our lives, labors, praise, and thanksgiving, we, too, offer gifts. The holy things at table are tokens of God’s gift to the world; we give not to render ourselves out of the debt of the Giver, but because we respond out of God’s fullness, even in our poverty.

Taking these rhythms of the Lord’s Table to heart, our work can be an expression of the people God calls us to be: persons gifted with life by God who gives to others. When an artist paints, she offers an interpretation of the world, expresses herself, gives
to others and praises God with her brush. When an accountant carefully tabulates expense sheets and keeps budgets so that a shipping company can transport wheat from one side of the Pacific to another, he employs his gift with mathematics, gives it to others, and in no small manner gives thanks to God. In an economy of abundance, much of the work that sustains the world occurs outside monetary exchange. When neighbors pass fresh tomatoes across the garden fence to one another, they till the earth and respond to God, the source of the earth’s abundance. When parents rise at 3 a.m. to comfort a sobbing child, they respond to a child in need and the God who nurtures us all. As each of these workers give to others, those who receive them are better equipped to pass on their unique gifts. Gifts at table keep on giving.

Work has become a problem in our economy of scarcity by distorting work’s meaning. Many of us work our fingers to the bone while others languish in unemployment lines. The fruits of our labors are typically distributed in ways that increase the inequities of society. As we work more, our jobs seem to satisfy us less. Where can we turn in a world where work seems to be failing? One place to begin is at this table, where fruits of labor are shared, where God blesses the work of our hands, and where we recognize that we live not by work but by God’s grace. Yet the renewal of our labors does not end at table, for whenever we eat and drink, we also rise from the table, going forth to share the gifts and the work we have received here.

NOTES


2. Since the occasion of this public address in September of 2006, the U.S. economy has experienced significant turmoil, accompanied by a marked rise in unemployment. This current economic situation makes the practice of the Lord’s Table all the more relevant.


Perhaps my ponderings on this subject should be far more global and all encompassing. I suspect this is what is expected when one is asked to muse on what it means to be a Christian seeking justice. Actually, I am in total agreement that it is a big thing, crucial for the world, for all of us, even those who don’t particularly feel that injustice is a regular part of their lives. In fact, it may be even more important for those of us for which this is true.

No, my thought on this is really a very small thing. Some will even dismiss it as too small and perhaps even irrelevant but I am going to persist nonetheless. I have three major ministry initiatives I have vowed to work on as I begin my new episcopate. The first of these three is to focus on those thirty-five years of age and under. To this group, the church seems ever more irrelevant because the Church, to them, seems to be irrelevant to the world. This is not actually new. In some ways every new generation has had its “issues” with the church. However, even when viewed historically, we seem to be witnessing as stark a denial as we have ever seen. The denial comes with a wish, at least from what I hear from these generations, that it might be different, which is hopeful.

When I meet with the mostly older generations that occupy the pews in our churches, I hear, eventually, some notion, and even accusation, that the younger generations seem to be uncommitted and self indulged. I listen for a while and then I have to ask, “Who raised them?” Somewhere, from someone, these young people learned to be uncommitted and self indulgent, if that be the truth. In reality, the entirety of the former generations raised them, corporately, as well as individually. I have to wonder if, in fact, they are not uncommitted and self indulgent at all. This is not what I sense when I engage them. Instead they are wise enough to sense, in the church, an often inauthentic loyalty and some suspicion that our words and proclamations don’t match our intentions or actions.

This is my small thing.

Though I have not been one to jump on the family values bandwagon as the solution to all things, I am coming around to the notion that it makes a difference, perhaps a more profound one than many of us want to imagine. Instead of biting off the major social issues of our day, some of which are truly more than one has time to spend any
time on, perhaps it would do well for us to calculate how we can make a difference within the moments in our lives which we cannot avoid, working in our jobs, making our way to those jobs, living with our families and others we live with each day. How can we live justice in those relationships so that justice becomes a way of life?

I think of my twelve-year-old son. Several years ago, I took him to Disney World. We lived in one of the perimeter hotels which require that you board buses, mostly packed unsafely to the gills with humans, so that you might make it to the various parks. I witnessed old women and men having to stand up, holding on for dear life, as we whipped through the park, while strapping young people sat sagely only inches away. It was clear that the thought had never crossed their minds to get up and offer their seats.

