

Practicing the Justice of God

GARY COMMINS AND ANNA OLSON*

*“If one member [of the body] suffers, all suffer together with it;
if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”*
(1 Corinthians 12:26)

*“What does the LORD require of you but to do justice,
and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*
(Micah 6:8)

At the Episcopal Church’s 2009 General Convention in Anaheim, a significant handful of bishops, deputies, and the Episcopal faithful joined workers from the Disney hotels in a massive march, demanding a fair share for workers in Disney’s impressive profits. The scene was boisterous and inspiring. Bishops Gene Robinson and Barbara Harris, arguably the two busiest people in the Anglican Communion that week, walked at the head of the march and stayed for the entire event. For me, however, the best moment came midway through, just as I had sweated through my black clergy shirt and realized I had worn the wrong shoes. “Madre Anna! Madre Anna!” Somewhere from inside the mass of picket-sign-carrying hotel workers, a woman’s voice was calling my name, and not just my name, but the name that only my Spanish-speaking parishioners use to address me. Leticia finally caught up with me: a member of my first parish, a Mexican immigrant with three kids who still lives in the small one-bedroom apartment in Inglewood where I used to visit her twelve years ago, the one with the bullet hole through the kitchen window. Leticia filled me in on her union job at the Los Angeles airport. She had ridden a bus filled with airport workers to Anaheim to show her solidarity with the Disney workers, members of the same union local. She

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was happy to see me, and laughed at my surprise at this chance encounter. "Remember," she said, "you always preached that we should stand up for ourselves about justice. Of course I'm here."

Anna Olson has preached so many sermons about justice that she can see certain eyes in the parish begin to roll before she is even up the steps and into the pulpit. What surprised and delighted her was that Leticia remembered. She not only remembered, but made a connection—between Anna's preaching and her marching on that hot day in Anaheim.

Being about economic justice in the parish context often feels like a losing battle. We lose many of the struggles we actually get involved in. Issues of workers and low-income families get lost in the push for gentrification and development. Opportunities for prophetic witness get lost in the shuffle of daily parish life. The overwhelming biblical cry for justice gets lost in the American pseudo-gospel of individual salvation and the precious Episcopal obsession with aesthetic detail and cultural superiority. As priests, we know that we lose energy for preaching justice when most people just want something to get them through the week.

"Love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." That feels manageable to people trying to get through the week. But something is missing. What's missing is not only the first part of Micah's trinity of divine requirements. In spite of our march from General Convention, justice is usually an ecclesiological afterthought, and in parish ministry it is missing in inaction. Justice is missing from parish life because parish life is all-consuming. We are Anglicans with an incarnational theology, but parish life is Anabaptist (which is fine if you are Anabaptist!). All that matters is what happens in the gathered community. Justice is missing because most Episcopalians do not relate their faith to the economy.

In spite of our beautifully crafted and oft-repeated baptismal vows, even though at St. Luke's we say we pursue "spiritual and social transformation," doing justice is a poor third twice over, lost first in the shuffle of parish business, but lost again beneath more immediately satisfying charity. And again, like everyone else, we are saturated by and swallowed up in the bizarre narcissism of American piety.

Each of us brings different experiences as priests, but in the end we come to a shared conclusion: doing economic justice at the parish

level is hard. Anna came to parish ministry as a former union organizer. After eight years in Episcopal parishes, she took a two-year “break” as the director of a nonprofit dedicated to organizing religious leaders and communities to stand with low-income workers in their struggles for living wages and dignity in their workplaces. Anna has worked as an associate and as a rector in three urban parishes in the Diocese of Los Angeles over a period of twelve years. If anything would give a priest some ideas about how to do economic justice at the parish level, this would be it. But it’s easier said than done. As a priest for thirty years, mostly in low-income neighborhoods, Gary finds himself on the inside looking out, but looking out *only* when not absorbed in the legitimate busyness of parish life, as well as its distractions, diversions, pettiness, and minutiae. Despite variations in size, demographics, resources, and location, all these congregations have shared similar struggles in making economic justice a lived priority of the congregation. These years have been enough to exhaust most of our straightforward ideas about how to do justice work at the parish level.

Jesus is pretty clear about triumphalism and the desire to win all our battles, to be popular and well-received and have lots of followers. If we must lose our lives to save them, if Jesus’ following dwindled from thousands to the small handful at the cross, maybe lack of clearly defined success in doing economic justice in our parishes is not so much the issue. Jesus doesn’t let us off the hook, though. Just being losers is not enough. The crosses we are called to pick up are heavy and full of splinters. Staying awake and alert to the very real suffering of our neighbors is not easy for sleepy disciples, nor is making the time and effort to raise our voices for and with those neighbors.

