

A Random Act of... Justice!

John 5:1-9

One of the perplexing realities of our recovering economy is that, in the opinion of many analysts, it is not growing stronger, but in significant ways, it's becoming weaker. In spite of the record profits for corporations, rising stock values, and Friday's positive job report, overall the actual grassroots net impact is not quite the same. Namely, a broad-based sense of optimism about the economy simply doesn't exist.

Why? This is largely due to the economic stresses that still burden a large majority of the population—professional and blue-collar workers alike—reflected in the fact the size of the middle class in America has diminished over the last decade, over 46 million Americans currently live near or below the poverty line, and the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” has widened. In trends reminiscent of the early 20th century when the Rockefellers, Carnegies, and the rest of the top 1% owned 20% of the nation's wealth, there's a similar percentage today of those who are indulged with endless financial and material *excess* while an increasing number of people suffer a basic lack of *access* to quality-of-life essentials. Despite the economic improvements over the last four years, many Americans have lost access to healthcare, mortgage financing leading to home ownership, and jobs that pay a living wage.

According to a report just released by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, only 24.1 percent of Americans have what is considered a “good job.” A “good job” is defined as

...one that (1) pays at least \$19 per hour (in constant 2011 dollars) and (2) has employer-provided health insurance and (3) has some kind of retirement plan (either a traditional pension or a 401(k)-style plan).¹

This is a pro-rated standard that has defined the quality of employment for the last several decades—a standard that has declined for the vast majority of employees since the 1970s. Since the beginning of the recession in December 2007, there are nearly six million fewer full-time workers, and an increase of almost three million employed in part-time jobs.²

It's not just a matter of declining hours and income. According to a study by the Urban Institute, many Americans also lack access to healthcare because of being uninsured, or due to a lack of providers (e.g., primary care physicians), or increasingly, because they can't afford to cover out-of-pocket expenses.³ Preventative services are avoided, as are necessary surgeries and treatment. People are even afraid of taking time off from work for medical appointments because it might imperil their employment. Even though the Affordable Healthcare Act is due to go into full effect beginning in 2014, the implementation of it, as we know, is uneven from state to state, and a key mandate may be overturned by the forthcoming Supreme Court decision due out next month.

If this happens, what then? What do we do? How can it be that in the country that spends more money on healthcare than anywhere else, that has the greatest number of doctors and medical facilities, that possesses one of the highest standards of living in the world—

¹ John Schmitt and Janelle Jones, "Making Jobs Good," published by Center for Economic and Policy Research, April 2013.

² Catherine Rampell, "The Rise of Part-time Work," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2013.

³ Genevieve Kenney, et. al., "A Decade of Health Care Access Declines for Adults Holds Implications for Changes in the Affordable Care Act," *The Urban Institute*, May 2012.

that we still have 41 million people who are uninsured and untold millions who cannot afford to go to see a doctor, even with insurance? Is this the type of world we want our children and grandchildren to inherit? How can we make healthcare more accessible and more affordable? How can we improve the quality of life for the greatest number of people in America?

As we all know, these are tough issues to address, regardless of where we stand on things politically. Yet, when we get beyond our own borders and consider global realities, it gets worse in many cases. Few of us really grasp what deprivation looks like, especially in less developed locations. Even if we witnessed it in less wealthy states or in communities in our own region, the numbers are always staggering of how many people lack access to healthy food, or clean water, or sanitary conditions, or safe shelter, or even electricity and communications, let alone healthcare, education, and employment. Despite our own personal economic woes, it's important for us as Americans to keep perspective because, in our own pursuit of a higher standard of living, it's easy to overlook or dismiss those who have so much less access to even that which we simply take for granted. Certainly, charities abound to help those in need, and many of us contribute regularly and generously to them; but in the eyes of heaven, our generosity is usually only a band-aid to problems that exist due to systemic exploitation of those who have lost access to so much more, i.e., ancestral lands, natural resources, water supplies, or even to fairly-traded markets. Our charitable efforts amount to little more than random acts of kindness that would be better received and

appreciated if they were sustained commitments to economic justice—not only in this country, but around the world.

What provokes this topic today isn't just economic or social justice values that I've long embraced; it's also a concern inherent to this story from the Gospel of John—a narrative that screams out relevance to us in our global awareness of human need against the backdrop of a competitive struggle for access to the world's resources. Granted, we normally view this as another healing story of Jesus'—one more biblical example of his extraordinary powers. But, as with most Gospel stories, we should ask, what is this really about? Who or what was he healing and why did that matter? What was the point; what was the message? Was it merely a random act of kindness on Jesus' part to heal this broken man, or was it something else, something more?

The story takes place in Jerusalem at a pool near the Sheep Gate that archaeologists actually uncovered a number of years ago. In Jesus' time, this pool was valued for its purported healing effects, similar to the ways mineral or hot springs were once viewed therapeutically in this country. People would go there to get, in effect, medicinal treatment.