I became rather obsessed from then on to teach my son, making him get up, as I did on many occasions, to allow others to sit.

You will never know the great conversations that started as we offered this simple kindness. Sadly, it was so unusual as to be novel. My son began to actually look forward to doing it.

Lest you think I am taking it to the younger generation, you can witness the same from everyone. We are a pampered nation, a people blinded by our wealth, and so this type of entitlement living is all around us. I succumb to it too, I am not excluding myself. We, here, have to work hard to see beyond it. On a small ferry ride recently I watched an older woman plop herself down in a chair, prop her leg up on the one next to her, and proclaim loudly, “Just let someone try to take this seat away from me!”; all the while, all around her, the same scene; men and women bouncing around in the waves trying their best to stand.

I know, I told you these were small things, you might even be saying petty. But, like the ripples of waves that come from the stone thrown upon the water, or the old adage that the flap of butterflies’ wings in Japan is connected to the tornado in Texas, I think this may actually be the world when we consider how a Christian seeks justice.

I think this same mentality keeps us from having real conversations, something also quite wanted by the younger generations and something they see quite missing from our midst. A friend of mine recently bore her soul regarding her experience with racism, only to have those very ones who should have praised her venture, eat her alive. It is so much easier to stay on the surface, to keep the veneer of care and concern alive rather than really delve into our demons; so much easier to look across an ocean than to see the injustice in our homes, schools, or churches. We have seen this played out on the national scene as well.

Thich Nhat Hahn once reminded us that peace is every step. I believe Jesus walked, with every step, purposeful and centered on justice and peace, for every person he encountered.

The call or need for justice is not far away, in some other place. The root of our response, the place we learn, is right before us every day. May we teach our children consideration, hospitality, and justice. Have them watch us do the same, and I think we will change the world. A Christian seeking justice is a Christian doing justice with every step.
Cohort Reflections

Justice Prerequisites

Helen Nablo

Justice isn’t exactly the first word that comes to mind when I reflect on the experience of being part of a clergy cohort group. Our group has focused on other things. We are six clergywomen from two denominations (Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ). We are old friends from seminary days, who now live in six different states. Our group time has been more about coming together as midlife clergywomen to renew friendships and reflect on ministry and life as we look forward to the second half of our personal and professional lives.

It was challenging to get our group to agree on a grant focus. After much e-mailing and discussion, we settled on the name “New Wineskins.” At the time, we were thinking of the transformation of our particular church bodies (four different churches, a hospice setting, and a denominational judicatory setting) and how we, as leaders, can help encourage the possibility of transformation. Almost before we began, we let go of that focus. Our focus instead became supporting each other in the midst of changes—considerable changes—which we ourselves were going through.

One in our group had a series of events which led to divorce. Several of us had family members in crisis. Several of us experienced serious workplace conflict. One of us resigned a church that could be understood as a “clergy killer” church. There was perhaps one of us who didn’t feel like her life was in serious turmoil that first year we came together!

This has been exciting, but also humbling. The group experience revealed a lot about the challenge of being community for one another. Sometimes we overwhelmed each other. Sometimes we tired of “group dynamics.” There have been times when some of us wanted to analyze and others just wanted to have fun.

Looking back on all that we have been through, while we have not in every instance perfectly supported one another, we have truly been there for each other. Sometimes it’s been a phone conversation or an e-mail. Sometimes it’s been learning to grant someone the space to not share. Sometimes it’s just been soaking up the beauty of a place like Key West, watching the sun set, or searching for dolphins that frolic in open waters.

All this makes me aware of how few people have sufficient support or beauty in their lives. “Impoverishment” is about a lot more than what we might or might not have in our bank account.

The Reverend Dr. Helen Nablo is interim pastor at North Community Church (UCC) in Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts. She is a member of New Wineskins cohort group.
Some weeks after returning from the last gathering with my cohorts, I am once again sitting in a women’s support group meeting in my own church. Some of these women struggle with family problems of one sort or another. A few are looking at filing chapter eleven, some are taking in adult children with drug and alcohol problems and facing the prospect of raising kids again—their grandkids. All this takes place in an affluent white suburb. Often the conversation turns to the beauty of friendship and the much appreciated encouragement of this particular group of women who have known each other for so long. The conversation also turns to gardening. They are a group of women who find sanity by getting their hands in the dirt.