The theme with the prophets seems to be the voice crying in the wilderness. The prophets end up in holes, and on platters and in oblivion. In parish ministry, prophetic work starts in holes and ends in oblivion. It takes enormous effort to be a living parish, and that much more to be inclusive and bilingual. A decade ago, St. Luke’s was graying, monolingual, and white; it is now bilingual, racially mixed, generationally diverse, economically disparate, and inclusive of the city’s large gay and lesbian population. This process has taken the lion’s share of energy and resources in our life together.

St. Luke’s reflects the norms of suburban churches in several ways. We do not frame monetary matters like compensation, budgeting, and stewardship as issues of economic justice. We take up collections for

the usual charities. Our Children's Ministry sponsors a program that helps children visit their parents in prison. But as a downtown church, we do not have to *imagine* people in need. On Sundays, we worship. During the week, St. Luke's is a community center, housing offices and meeting spaces for nonprofits that work with preschool children, youth, foster families, hotel workers, and persons with HIV. On Saturdays, hundreds arrive at our parish's all-volunteer hot food and homeless shower programs. During the week, we serve hundreds more with a food distribution program, a youth program, and with health programs in Spanish. Hands-on ministry is direct: we act, we see results—the hungry are fed, the naked made physically clean.

Our Peace and Justice Ministry, a parish partner of the Episcopal Peace Fellowship, brought the Eyes Wide Open exhibit of combat boots representing the lives lost in the Iraq War to Long Beach and has consistently engaged in counter-military recruitment at local high schools. We took part in the New Sanctuary Movement and housed a woman that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers were about to deport, preventing them from separating her from her husband and children. Many in the parish worked actively against California's Proposition 8 that banned same-sex marriages. Do justice, yes. But *economic* justice?

Long Beach could use it. A city of five hundred thousand once quaintly known as Iowa-by-the-sea for its Midwestern immigrants is now predominantly working class and has no racial majority. Recent attempts at gentrification (re-Iowa-ization) have not changed the city's make-up. Rundown buildings, parishioners scrambling for low-paying jobs, people struggling to pay their rent all cry out for economic justice. A social service agency's executive director referred to our downtown neighborhood as a "bottomless pit of need."

Viewed from this neighborhood, capitalism, like human nature writ large and run amok, is neither banal nor benign. Without vouching for economic systems the neighborhood has not seen, in this community it is naive to speak of ethics *and* economics without irony, and absurd to suggest that self-interested behavior can create a just society. The idea that capitalism can become more ethical, more humane, more conducive to the common good neglects Reinhold Niebuhr's "immoral society," William Stringfellow's "principalities and powers," and the realities we see every day. In *this* world, principalities exercise power over the individuals that allegedly captain them. Capitalism

values productivity and accumulation; the Law and the Prophets treasure equitable distribution. As seen from our neighborhood, capitalism *feels* predatory, the system Martin Luther King, Jr. likened to “cannibalism.” The way we respond to this economic system tells us who we are, what we believe, and how we relate to God. To salvage good news: the bottomless pit of need is also a fertile seedbed for doing justice.

In our experience, effective economic justice work at the parish level almost always involves collaborations—collaborations with organizations whose primary mission is economic justice, and collaborations among faith communities who share values and geography. For many of the reasons that we have elaborated, faith communities are generally not well positioned to come up with their own strategies and programs around economic justice. That work takes a level of focus and expertise that is rarely present in the mix of parish life. Collaborations also help the parish to avoid the trap of reinventing some version of the wheel—usually one that does not run as smoothly as other versions already in existence. Unions, community organizations, and interfaith organizations provide opportunities for faith communities to lend our voices to full-time struggles that are already to some extent defined, researched, and organized. We learn the value of solidarity, of standing with our neighbors, of using our position to magnify the voices of those who are suffering.

For several years, St. Luke’s has collaborated to advocate for city policies that favor workforce, low-income, mixed-use, and transitional housing. One city council member, speaking for the divine right of wealth, pontificated that people “work hard,” “make money,” and “have a right” to choose their neighbors—who, presumably, are not poor. While rarely so baldly stated, that policy prevails. Other local campaigns support housekeepers in luxury hotels in the city-subsidized tourism industry and address labor, environmental, and health issues related to the Port of Long Beach. The former president of the Long Beach Port Commission told a group of clergy, “The job of the port is to generate wealth” (productivity and accumulation). The port also generates asthma, cancer, pollution, and poverty. In what theologian Ignacio Ellacuría called a “social necessity,” a few are made wealthy while most are made poor.

