

## Public Justice: A Christian Calling

A few weeks ago, I was here in the Greater Toronto area to attend the Maytree conference where Dr. John Helliwell was talking about the work that is being done on well-being. Helliwell is an economist, and is part of a recent project that is basically bringing social science to economics, public policy and the work place. The researchers are working to discover what creates well-being – they're asking questions like "what makes people feel the happiest," or "what gives people the greatest sense of life satisfaction."

The answers they are finding are surprising to economists, who have long assumed that simply maximizing profits will create the greatest sense of happiness. What they're finding is that social connections play a greater role in well-being: a socially engaging context where trust is high, feeling connected to others and believing that most people are basically trustworthy, time spent with family, friends and neighbours, and feeling engaged in something useful.

To the economists' surprise, money has only a limited impact on well-being. Money can have a negative effect on well-being if you don't have enough income to meet your basic needs. But once your basic needs are met, more money doesn't bring greater happiness. In fact, beyond basic needs, relative income is more important than income – how your income compares to those around you, whether you make more or less money. The gap between the rich and the poor acts like a social cancer: it makes both the rich and the poor more unhappy.

Dr. Helliwell boils well-being down to this: "People have the greatest sense of well-being when they are doing something together with others for other people." I found this a fascinating conclusion, but when I thought about it some more, I thought this idea sounds familiar – this is a profoundly Christian idea. We are hard-wired to be happiest when we are doing what God has called us to do: love our neighbour as ourselves.

As churches, I'm sure that's one of your goals – to provide a caring, supportive community that nurtures and supports each one of your members. Our common mission as Christians is to live in loving, obedient relationship with our Creator and to share that love with our world. That love is developed and supported in the context of our families and our churches, and expressed in tangible ways as we pray together, dialogue together, celebrate and mourn together, and work on living as people reconciled.

But our task as Christians is also much broader: care for our neighbour, our country, and our world. Being servants of Christ has implications for how we live within our neighbourhoods and communities, like Whitby, and Oshawa and the Greater Toronto area. For how we treat the environment, and all of God's creation. For how we do our work on a day-to-day basis. For how we live as citizens of Canada, and engage with our governments and public institutions.

We have a calling to do justice in every part of our lives. As Micah 6:8 says, "What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God." Isaiah 58 makes it clear that worship is intimately connected with living rightly and doing justice:

3 "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. 4 Look, you fast only

to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? 6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? 8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. 11 The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. 12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

So what does justice look like in practice? Proverbs 31:8-9 describes it this way: “Speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” Proverbs makes it clear that justice means more than fairness – it means protecting and defending those who are weak or marginalized. It means turning the logic of our dominant culture on its head, and not putting the strongest and most powerful first, but putting the lowest of the low first – those who have the least, those who fit in the least, those who we are inclined to think of the least.

Isaiah 1:17 puts it another way “learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

This call for justice focuses on all areas of our life. Citizens for Public Justice is an organization dedicated to promoting justice within the public sphere, focusing on governments. CPJ was founded 45 years ago by Christians who believed that governments and all institutions have a responsibility to promote the common good. Our mission is to promote public justice in Canada by shaping key public policy debates. We encourage citizens, leaders in society, and governments to support policies and practices which reflect God’s call for love, justice and stewardship.

We believe that we are called as Martin Luther King put it, “to be **thermostats** that transform and regulate the temperature of society, not **thermometers** that merely record or register the temperature of majority opinion...”

We believe that public policy needs to be engaged when:

- A wider community is needed to address the scope of a need which Christians want to address
- Oppression or injustice is preventing people from living fully before God, with their neighbours and in a healthy environment
- Root causes need to be addressed, rather than only symptoms which we experience close at hand.

As an example of public justice in action, what I would like to focus on with you tonight is the issue of poverty in Canada. Poverty is a significant concern for our society, as 1 in 10 Canadians currently live in poverty. We often think of poverty in terms of low-income, but as I mentioned earlier, poverty is also associated with the lack of well-being, and that lack of well-being impacts the dignity of people created in the image of God.