I remember once visiting a day shelter for women and children. The director was showing us a large living room with worn sofas and ragged rugs. “See this?” she said. “I see this and I imagine bright and colorful rugs. New and inviting sofas. Plants all around and soft curtains on the windows. I just want to bring a little beauty into these women’s lives.”

The justice link? Beauty and support are not luxury items. We all need the joy of human love—“brother, sister, parent, child.” We need friends on this earth. As clergy, we cannot have energy to work for a better world unless we have a sufficient measure of these things.

So I am not going to feel guilty about watching the sun set over the ocean “on continuing education time.” I am not going to feel guilty about a good meal shared thanks to generous grant money. Considering this last year, without the cohort group in my life, I might be one of those burnt out and bitter clergy types, racking my brain to figure out what else I could do! But thanks to “old” seminary friends becoming new midlife friends, I am keeping on. I still want to work for a world that’s new. I still want, even, to work on a me that’s new. My cohorts feel the same way. Perhaps now we can have energy to work for the better world; perhaps we will be able to imagine a new world into being.
“That which is has already been, and what is to be has already been; and God requires an account of what is past.” (Ecclesiastes 3:15)

The book of Ecclesiastes addresses the exercise of free will and the importance of human action and wisdom. It also speaks to the frustrations and disappointments of life when lived apart from God’s wisdom. How does justice show itself in our daily living as Christians in functional and practical ways? And how does justice reach those closest and then reach those farthest away?

Few could argue that the scales of justice are perfectly balanced in our ever-changing world; a world burdened with pervasive injustice masked as poverty, hatred, ignorance and indifference, played out in a myriad of deliberately selective “isms” that include racism, sexism, and class-ism. Do you ever wonder about a justice system that allows oppression as a way of life?

Where is the justice, the rightness, impartiality, fairness, reasonableness, and equity in any of it?

This scene is played out over and over again in our communities, nation, and world. And while I instinctively long for an “elusive” justice in our troubled world, I cannot honestly and realistically say that I seek to do all or as much as I can to find it. Why? Maybe I’m over-extended with family and church responsibilities, feeling too old or weary, convinced that it’s someone else’s turn or time. Perhaps I have allowed a moderate degree of pessimism (yet another “ism”) to set in. The verdict is still out.

As people of faith, Christians have irrevocable responsibilities to all humankind. These God-given responsibilities include positively effecting good in the lives of others, bringing attention to injustice and maintaining allegiance to common principles and values without diminishing the personhood of others. In Justice in an Unjust World, author Karen Lebacqz addresses the need for “justice-making actions in a world of injustice.”

At our May 2008 College of Pastoral Leaders clergy conversation, Dr. Ismael García, spoke of justice as a key principle of ethics along with freedom, order, equality, and a sense of community, and that often one must make a choice between one or several of these principles. None can be absolute. And while encouraged by Dr. García not to be in a rush to contextualize everything, my sense of justice is contextualized by my per-
personal ethnic and cultural perspective; that of an African-American female ordained clergy in a traditional mainstream denomination. Is justice truly blind? Does it see me as the unique hybrid God created, outside of my human circumstance? My adult experiential reality speaks quite differently to this than that of my childhood.

Growing up in a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse community on the west coast, our neighbors had roots in Mexico, Panama, China, Africa, Germany, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. We were Baptist, Presbyterian, United Methodist, Catholic, Jehovah Witness, Seventh-Day Adventist, Mormon, and “inactive” Christian. Segregated schools and “colored” versus “white only” facilities were only things we saw on television and read about in the newspapers. Everyone knew everyone and the adults in our community had unwritten and unspoken consent to reel in any youth who strayed outside common community and family values. My seven siblings and I never spent any time in juvenile detention or jail while growing up or as adults.

Families worked hard in our community, took care of family and provided for those less fortunate with little fanfare. I grew up during a time when social and economic justice was being sought by neighbors who worked as day laborers and migrant farm workers. Our community was not well-to-do, but no one went without and their cause was our cause. Our ethnic and cultural diversity was real, yet we truly were our brother’s keeper. We had a strong sense of community and mutual responsibility.