With other clergy, we have met with tough, teary-eyed port truck drivers who talk about the brutal effects of impersonal systems on

their children's lives. They experience the economy as a totalitarian system, the powers we renounce in our baptismal vows that "corrupt and destroy the creatures of God." Even when you know about the injustices, the personal witness of drivers and hotel workers is always stunning. This year during Lent, at Anna's initiative, we brought economic justice into Sunday worship. A parishioner-artist's sketches of our homeless neighbors who frequent our shower program became icons on our church walls. A quilt that honors the hardships of hotel housekeepers graced our altar. We may yet envision ways to be more than an occasional raspy voice in the wilderness, but the momentum of parish life and hands-on charity may always make doing justice a forgotten sister of both Mary and Martha.

Collaborations with justice-focused organizations have their challenges, among them misperceptions about the nature of churches, clericalism (ours and theirs), and the fading/changing role of religious institutions as voices of moral authority in the public sphere. As we seek to collaborate, we find that there are within movements for economic justice goals that we can share as Christians up to a point, but not beyond. The demonization of "enemies" that often takes place crashes directly against the mandates of our faith. The framing of "victory" and "power" lacks the complexity that grows out of the Christian story. While we may want to be spokespeople for the church universal and bring all that power and authority to bear on a given struggle, the reality is of course more complex. We wonder if a theology of a faithful remnant in the context of exile might not better prepare us for the roles that we can play than the temptation to puff ourselves up as a principality among principalities, weighing in with "real power."

While we should clearly strive to do better in most individual parishes, it is also possible to dismiss or underestimate the power of what we *are* able to do as churches. We often do our best work in solidarity by doing exactly what we are most well-equipped to do—watch and pray, tell the truth, insist on our own interconnectedness, love one another. In our own pastoral work, we learn again and again that our instinct and need to fix people's problems is not really what most people are seeking when they come to us for help. It is helpful to keep in mind the distinction between healing and cure that Sara Miles makes in her book *Jesus Freak*.¹ We want to fix, make things better, make a

¹ Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 63–105.

good referral, solve the problem. The pain and discomfort of “hanging in there” in prayer seems like such an inadequate response, even sort of cheesy when compared to hardcore activism or competent social service. Where’s the satisfaction, for “them” or for us? Yet our experience of hanging in there with people is that often prayer and companionship is what people want and need; it is what brings the light back into their eyes and the spring back into their steps, what reconnects them with the faith that has brought them through past struggles and will take them further in the future than any great referral.

We find ourselves going back to the basics as we seek the theological underpinnings for doing the work of economic justice. We ask, “Who is my neighbor?” We remember that we are members of one body, a body which cannot be well when any member is suffering. We remember that we are called to love one another, as Jesus first loved us.

We suspect there are no shortcuts for the spiritual and practical dynamic of going from doing service to being neighbors. As we move from one body serving another to One Body, we find that “us” addressing “their needs” becomes all of us speaking the truth to one another and the world about what our whole Body needs to be well. Congregations like St. Luke’s with strong ministries of service have a very significant start in this process, even though it is tempting to critique them as not really being about justice. The challenge is to keep the process from stagnating, stalling out halfway. On some level this will require a reconsideration of the separation we make between what “we” do on Sunday mornings and what “we” do for “them” on Saturdays and during the week. We may have to find ways to throw our cautions about proselytizing and liturgical messiness to the wind, making Saturdays more about our shared life in Christ and Sundays more about our engagement with our neighbors. Out of that fertile mix of true neighborliness, we would not be at all surprised to see new impetus for justice grow.

We want shortcuts. We are shaped by our culture’s equations of work and results, striving and success. Often Christians seem engaged in the myth of Sisyphus, and our ministries feel like Gatsby’s dreams, “so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”² But we are also formed by F. D. Maurice’s contention that the most profound theology is revealed in the most common things of life. We are formed by faith in the incarnation, the messiness of the

² F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 1925, 2004), 180.

Word made flesh. We are formed by the countercultural stories of the wilderness, images of arid deserts of the soul, and passionless prayers that mean more to God than ecstatic union. So we go on—boats against the current and/or walking through the wilderness, hoping that when we look back, we will see that we have walked on water.

Economic justice work, like all important work, is about relationship-building and patience and hanging in there, about the slow and painful process of truth-telling and neighbor-making. This work is less gratifying than quick victories. Ultimately, though, we trust that it is powerful in the way that the cross is powerful, impossible in the way that resurrection is impossible, a process of making something from nothing in the way that only God can.