

The Last Word on Justice by Christine Chakoian

Our Biblical mandate is to love righteousness, to protect the poor, and to care for the vulnerable. The Old Testament points to four particularly vulnerable kinds of people: the widows, the orphans, the sojourners, and the aliens in the land.

In their society, these groups had no rights, and they were at the mercy of others to protect them. Jesus expands the circle of care to include everyone in need, anyone who is hungry; or thirsty; or naked, or sick, or imprisoned. Even this is not meant to be an all-inclusive list, beyond which we're off the hook. No, Jesus' goal is to expand our vision to look beyond categories, to look with compassion on real human beings in very real human need. Jesus invites us to care.

The great Catholic writer Henri Nouwen taught a class in our seminary that he titled, simply "Compassion." Compassion, he reminded us, is a simple compound word that literally means, "suffering with." To have compassion isn't to pity, or look down, or try even to rescue someone in grave trouble. No, compassion begins by "suffering with" our neighbor in need, putting ourselves in their shoes.

The greatest civic leaders have known how powerfully compassion propels us into action. One community organizer confessed, "There was a time when I believed that the basic quality [I] needed was a deep sense of anger against injustice, and that this was the prime motivation that kept [me] going. I now know that it is something else: this abnormal imagination that sweeps [me] into a close identification with mankind and projects [me] into its plight. ... [The great lawyer] Clarence Darrow [put it this way]: 'I had a vivid imagination. Not only could I put myself in the other person's place, but I could not avoid doing so.'"

Jesus calls us to care, to have a compassionate imagination, to suffer with our neighbors. But where do we start? Maybe the reason we avoid these passages of Scripture and focus on things like sex instead is that it is so very difficult for us to know where to begin. How do we address the enormous problems of the poor?

The World Bank estimates that 1.5 billion people live in abject poverty, on less than \$1 a day. Millions in the U.S. try to get by without health insurance. Thousands of African babies die every day of AIDS. It's mind-boggling. And it's tempting to throw in the towel, to turn our backs and forget about it. But that's not an option for those of us who follow Jesus.

So what can we do? The reality is we can't do everything, you and I. We're not going to eradicate hunger or rescue all the children from war this evening. But we can do something. It may feel like a drop in the bucket. It may seem like Don Quixote, thrusting at windmills. But Jesus invites us to do what we can anyway. His promise is that whatever we do, it will add up. It matters.

The Rev. Christine Chakoian gave this excerpt as a guest on the "30 Good Minutes" in 2006