A required sense of mutual responsibility seems to have broken down in our world today. I’m reminded of Old Testament scripture when God asked Cain about his brother, Abel. Cain’s response, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9) is a clear picture of what mutual responsibility was not.

There is encouragement for every Christian seeking justice. We cannot loose hope or give up on imperfect people in an imperfect world. A dear friend helped me realize that you don’t throw away a good person because they did something bad. I’ve come to know that we can embrace justice by living out the Word from within the heart! Positive human action is required for justice to prevail. Seek to become part of what Karen Lebacqz refers to as the “rainbow of God’s righteousness.” Justice demonstrates an acceptance of God, the Word, and the grace and value God places on another human being.

As a Christian seeking justice in an unjust world, I am encouraged by the words of Bill Crowder (Our Daily Bread, June 2008): “The search for justice can be satisfied only by trusting the God who is always just.”

Though sin seems to triumph and wrong conquers right,
Though lies can put justice to flight,
God’s truth is eternal, His Word shows His might,
And He will bring justice to light.
(Gustafson)

NOTES
2. Ibid.
When I got married on a beautiful July afternoon twenty-six years ago to the love of my life, I believed that the essence of marriage lay in the understanding of the relationship not as a contract, but as a covenant. A covenant of love and trust between two people who by the grace of God pledge their faithfulness, their loyalty and their commitment to one another for better or for worse. I believed that the vows we took were reflective of the steadfast love and faithfulness that God has for all human beings. It is the Hebrew concept of hesed, steadfast love, that I find to be the core to marriage. God loves us, day in and day out. That is the essence of who God is. That is how God calls us to relate to one another … and this is what marriage is all about.

I am writing this essay soon after the California Appellate Court ruling was overturned by the California Supreme Court allowing homosexual persons to legally marry in that state. Gavin Newsom, the mayor of San Francisco called this an issue of justice.

I believe that Mayor Newsom is right. This is a justice issue, but it is not just a legal justice issue. Theologically, the justice I am speaking of has to do with regarding each other in light of God’s attitude toward us all. Most of the gay couples who are lining up to be married in California are not persons who happened to meet last week and just decided to get married. In many cases these are persons who have been in committed relationships, practicing faithfulness, monogamy, and steadfast love for decades.

One of these couples was Dee Barten and Lynn Patton*. Dee sat in her wheelchair and Lynn stood by her side. For many people who oppose gay marriage, the fact that two women were getting married might be the surprising or shocking aspect. For me, it was the fact that Dee, 87 and Lynn, 84, had been together in a committed relationship for over 50 years. They have already proven their commitment to steadfast love. All they wanted was to have it validated by society. I don’t think they had any qualms about the fact that God had already sanctified their union over 50 years ago.

The issue of sexuality is complex, and one that the church seems to have had an aversion to dialogically exploring for centuries. And while science has not yet offered a conclusive response to the issue of whether one is born a homosexual or heterosexual, anecdotal evidence is overwhelming that gay persons often know they are “different” from others from a young age.

* All names have been changed.
This was the case with Hank Jacoby, one of eight siblings in a devout, close knit Roman Catholic family. Hank knew he was different from a young age, but tried to live as though he wasn’t. When, as a young adult studying for the priesthood, he finally “came out” to his family, his parent’s reaction was not accepting. What was particularly difficult, though, was that after viewing their parents’ reaction, his three younger brothers were afraid to reveal their orientation to their parents. Yes, four out of eight Jacoby siblings are gay. And none of the four brothers ever confided in the others prior to Hank’s admission.

For Christian justice on this issue to occur, the church needs to speak to creating what author and theologian, James Nelson calls “a sexual ethic centered in love.” In his article “Christian Ethics and Theology of Sexuality” in The Dictionary of Pastoral Care he outlines the components to this ethic. He states such a sexual ethic would express itself in values such as honesty, faithfulness, and joyfulness. Such an ethic should also be “other-enriching, displaying a genuine concern for the well-being and growth of the partner” (1157). And because sexuality is often distorted by violence, control, and exploitation (i.e. rape, pornography, domestic violence) sexuality should also lead to mutual empowerment rather than dominance and submission.

