

## JUSTICE AWARENESS WORKSHOP

January 11, 2014

What is justice? The dictionary defines justice as moral rightness, righteousness, equitableness. The just are guided by truth, reason, justice, and fairness. We know how just individuals act. What about just governments or organizations?

What is race? My 1971 Random House Dictionary defines race as “a group of persons related by common descent, blood, or heredity”. Race is an idea, a social construct, invented in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by white Europeans to refer first to “speakers of a common language, and later to denote physical characteristics. The term has no taxonomic significance, since all human beings belong to the same species, Homo Sapiens (Wikipedia).

As you have seen in the historical presentation, racial injustice in the United States and elsewhere grew out of this white European construct; “race” became a way to justify, to make just, unjust treatment of a so-called inferior group. In the last century, ideas began to change, but the unjust systems put into place based on this “white advantage or supremacy” are still imbedded in our governments, economic, education, and social welfare systems. The unjust systems now affect not just those delineated by so-called “color” but also by economic class, anyone who is considered “different”.

Consider these examples. A December 13 Asbury Park Press article reported that “minorities were rejected at higher rates than whites from state-administered Sandy relief programs...but officials in Governor Chris Christie’s administration insist the process has been fair.” Statistics from minority groups were low, “but Fair Share Housing staff attorney Adam Gordon said the low samples highlight perhaps the key flaw in the state’s Sandy recovery effort – a failure to advertise the programs and reach out to affected communities.”

Barbara is a disabled single mother with five children. Displaced from her Seaside Heights rental by Superstorm Sandy, she has moved six times in the last year. She now lives with her children in a second story one bedroom apartment. She is barely able to clomp up and down the steep steps using her cane, and must go to radiation treatment daily for her cancer.

Freeholders in Ocean County have long denied the need for a homeless shelter with physical and mental health counseling and job training under one roof. They have claimed that the thousands they spend on short-term motel rooms for homeless families and individuals is better than long term investments in low income affordable housing.

In Memphis, Tennessee and around the country, as reported in a December 20 New York Times article, many African-American women receiving a diagnosis of late stage breast cancer have given up, and prepared for death. They never received information about early diagnosis and treatments. The article states that “while nearly 70% of white women live at least five years after diagnosis, only 56% of black women do.” “Lack of health insurance among low and self-employed women was cited as [one]

obstacle to timely care,” as were years of racial discrimination and distrust of the medical establishment...”

These are examples of how systems treat people unjustly, unfairly. Jesus’ two great commandments sum up the prime messages of the Old and New Testaments. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

History shows that we have not loved our neighbors, we have not loved the people either next door, or in the next neighborhood or town, or in the next country. We have not loved the people who are not quite like us ourselves. We have not loved as the Good Samaritan, one of a hated race in Jesus’ Israel, loved the Jew who fell in the deserted road. We have not given as generously of ourselves and our treasure as the poor woman who gave the only two pennies she had.

We know what is required of us as individuals. We know that individually we often fail; we try and try again to love in a more complete, more truthful way.

The systems we support have been failing in love since we adopted them hundreds of years ago. They are not perfect as we are not perfect. But systems are harder and take longer to change.

How can we change the systems that created the Sandy relief program? How can we change the social welfare system that moves a sick disabled woman with five children to a second story one bedroom apartment? How can we work with Ocean County Freeholders and our neighbors to provide land, decent housing, and support services for the homeless and working poor in our communities? How can we make sure our health systems treat all people equitably?

How can we as individuals make a difference in our country, state, and community systems of health, welfare, and education so that justice is effected for all people? How do we show that we love our neighbors as ourselves?

James’ letter in the New Testament says, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

Each one of us has a part, and must play that part in working with our societal systems to create justice for all. It is what Jesus mandates that we do.

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