There is no doubt that poverty is a problem in God's eyes. In his book, *Faith Works*, Jim Wallis shares a project he and several colleagues undertook in seminary to examine every mention of the poor in the Bible. He reports that they found "several thousand verses on the subject. In the Hebrew Scriptures, it was the second most prominent theme, idolatry being the first, and the two were often related. In the New Testament, one out of every sixteen verses had to do with wealth and poverty. In the first three Gospels, the subject is in one out of every ten verses; in the Gospel of Luke, it is in one out of seven verses." If poverty plays such a central role in the Bible, should it not also be important to us?

So what are we as Christians called to do about poverty?

Let me take a step back for a moment, to look at one particular story of poverty. To set the scene, there is a drought in the land, and drought brings famine. International food aid is not forthcoming, and so our protagonists, who are suffering severely from hunger, must seek an alternative solution. In this case, it is forced migration – they leave their home, familiar surroundings, and everyone they know and love and trek to a neighbouring country where there is food. In this country of refuge, for a short while life seems good as both the sons of the family meet a girl, fall in love and marry. But disaster strikes once again, and the family's mother is left all alone with her daughters-in-law as her husband and sons suddenly fall sick and die. The woman decides she will return home to familiar surroundings, but aware that she does not have the means to provide a future for her daughter-in-laws, she urges them not to accompany her.

But with a love that transcends economic self-interest, our heroine Ruth refuses to leave her mother-in-law alone and destitute. She commits herself to lifelong love and care for Naomi: "Where you go, I shall go. Your God shall be my God." Ruth becomes the means by which God's grace is made manifest in Naomi's life. The two of them return to Israel together.

But even with Ruth's support, the future is far from assured. In the context of ancient Israel, two women alone had very little economic capacity and no security for the future. Ruth must go out to glean in the fields for their food. It is clear she is at risk of sexual harassment there, for Boaz kindly warns her not to go into anyone else's fields and orders his own men to leave her alone. Furthermore, gleaning is only a temporary solution. What will Ruth and Naomi do when the harvest is over?

Together, Ruth and Naomi come up with a risky plan. Ruth will offer herself to Boaz, in hopes that he will marry her. The risks inherent in this plan are incalculable. If he chose, Boaz could rape Ruth and refuse to marry her. Then all her future hopes would be devastated. Luckily, Boaz is an honourable man, who agrees to marry Ruth and to redeem the land of Naomi's family. Our story ends with the ultimate happy ending for its context: Ruth gives birth to a son, who represents security for the future.

Although it is several thousands of years ago, Ruth and Naomi's story shares similarities with the experiences of the poor today. Poverty is often the result of a complex mix of economic and social structures, uncontrollable events and circumstances, and personal choices or lack of choices. These include environmental devastation, inadequate support or assistance in times of hardship, jobs with inadequate income or jobs that provide no stability you can plan a future on, job loss, illness and death, or value systems that claim people are unequal on the basis of sex, race or nationality and should therefore not be allowed to participate in economic systems on the same footing.

Ruth and Naomi's story also demonstrates the powerful role of personal relationships, and the ways in which God's grace can be experienced in tangible ways in our lives through personal interactions and relationships. The only time the book of Ruth mentions God intervening directly in the story comes at the end, when Ruth conceives a son. Otherwise, all of God's involvement in the story of Ruth comes through the actions of other people. Personal relationships can be a profound way of expressing God's love for our neighbours.

But Ruth and Naomi's story also demonstrates the inadequacy of only offering poverty alleviation. The right to glean in the fields of Israel kept Ruth and Naomi from starvation, but it gave them neither economic nor physical security. In fact, it put them in situations of great personal risk and greatly constrained the choices available to them. If Boaz had not chosen to support Ruth and Naomi, they would have lived on the margins for years – unable to assure their food supply, their standing in the community or their physical well-being. While Ruth and Naomi suffered from uncontrollable circumstances in their lives and in their environment, they also suffered from social structures and practices that made them poor and kept them poor.