Creating an environment where people can accept, celebrate, and live out their sexuality in an authentic manner is an issue of justice. In this environment we are called to practice hese, this steadfast love of God. The steadfast love that God so freely offers us is not threatened by diversity, but rather embraces it. For justice to really exist, human beings must be able to embrace diversity as a God-given gift. Diversity is inherent in creation. Why is there more than one variety of tree? How could the world possibly benefit from more than one type of rodent? Diversity is all around us, particularly in the species homo sapiens. We are not all the same. We are men and women; we are homosexual, heterosexual, bi-sexual, transgendered; we are redheaded and blonde; we are white and black and every shade in between. We are not all the same, and yet in order for justice to be done, God’s justice, we have to treat each other with the same love that God has for us. The lawyer in Luke 10: 25-27 noted the two great commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind … and your neighbor as yourself.” For God’s justice to take place, we are called to practice healthy self-love so that we can respond lovingly to others.

I believe the church will be held accountable for how exclusive it has become in this regard. God is likely to say to us, “Did you not understand the story about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch?” The early church grew out of Judaism, and as such had a fairly exclusive understanding of who could be admitted and blessed by its rites and rituals. Just like gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of today, eunuchs were the sexual outcasts of Jewish religious society. The first-century teachers of Jewish law forbade converting such a person to Judaism, and they would have informed the Ethiopian eunuch when he arrived in Jerusalem that he could not even enter the outer court of the temple. He would have been despised and rejected, cut off from access to the rites and rituals of the faith by the religious leaders. Perhaps that is what captivated the Ethiopian with Isaiah 57:7-8, a key passage in a chapter that speaks about the suffering of God’s
anointed one. “He was despised and forsaken” by people. (vs. 3) “He was oppressed and He was afflicted” (vs.7). It seems like a strange passage for someone to read just after worshipping in the holy city of Jerusalem. But it makes sense when we understand that the Ethiopian eunuch had probably found himself despised and rejected by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Philip, with the Holy Spirit’s guidance, interpreted the passage from Isaiah and proclaimed the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Ethiopian. When he asked if he could be baptized as well, Philip’s response to the man should be astonishing to anyone who still holds a prejudice against non-heterosexuals: “If you believe with all your heart, you may” (Acts 8: 37).

I wonder how it is possible for so many Christians to hold the scriptures to be sacred and inspired and yet be able to ignore the example set by one of Jesus’ disciples who was charged to grow the Christian church. I have empathy for Philip, because he found himself at a crossroads for how he understood his faith. As a Jew, he and the other disciples were on the cusp of building a new faith tradition based on the life and teachings of Jesus.

This is no easy place to find oneself, particularly as one’s assumptions are in danger of becoming unraveled. This is where Philip was when he met the Ethiopian Eunuch. It is also where Peter was when he had the vision of the unclean animals in Acts 10. As Jews, their heads must have been spinning. “What, Lord? You want us to preach to Gentiles, eat foods we once were taught to be unclean, and invite sexual outcasts into the church?” It is amazing that Philip, Peter, and the other disciples were able to stand that much change! And yet, these first disciples were open to the counsel of God’s Spirit and found ways to incorporate a new openness to understanding God’s inclusive nature.

Two thousand years later, most Christian denominations are not supportive of gay marriage, and many congregations are still wrestling with the issue of justice regarding the admittance of gay persons into membership. History reminds us that the institutional church is often resistant to accept change. How much more time do we need to learn to embrace the diversity of sexuality present in this world and learn from one another? I pray it won’t take much longer.

For further reading:
Crosscutter Reflections

We had a hunch from the very beginning of our time together as a cohort group that the process of stimulating creative thinking in one area of life would facilitate our creative thinking in other areas as well. So if we developed our artistic expressions in the area of our woodworking, creative growth in general would follow and help us to think and imagine creatively in our church ministries as well.

For the past two summers we scheduled trips to Santa Rosa, California, to study woodworking with David Marks. We explored a broad range of woodworking topics and approaches as well as developed methods of artistic composition and craftsmanship.¹

In April of this year, we attended a Clergy Conversation at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. We met with another cohort group. We yearned for a Sabbath break, the opportunity to talk about seeking justice and looked forward to sharing some of our artistic work with the other cohort group.

One of the events at the conference was a lesson in African drumming. Naturally our first response upon seeing and touching these drums was to wonder and question: “How are these made?”

