

## **Pursuing Justice, Learning Humility**

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World Fellowship Sunday, Faith Mennonite Church  
January 20, 2013

The children's time story of the fourteen cows for America is a true story that I came across several years ago in the newspaper. I was struck by such a beautiful expression of compassion from a people who are more often the recipients of development assistance than those who are in a position to offer comfort and support to others. I love the image of the American ambassador riding out to a rural village on a diplomatic mission, perhaps expecting a request or a complaint, and instead finding a celebration and an offering of comfort. Kimeli, the young Maasai man who brings the news of September 11<sup>th</sup> to his village, writes in an afterward that this offering to the grieving Americans brought the ambassador to tears. In his words, "A connection between the two cultures had been made. We felt we had taken some of America's pain into our Maasai hearts."

To me, this story captures what we remember on World Fellowship Sunday – a celebration of worldwide community and the gifts we receive as we take each others' pain into our hearts and learn to better understand ourselves and God's vision of justice through our interactions across differences and distances.

This morning, I would like to weave together some reflections on the passages from Micah and John with some stories from my experiences over the past several months. Along with a number of other graduate students who are a part of this community, my interest in working toward global justice has led me to pursue a career path that involves international research. Specifically, my research focuses on higher education development initiatives. Over the past several months, I have been in Arkansas researching a scholarship program for students from Rwanda, a country that has quite a history of injustice and violence, and that continues to be mired in ongoing tensions in Africa's great lakes region.

Like Kimeli from the story, the students I have been interviewing are recipients of scholarships to study in the United States. These students are in a very interesting position, because their scholarship comes with a significant sense of responsibility – upon completing their studies they are expected to return to Rwanda and contribute to the future of their country. I have had the privilege of listening to their stories and their hopes for the future, as they imagine how they will use their educational opportunity in the United States to contribute to their families and communities back home.

In contrast to most of their American classmates, these students from Rwanda have a heavy sense of responsibility on their shoulders. Their government has given them a scholarship to acquire specific skills with the expectation that they will return and help rebuild their country. As much as they want to help their communities, many are daunted by the high expectations and the challenges that they know returning home will entail.

Like these students, when I think about the words we read from Micah – what does the LORD require of you but to do justice – I feel similarly overwhelmed by such high expectations. How can we not be overwhelmed when we look around and see so many examples of injustice? How do we begin to understand and take part in God's vision for transformation?

I'm grateful for World Fellowship Sunday because I think our hope is renewed by reminders that we work for justice as a global community, and that there are many examples of how individuals and communities around the world are working toward justice and being transformed in the process. In this congregation alone there are a myriad of ways that we are participating in this vision – supporting the livelihoods of artisans around the world through Ten Thousand Villages, the work of Mennonite Central Committee through participation in the annual relief sale, and the resettlement of refugees in our community, to name just a few examples. We need to hear stories of courage, of creativity, of change – no matter how small or slow – to remind us that God is indeed working through the Church and other communities around the world to bring justice and teach us the way of humility in the process.

The link between humility, kindness and justice is the theme that stands out to me as I reflect on the story from John 8 – Jesus’ interaction with a woman caught in adultery and the crowd of scribes and Pharisees ready to enforce their understanding of justice by stoning the woman to death. Not only does the story illustrate God’s restorative vision of justice in sharp contrast to the more prevalent retributive variety – it exemplifies that working for justice should be a mutually transforming process. I imagine that this encounter with Jesus left both the woman and her accusers with a lot to think about. Expecting condemnation, the woman must have been shocked that Jesus was more interested in restoring brokenness than safeguarding an unjust legal order. When the scribes and Pharisees heard Jesus’ response – “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her” – they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones.

I can’t help but wonder what they were thinking as they walked away. Was this encounter a humbling experience, or did it merely reinforce their frustration with Jesus’ constant challenging of their attempts to maintain the social order? Did they leave out of anger, or out of mercy, unable to ignore this reminder that they themselves were not without sin? I wonder if while pursuing even such a flawed vision of justice, they caught a glimpse of mercy.

One of the things that I have observed about the scholarship program I have been researching is that as universities and communities have come together to work toward justice – in this case, promoting economic and social inclusion by helping to support higher education opportunities for youth from Rwanda - they have been transformed in the process. In my conversations, I discovered many examples of how providing support and offering hospitality to Rwandan students changed conversations in the host schools and communities.

At one of the schools where I was doing my research, several individuals (faculty and staff) explained to me that through working with these students from Rwanda, they have been challenged to re-think how they talk about vocation with students. As a liberal arts college with many students coming from relatively privileged backgrounds, the faculty and staff were accustomed to encouraging students to explore their passions and to discover how they connect with the world around them with little attention to the kind of constraints the Rwandan students faced as they explored such questions. For this group of students, the responsibility to contribute to their families and country in some ways limited the opportunities and choices available to them. Until students from Rwanda entered into these conversations, the college had given little attention to the variety of responsibilities and circumstances that influence our how we go about pursuing our passions and serving our communities. These are choices that we make in the midst of our diverse realities, and there are many factors to be taken into consideration. In this particular college community, the inclusion of Rwandan students in these conversations brought about a more comprehensive understanding of vocation as a commitment that is explored the midst of our responsibilities and shaped by them in creative and fruitful ways. They expressed gratitude for the ways it enhanced the conversation about vocation for everyone involved.

This is only one of many examples I could share of the ways the scholarship program was bringing about change for the individuals and communities who took part in offering hospitality and supporting the program’s vision for justice. I imagine that many of you can also call to mind examples of how interactions with those whose life stories are in many ways different from your own have allowed you to better understand your own humanity and transformed your understanding of justice. That is the reminder that these words from Micah and John have offered me as I have reflected on them this week – that seeking justice and walking humbly are integrally related, and that it is through living and struggling in community with each other – carrying the pain of others in our hearts – that we humbly discover our shared humanity.