Similarly, poor Canadians today require structural changes, as much as they need supportive communities, and short-term help from foodbanks, shelters or local clothing programs. We have policies and public practices that contribute to poverty or that work to keep people in poverty rather than helping them to find a way out. Changing those structures will help bring justice to those living in poverty today.

Now I know there are some who would say "But the Bible says the poor you always have with you." Doesn't that mean poverty is inevitable? Well the truth is, we've made the inevitability of poverty a self-fulfilling prophecy. We say nothing can be done, we don't do anything, and then poverty rates remain the same. But the poor you will always have with you was not an excuse for inaction. In fact, Jesus was quoting a passage from Deuteronomy, in which the laws on Jubilee are laid out. That passage warns Israel that "There should be no poor among you."

Jubilee is God's vision of a society without poverty. God's people were called not only to charity, but also to periodic redistribution of the means of production – land, grain and livestock. No one was allowed to fall permanently behind, just as no one was allowed to become wealthy at the expense of the impoverished. Rather, God's people were encouraged to give generously even as they returned land and livestock, so that people would not only get back on their feet but flourish.

For us today, Jubilee translates into a need to create policies that ensure everyone has access to a sustainable livelihood and a livable income. Jubilee requires that every citizen has the opportunity to live in dignity as an image bearer of God, fully able to participate in community life.

We all have a responsibility to contribute towards achieving God's vision of a society without poverty. That includes all of our various roles – as neighbours and friends, as church communities, as workers or business owners, as union members, in community groups, and as citizens.

Sometimes that responsibility can feel overwhelming. We feel like the problem is so large, so complex to understand, we don't know how we can contribute, what difference our actions make, or what kind of changes we can actually achieve.

Paul Rogat Loeb talks about how hard it is to get the courage to speak up in his book, *Soul of a Citizen: Living with conviction in a Cynical Time*.

p. 6 [he writes about ] what psychologists call learned helplessness. Society [sometimes our own faith community] has systematically taught us to ignore the ills we see, and leave them to others to handle. Understandably, we find it unsettling even to think about crises as huge and profound in their implications as the ... desperate poverty that blights entire neighbourhoods in our nation's largest cities. We're led to believe that if we can't solve [the] problem, we shouldn't bother to become socially active at all. We're also taught to doubt our voice- to feel we lack either the time to properly learn and articulate the issues we care about, or the standing to speak out and be heard. To get socially involved, we believe, requires almost saintlike judgment, confidence, and character– a standard we can never meet. Whatever impulses toward involvement we might have, they're dampened by a culture that demeans idealism, enshrines cynicism, and makes us feel naive for caring about our fellow human beings or the planet we inhabit.

The answer, Loeb suggests, is learning to start with just one step. He says that those who have successfully gotten involved, "don't need to wait for the perfect circumstances, the perfect cause, or the perfect level of knowledge to take a stand; [they learn] that they can proceed step by step so that they don't get overwhelmed before they start. They savour the journey of engagement and draw strength from its challenges. Taking the long view, they come to trust that the fruits of their efforts will ripple outward, in ways they can rarely anticipate."

If we think back to our story of Ruth, Ruth was one woman, not even an Israelite, one of God's chosen people, who began with the step of committing herself to loyal service to her mother-in-law. God blessed that one step of obedience in powerful ways, and Ruth even became one of the ancestors of Jesus! Humble acts of faith can change the world.

So think about embarking on that journey of public justice and of solidarity with the poor. What might that first step be?

Perhaps it is a small step to reach a hand out to neighbour

Perhaps it is choosing to pay a living wage to your employees

Perhaps it is making a choice as a family about our consumer purchases

Perhaps it is writing a letter to your Member of Parliament and asking them to commit to a poverty reduction strategy

Perhaps it is supporting an organization like CPJ that is dedicated to promoting public justice in Canada.

CPJ has just embarked on a campaign for citizen education to empower citizens to engage in advocacy on poverty, Envisioning Canada Without Poverty. Check out our flyer on the table at the back, or our website [canadawithoutpoverty.ca](http://canadawithoutpoverty.ca) for more information.

One small step could lead to a lifelong journey. We pray that God will bless our efforts as we work towards making God's vision of a society without poverty a reality.