This was followed by the obvious response upon due consideration of: “I think I could make one of these!”

For us that moment of constructive clarity immediately became a “crossing point” which connected us as clergy persons serving congregations in a postmodern society with African drum makers from what might be described as marginalized cultures.

The craftsmanship of these drums provided something in common between our group and the craftsmen of African heritage who constructed the drums we were using. When we looked at the drums we did not see just a drum. We were now able to see the craftsmanship, the wood, the origin, and even the tools that would have been used.

That being the case it was not a big jump for the playing of such drums to become a “spiritual” experience for us.

We discovered rhythm. There is a rhythm in the universe and it expresses itself in the playing of drums, the telling of life’s stories (what we as Christian clergy typically refer to as “preaching”), the pastoral care and concern for others and of course in the simple turning of a bowl out of a block of wood.

That rhythm is always there. Frequently it is drowned out by the noise of our

¹The Reverend Gary D. Bell is pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Newton, Kansas. He is a member of Cross Cutters cohort group.
“postmodernity.” Sometimes it is drowned out by our haste to move from one program to the next. Other times it is drowned out by our refusal to believe that it exists. But it is there nonetheless. That rhythm is always present regardless of cultural background or geographic location.

Can we not seek that rhythm in all of our relationships? The heartbeat of every human on the planet is a part of the resonant frequency we call life. Seeking justice is perhaps not so much a Christian imperative as it is a human obligation. Paul tells us in Romans 12:10 (NRSV) to “love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” As Christian clergy if we are part of the human race and we are to love one another, then it follows that we are to treat all humanity with respect and decency. Simply put, if we allow ourselves to become aware of our humanity then we are obligated to be humane. If we want love then we should love. If we want forgiveness then should we not forgive? If we expect justice then we must be just.

Over the course of our two years together, we learned about spontaneity, design, and improvisation. A master woodworking artist James Krenov followed what he called an evolving rhythm when he approached the wood he worked with, the wood he listened to.

When we worked together we often said, “let the wood speak to you” or “listen to the wood.” Initially this was a joke, but as we grew in our artistic expressions, we learned that indeed there was something to be heard from the wood. It was the rhythm that Krenov spoke of when he encouraged his students to be spontaneous and improvised with the wood instead of working against it.

It does not take a big stretch of the imagination to see that programs in churches have rhythms. The lives of people have rhythms. We can plan and program and try to force life and our ministries into a mold or a shape, but most of the time life just doesn’t mold or shape. Improvisation and spontaneity are the only ways that anything with life happens.

Our group was not surprised to find that among serious artistic woodworkers there is a sense of spirituality. Sometimes they use worlds like “Zen” to describe their understanding of the spiritual nature of their work. That term is descriptive, but for us as Christian clergy I think it most appropriate to recognize that there is the essence of our Creator found in all creation. Just as his fingerprints are all over us, his fingerprints are found in even the simplest block of pine.

It is not such a long road from the wheat fields of Kansas to a drum beat from Africa. For me that road was paved with the common bond of craftsmanship and listening to the Word in the wood.

NOTE

1. David Marks’ web page (www.djmarks.com) has a complete outline of courses and a gallery of his work. Additionally our class gallery of work can be seen at the following link: http://www.djmarks.com/classphotos/Turning%20%26%20Gilding/default.asp

In Memory of Robert Smith
In Micah 6, the prophet calls on his people to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” I find the phraseology interesting—to do justice. Generally, both in the church and in the secular world, we think of justice as an end product, the result of our actions and decisions both personally and collectively. As an end product, justice would be seen as a noun, not a verb. But Micah presents it as something we do, not just the result of what we do.

Walter Brueggemann says that justice in the Bible means, “to sort out what belongs to whom, and return it to them” (“Voices of the Night—Against Justice,” To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly [Paulist, 1986], p. 5). I find this a bit simplistic, at least on the surface. To discover what belongs to someone else and return it to them does not necessarily acknowledge our complicity in why they did not have what belonged to them in the first place. What belongs to others may not just be material goods lost in the sin of economic inequality, although access to the basic human needs of shelter, food, and clothing are grossly out of proportion in the world. What else is often missing in the face of injustice is dignity, respect, and humanity. In the act of finding out what belongs to the other, we must look at how our lifestyle, assumptions, and entitlements have contributed to the imbalances of the world. We cannot return what belongs to our brother or sister without that awareness and an ongoing attempt to right what is wrong in our own lives. Only then will we approach the prophetic justice of Micah.

