



WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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Witness for Justice #659

November 18, 2013

Shift from Sympathy to Solidarity

People suffer from injustice in a variety of ways, and we regularly hear news of it. Consider, for example, three circumstances impacting people's lives right now:

- Billions of dollars are being cut from the food stamp program, leading the 15% of Americans who depend upon them to wonder how their families will be properly fed.
- The Syrian civil war has created over 5 million internally displaced persons, and over 2 million refugees who have fled to other countries.
- Inequitable funding in U.S. public schools adversely impacts the achievement levels of many minority and low income children.

Just as injustice gets inflicted in numerous ways, responses to it are also diverse. We may grow hardened and look the other way. We may feel helpless, or hopeless. We often express sympathy: "Those poor people, my heart breaks for them!"

While sympathy is emotionally responsive to the suffering of others, by itself it is on an ethical par with indifference. Sympathy alone will not feed the hungry, house the displaced or educate a single child. What is needed is not mere sympathy, but solidarity.

Choosing solidarity acknowledges our unity with and commitment to others, and most especially the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. Those who stand in solidarity recognize that when some go hungry, none are well fed; when violence abounds, none live in peace; when some are denied their rights, the dignity of all suffers. As

As Dr. Martin Luther King wrote, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

There are a number of ways in which solidarity is made real. One is through direct service. Several months ago I visited the Zaatri refugee camp in Jordan, now home to nearly 150,000 Syrians who have fled the war. Often they come with nothing more than the clothes on their backs and sandals on their feet. Their needs are manifold and immediate; solidarity demands a response from us.

Stocking shelves at a local food pantry, donating supplies to underfunded schools and raising money to assist Syrian refugees are important and necessary activities. But if meeting immediate needs is all we do, we are not addressing the underlying injustices that create those needs.

Choosing solidarity means that in addition to direct service, one acts to address the foundational, structural issues that undergird injustice: Having a full time job in an affluent society and yet living below the poverty line is a breach of the social contract. More arms shipments into Syria will only escalate the violence and increase the numbers and needs of refugees. Quality education is a public good to be extended to all children, not a scarce commodity reserved for the privileged few.

Systemic injustices in our social, economic and political systems are often at the root of human suffering. While direct service is essential in meeting immediate needs, solidarity requires us to advocate by applying non-violent pressure on those in power to make changes in order to establish justice. By itself, sympathy does nothing to meet real needs or establish justice. We are called to shift from expressing sympathy to acting in solidarity.

For more information on expressing solidarity through the work of Global Ministries, go to <http://www.globalministries.org/>.

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