In this particular case, those who sought healing would rush to enter into the water when it would bubble up (presumably with a thermal jet of water)—a mysterious phenomenon that to an ancient's mind would have been interpreted as a divine act. In effect, it was seen as a baptism of divine healing.

As the story is told, one such man had been suffering for 38 years from paralysis. Apparently, he was nearly immobile,

handicapped by some paralyzing condition—dependent upon some compassionate soul to help him gain access to the water. Usually someone in this condition would have a friend or family member help. But apparently this man was without either. Every time the pool would bubble up, the mad rush would bypass him. With everyone around him preoccupied with their own access to relief, he was left overlooked and ignored. Allegorically, the pathetic man represented everyone everywhere who lacked access to basic needs and who had no one to advocate for them. They were handicapped by their circumstances in life and unable to fix things on their own. It's for that reason Jesus noticed him.

That, alone, could be an important lesson to take away from this story, i.e., paying attention to those in this world who are often overlooked and forgotten. It's not something most people do. Not only is it charitable and kind to do this as a human being, it's also a fundamental Christian mercy, articulated best by Matthew: "Just as you did it for one of the least of these, you did it for me" (Matthew 25:31-46). Simply being attentive to "the least of these"—those who fall between the cracks—those whose misery is far greater than our own—those who typically are left behind, unless someone takes notice—that is a Christ-like ministry and mercy. These are the silent sufferers in life, often left to their own devices, immobilized by their circumstances, and unable to convey their pain or, in some cases, unaware of what might come their way as resources or assistance because they have no one to take notice and advocate for them. To simply notice and attend to people who are in this predicament is a generous act of love and compassion that is quite remarkable in and

of itself. Every charitable contribution we make, every random act of kindness that we carry out in the spirit of Christ makes a huge difference to those we assist, which also in turn helps us by keeping our own perceived needs and worries in perspective. We are not as impoverished as we sometimes think we are.

Jesus came over to the man paralyzed by his situation in life to offer a kindness—a mercy—a generous moment of attention. At most, the man would have hoped Jesus would have treated him like family, pick him up, and carry him into the water whenever it would purl up and the great rush of needy people overwhelmed the pool. If Jesus simply did that, it would have given this poor man access to the immediate medicinal help for which he yearned. That would have been enough—a generous act of mercy to help this poor man find relief. Since Jesus was unrelated and not directly responsible for the man’s welfare, his overture would have been considered a beautiful, but random (even unexpected) act of kindness—just the sort of charitable deed we love to do from time to time.

But being thoughtful and considerate wasn’t enough for Jesus. It wasn’t just a matter of being charitable, kind, and caring. He didn’t settle for simply bringing the man to the water and then going his own way. He wasn’t just offering a salve for temporary relief, much like we do when we help people with food, shelter, clothing, and other needs. It wasn’t enough to simply intervene in a random way and go on with life, offering some kindness to lighten the load for a brief moment.

What Jesus did was get to the heart of the man’s problem by healing him—to end the suffering altogether—to change the

circumstances so the man would no longer lie there pathetically day after day along the waters edge, denied access by those who were more focused on their own needs and concerns. He did much more than that. Jesus freed the man from having to be there in the first place! Not only that, in a world that equated human suffering with divine judgment and punishment, Jesus pastorally responded to him and delivered the man from a sense of being godforsaken! He didn't just hand the poor man a religious tract and try to win him over the promise of heavenly reward; he gave him a life to live *on earth*—he restored him to a status where he could stand up on his own two feet! It was a divine act of *justice* to compensate for all the suffering of this man's life and the way he was treated by his fellow human beings! What no one else on earth would do, Jesus did on behalf of heaven!

I'm compelled to think that you and I are called to the very same ministry of justice-making. It's not enough to leave it at charity and throw band-aids at people and tell them to be well on their own; it's a Christian act of mercy to intervene personally, to advocate in the public square for just and fair policies, and to transform people's lives, individually and collectively, by giving them access to the things many of us take for granted. It's just not right to callously declare to the growing number of people struggling to get by that it's their problem—that it's up to them to figure things out. In my opinion, you cannot call yourself a Christian and claim to follow the teachings of Jesus and then be an unconverted Scrooge with no social conscience!

Would we not want such a hope for ourselves? And by virtue of our faith, by the simple moral ethic of the Golden Rule, are we not called to do what is in our own self-interest for somebody else,

especially for those who cannot do it for themselves? Is this not a ministry of compassion, a noble act of justice—to give people access to the resources that will turn their lives around for good so they can stand up on their own two feet? It’s what builds the commonwealth, materially and spiritually, and it’s what reflects the defining character of our Christian faith!

We must remember, especially when the gap widens between the “haves” and the “have nots,” when it’s easy to become preoccupied with our own private needs, that what has made this country great, morally and materially, has been a sense of fairness and justice and the enduring sense that our neighbors, both near and far, are to be treated like family. As people of faith, there’s good reason: for it’s what we do for the least of these that will be remembered by the angels of heaven when we want to be counted among God’s own family.

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