Justice is a concept difficult for even the most scholarly to wrap their heads around. It can be utterly overwhelming in its complexity—social justice; economic justice; political justice; environmental justice; global justice—all intertwined. How can one individual Christian begin to know how to address these? The very immensity of need can render one paralyzed.

We cry out, “How in the world can I make a difference?”

To do justice, as Micah calls us to do, we must first become aware. To do justice is to live a life of consciousness—consciousness of who we are and how what we do impacts others as well as ourselves. American culture, perpetuated by the various forms of media and reinforced by political, technological, and even religious institutions, is designed to shut us away from that consciousness. Our fixation on consumption as a way to nirvana numbs us to the injustices that are perpetuated by that very consump-

The Reverend Janet Beatty is a member at large of San Francisco Presbytery. She is a member of Six-Pac cohort group.
tion. Our economic status separates us into classes and encourages geographical isolation and emotional lethargy both in our living and working environments. The skewing of wealth in this country is reflected in the skewing of power—wealth translates into economic and political control, and in turn, perpetuates itself at the expense of the poor, which directly translates into injustice. The overwhelming popularity in recent years of “Prosperity Theology” is further evidence that many people want only a feel-good gospel message that insulates them from the realities of injustices all around them.

Living in consciousness is a beginning and is essential to “doing justice” in the biblical sense. From that consciousness, each of us can individually make decisions that will impact not only our lives but the lives of those around us and around the world. We decry the injustice of sweat shops in foreign countries without ever looking at the tags on the clothes we buy. We strive to make life better for the poor while expending millions of dollars a year on unnecessary consumer products with built-in obsolescence. We say we are deeply concerned about global warming but are unwilling to give up the comfort and convenience of our automobiles.

There are things that can be done and if enough of us did them, it would make a huge difference. Already, because of small steps taken by a few individuals and picked up by the powers that be, the “institution” of plastic bags is becoming a thing of the past in the San Francisco Bay Area. Gather together cloth bags and take them into the store—every store!—every time you shop. Stop buying because you “want,” but only because you “need.” Recycle your used clothes—in fact, buy used clothes. Break out of the way of thinking that perpetuates economic injustice and therefore the imbalance of wealth and power in the U.S. and around the world.

To believe that the problems of injustice are too big for one person to do anything to make a difference is not the point of “doing justice.” Micah calls each of us to do justice because that is what God requires of us. We do justice for God. We adjust our lifestyle for God. We make a difference in the world for God.

Doing justice is daunting and frightening. To do justice is hard work. Justice isn’t about feeling good. Justice isn’t about getting a return on your emotional dollar. It requires choices that are not popular, choices that will alienate us from our comfort zones. To do justice, as an American Christian, will invite sacrifice—the sacrifice of assumptions, of entitlement, of privilege. To do justice, as an American Christian, requires us to walk in the Word, even when the Word presents a very difficult road to travel. The guideposts are there, throughout the gospels. We need only set our sights on a new horizon.
As I heard the verdict handed down from the judge, I sighed a sigh of relief, relief for my son and relief for our family and I quietly thanked God for his grace. Yet, I couldn’t help thinking about whether or not justice had been served. It was only a few short months ago that I had been crying out to God for justice. In fact, I had done this many times before in other situations where I believed that I or another had been wronged in some way. “God avenge us; God we want restitution; God don’t let this thing happen without your justice.” We all want justice when it come to personal situations and circumstances, but how do we define justice?

I had to admit to myself during this soul searching that my brand of justice was closely tied to the Old Testament sentiment “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.” (Ex. 21:23-25; Lev. 24:19-21; Deut. 19:21) When we are hurt, displaced, or discarded by the hands of another we want them to feel and experience just what we have felt and experienced. It’s a cry for “just us” rather than justice, since at that moment we are only concerned about ourselves or our loved ones rather than the consequences and connections of the greater community to the event or circumstances. As long as we receive our brand of “just us” then and only then will we become satisfied with the outcome as the will of God.

