

WITNESS for JUSTICE

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“Human” Rights

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In several weeks I will speak at Kwansai Gakuin University in Japan on the subject of human rights as part of their commemoration of International Human Rights Day. In thinking about that engagement, I have been impressed by the fact that there is a near universal embrace of the concept of “rights.”

In the American context, the first ten amendments to the constitution are collectively known as the “Bill of Rights.” Similarly, the Japanese constitution enumerates such rights as freedom of the press, religion, speech and assembly. Even totalitarian regimes have frequently adopted strong statements on rights; a series of constitutions in the former Soviet Union contained impressive lists of political, social and economic rights.

Human rights received global affirmation when the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Not a single member nation voted against it, although several abstained. Sadly, noble statements have not had the desired effect; everywhere, rights are unevenly distributed.

In the United States, the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri is a recent example of how far we still have to go in attaining the goals of the Civil Rights movement. Similarly, the gender pay gap continues, members of LGBT communities do not enjoy marriage equality in many states, unaccompanied and undocumented children coming into our country are sent back to poverty and violence, and the poor do not have equal access to education, health care, nutrition or political influence.

Why have we not made more progress in the human rights arena? Part of the answer is that, while there is a broadly shared understanding of “rights,” our understanding of “human” remains ill formed. As long as rights remain abstract ideals, they are non-threatening. But when we try to apply rights to this or that group of

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people it becomes more difficult. The fact is that some people are considered to be “less human” than others.

When our nation’s founders penned the Constitution, slaves of African descent were only counted as being 3/5ths of a human and, therefore, not entitled to “inalienable” rights. Native Americans, women, the poor, immigrants and religious minorities were similarly seen as possessing lesser degrees of human worth and dignity. They, and other marginalized groups, continue to be assigned a lesser value.

Our faith sends a different message: all people, without reserve, bear the likeness and image of God. This truth was affirmed by the Biblical prophets, and most especially by the life and teachings of Jesus who consistently embraced the marginalized and oppressed—often at the expense of the privileged. Further affirmation was given on the day of Pentecost when it was shown that differences of nationality, gender and class do not block to the inclusive embrace of the Spirit. The scriptural witness is that all people are fully human.

Bold declarations of rights are good, but the implementation of those rights will remain elusive as long as some are seen as possessing lower degrees of human worth and dignity. An authentic faith requires us to put a full understanding of humanity at the center of “human rights.”



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