

Justice in a Threatened World

max ediger
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Our world is a deeply threatened one. The violence of war, terrorism and economic disparity affects the lives and security of everyone. Peace built on justice, or just-peace, seems like a goal too distant to be achievable. But there is hope because this threatened world can be transformed. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul says that when we put on Christ, we become a new person (transformation). The "putting on" of Christ transforms us, and through that transformation we become agents of transformation in the world. We begin acting together for just-peace, and therein lies hope. To participate in this work of transformation, we need first look briefly at some of the stark realities facing us today.

Born in September of 1990, Santhi was unaware that by the end of that month the largest gathering of world leaders in history would assemble at the United Nations to attend the World Summit for Children. The purpose of that meeting was to adopt a Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children. Santhi is now twelve years old and is still unaware of that historic meeting nor of the rights and protections it was to provide her with. She is one of some 25 million Internally Displaced People (IDP) in 47 countries around the world who have little or no access to information. More than half of these IDPs are children. Another 12 million men, women and children are living as refugees in foreign countries.

Santhi is luckier than many of her generation because she is still alive. Last decade, over 2 million children were killed in war, 6 million wounded and 1 million orphaned. She, along with millions of other children live among some 60 million land mines that litter the fields of present and past conflicts. Each year more than 10,000 children fall victim to these mines. The proportion of civilian war victims to combatants jumped from 5% to 90% in the last ten years.

More than 300,000 young boys and girls, many less than 10 years of age, are child soldiers and a very large number of others are now heads of households because parents have either been killed or have simply disappeared.

Santhi's two younger siblings died from preventable diseases shortly after birth because medical care and good food were not available to them or to their mother. They have become lost in the list of some 10 million children under the age of 5 who die each year from preventable disease and malnutrition.

Living as an IDP Santhi joins 100 million other children worldwide who are not in school. At least 60% of those children are girls. Their future is grim indeed as they can not enjoy the luxury of thinking about a better future but can only think of day to day survival.

When Santhi looks at her mother, she sees her own future all too clearly. On a global scale, women cultivate more than half of all the food that is grown. Although Santhi's

mother is one of the major actors in feeding the world and fighting hunger and malnutrition, she herself is malnourished, has rarely been paid and has little or no access to land, credit, training and technology. And like 544 million other women in the world, she is illiterate. 70% of the world's poor are women.

Does Santhi have to exist in this kind of world? The answer is a resounding no! According to many international organizations, Santhi and her mother should not be malnourished because there is sufficient food being produced in the world to supply every human being with at least 2,700 calories each day. This makes the fact that 30 million people die each year of hunger and 800 million suffer from chronic malnutrition a crime against humanity. While over US\$900 billion are spent on military budgets worldwide, only 10% of that amount would ensure the essentials of life to everyone in the world. To satisfy all the world's sanitation and food requirements would cost only \$13 billion, hardly as much as the people of the United States and the European Union spend each year on perfume.

While the World Bank, the IMF and the world's most powerful governments try to appease a billion people living on less than US\$2 per day that things are improving and that globalization will bring a peaceful and happy future for all, a few modern prophets echo the words of Jeremiah, "They attempt to heal the pain of my people slightly by saying, 'Peace, peace; when there is no peace.'" (Jeremiah 6:14)

And like the false prophets of Jeremiah's day, these institutions of wealth seem not to even be ashamed of the vast and growing gap between themselves and the masses of people living in abject poverty. This is where the voices of God's people must be raised in protest. Peace will not come from GM foods, from globalization, through the industrialization of food production nor through economic systems that demand ever-greater growth. Nor does security come from greater military might nor from wars against terrorism, for in all of these there is no justice, and without justice there is neither real nor lasting peace.

Too many of the issues that make life for Santhi and more than a billion other men, women and children around the world a living hell can be solved easily if we but commit ourselves to positive and long-term actions. But the solutions require the political will and the commitment to transform the present systems and structures of economic and political power in ways that will ensure that every individual has an equal share in the world's resources and a free and responsible participation in decision making.

Transformation is not easy and requires stamina and a long-term vision sufficient to confront those forces that demand the maintenance of the status quo. That is why we must seek a transformation with roots deeply planted in a Biblical spirituality that will give us the wisdom, courage and strength to remain in the struggle for as long as it takes. The Apostle Paul defines this spirituality when he says we must first begin with our own transformation. "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know

what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect God's will really is." (Romans 12: 2 NIV)

Our own transformation leads us to build a just and participatory civil society and to do that we must begin with the poor and the marginalized. Christ referred to them as the "least of these" and reminded us that our love for the least of these reflects our true love for God.

In most countries, including many democratic societies, the marginalized have no voice. Decisions that directly and indirectly affect their lives are made without any consideration of how such decisions will affect their lives. This group of marginalized is a growing percent of the total world's population and their marginalization is not only a terrible form of violence, but also the roots for a future of increased violence.

A strong and healthy civil society is essential for peace and security and the least of these must be an active part of that civil society. Our work needs to find creative ways of identifying these marginalized communities and helping them develop the skills and understanding necessary to participate actively in the civil society. Building from the "bottom up" helps ensure that justice for the least of these will be a serious consideration for political, economic and social development.

We should make a special focus on helping youth become more aware of and active in a just civil society. They represent the future of our world and their preparation to move into decision-making roles is a great responsibility for us.

It is also crucial that we continue to look seriously at the role women play in building a just society. While most of our societies tend to marginalize women, they continue to be a very important part of the fabric of our communities. Often working unnoticed and unrewarded, they strive to produce food we consume, bring up their children in responsible and healthy ways and often play a major role in peacemaking and conflict transformation. They must be recognized and encouraged in these efforts and their wisdom must be made available to the broader global community.

It is also important that we work at eradicating poverty. We must focus on forms of development and social organization that emphasize equal access to resources rather than constant growth and competition to control more. Economic forms that rely on constantly expanding growth rather than on cooperation and sharing need to be confronted and positive alternatives suggested. We need to search our own old traditions of community and economic wisdom for the kinds of values that might begin to eradicate poverty and help us focus more on sustainability. These alternatives could possibly include traditional organic farming methods, traditional medical treatments, traditions of community resource sharing, etc.

We must make a commitment to place ourselves with the suffering in order to empathize with their lives, their hopes and their dreams. It is not enough to simply "help" them

from afar, but we must stand in solidarity with them to confront and transform those systems and structures that are at the roots of the suffering.

This discussion also needs to look seriously at the issue of self-determination. Groups like the Dalits and Nagas of India, the Ainus of Japan and the various ethnic nationalities of Burma are part of larger nation-states that often do not recognize their indigenous identities or rights. Ways to stand with them and identify a form of self-determination that provides them with justice need to be identified and acted on.

There is also the question of justice for the growing number of migrant laborers, victims of war and ethnic conflicts, persons with HIV/AIDS, and children/teen suicides that needs to be seriously looked at. How can we stand in solidarity with these people in ways that lead to a more just and security life for all?

The prophet Isaiah talks about the transformed world that we are to envision in Isaiah 11. It is, perhaps, an idealistic vision, but God has called us to faithfully be a part of that vision. Basileia, or the reign of God, is already present in our world and we must commit ourselves to participate fully in it.

This is a time for us to seek together a deep spirituality of transformation that will begin to focus the world's attention on justice so that peace for all can begin to flourish. For this, we need to pray together, seek together and have faith together that one day " the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard and the goat will be at peace. Calves and yearlings will be safe among lions, and a little child will lead them all." (Isaiah 11: 6)

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