Justice has another side to it that we often neglect to consider: impartiality. Our claims for justice and fairness are most often partial to our own cause and kin. We do not possess the ability to be impartial and fair within our own natural and emotional state except when the Holy Spirit guides us. Calamity usually disarms us of rational thinking and in some cases of spiritual thought as well.

When discussing justice from an intellectual perspective, we have many platitudes about relationships, reformation, and rehabilitation. If our hypothetical child was harmed by loss of limb or life, we could easily say we would never seek a limb, let alone the life of the person who harmed our child. After all, what good would it serve for two families to be in grief, for another person to suffer? It wouldn’t bring back our child’s limb or life. It wouldn’t remove our heartache and pain. It would only cause harm to others who may already be suffering from the guilt and shame of the event. This is an impartial argument; an argument waged impersonally; an argument without emotional substance. This is the type of argument that allows us to easily and quickly ascribe to

The Reverend Patricia Boyd-Wilson is senior pastor of Saint Luke Christian Ministries of Tucker, Georgia. She is a member of Ministry in Mission Sisters cohort group.
the ideals of Christ, who said; “Turn the other cheek.” (Matt. 5:38-32) Our discussion
d of justice at this time is coupled with mercy, grace, and good Kingdom citizenship, but
actualities verses hypothetical posturing change everything.

Thus, I came to the conclusion that I really don’t know what justice is. For the first
time I deeply considered justice verses “just us,” and I realize that I have never really
sought to know true justice. I have been spoiled by God’s grace which has not allowed
justice to be served as it relates to my sinful case. Therefore, I take his brand of justice
for granted while denying it to my fellow earthbound companions. The mere fact that
we teach and preach so little about justice tells me that we are unable to look justice in
the face and realize that our “lives, hands, feet, wounds, bruises, etc.” should have been
required of us long ago. The gospel message is that Jesus took our place; the justice we
deserved was served through his substitutional execution. No partiality was considered
for the crimes we have committed, therefore we would do well to reconsider our defi-
nition of justice. We would do well to do some soul searching and personal examina-
tion when we seek justice on our own behalf or on the behalf of our loved ones. Then
perhaps we can include the subject of justice in our sermons as well as in seeking jus-
tice for our community affairs and needs.

Today, I can truly say that I am glad for the verdict that the judge issued in our
case. You see he handed out a verdict that was tied to mercy and grace based on his rela-
tionship with me. Fifteen years ago, he and I attended the same church and he remem-
bered me with favor. Through that relationship, my son was given the benefit of a his-
torical encounter of good will and ministry and justice was served—the same justice by
which we all benefit today. Years ago, the verdict came down, “the wages of sin is
death,” (Rom. 6:23) but due to our relationship with Jesus Christ, who remembers us
to the Great Judge, the sentence has come down in our favor. Through the good will
and ministry of Christ our Savior, we are reaping the benefits of true justice being
served—justice only God can ascribe.

I pray that my future cries to God will be for his justice, rather than for my own
“just us.” What about you?
Theodore J. Wardlaw, President

BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Cassandra C. Carr, Chair

Michael D. Allen
Karen C. Anderson
Thomas L. Are Jr.
Susan Beaird
F. M. Bellingrath III
Dianne E. Brown (MDiv’95)
Elizabeth Christian
Joseph J. Clifford
James G. Cooper
Marvin L. Cooper
Elizabeth Blanton Flowers
Donald R. Frampton
Richard D. Gillham
Walter Harris Jr.
Bruce G. Herlin
Norman N. Huneycutt (MDiv’65)

J Carter King III (MDiv’70)
Michael L. Lindvall
Catherine O. Lowry
Blair R. Monie
Virginia L. Olszewski (MDiv’94)
B. W. Payne
William C. Powers Jr.
Jeffrey Kyle Richard
Teresa Chávez Sauced (MDiv’88)
Anne Vickery Stevenson
Karl Brian Travis
John L. Van Osdall
Sallie Sampsell Watson (MDiv’87)
Elizabeth Currie Williams
Hugh H. Williamson III
Judy A. Woodward

Trustees Emeriti
Stephen A. Matthews
Edward D. Vickery
Max Sherman
Louis H. Zbinden Jr.