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PLANE TICKETS, JESUS, *and* AEQUITAS

"May God bless
you with a restless
discomfort about
easy answers, half-
truths and superficial
relationships, so that
you may seek truth
boldly and love deep
within your heart."

—ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI[1]

Marsh Supermarket in downtown Indianapolis is probably the last place anyone would expect to be reminded of social justice, but that is exactly where I found it—in the checkout line to be specific. I was standing behind a woman who could have been Danish she reminded me so much of my brunette friend Sophia, when she stepped aside to pack her bags and revealed to all of us her beautiful African-American baby boy. He was standing up in the shopping cart laughing and playing peek-a-boo, and he had Down syndrome. His mother paid for her groceries, leaned in to kiss his round face, and slipped out the store doors.

Although none of us standing in the line so much as exchanged a word with each other, we all knew we had seen something delicate and overwhelmingly beautiful. Perhaps it was the baby's gummy smile or the fact that he had Down syndrome. Or perhaps it was just the way his mother loved him with that kiss and made him her own despite the controversy surrounding such an adoption that reminded us that there are needs all around us and when we love even one well, we do something lasting.

"Social justice" is a term that most of us have become very familiar with. We know it to be the organized efforts of individuals seeking to change and lift the hardships and challenges faced by others who are less able to do so for themselves for numerous reasons. Social justice hopes to bring clean running water where there isn't any. It hopes to raise money to buy

enough mosquito nets to cap Africa's greatest killer, malaria, which claims more victims than HIV/AIDS. It hopes to free hundreds of children who have been stolen in the night and made to murder as child soldiers in Burma, Uganda, and so many other countries. It hopes to help train the next generation in the developing world with vocational skills so they can thrive in their communities and move away from dependency. Perhaps most simply put, social justice longs to bring hope, to let a hurting world know they have not been forgotten.

In September 2000, 189 world leaders tried to put social justice into practice by committing to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to see poverty wiped out, to make the world a fairer place. They focused on eight different areas that are at the core of people's lives: poverty and hunger, education, gender equality, child health, maternal health, environmental sustainability, and global partnerships.[2] Their targets are both adventurous and noble and also incredibly necessary if we're ever to see change. More than one billion people in the world are hungry. Out of those numbers seven out of every ten of them are women and girls. And yet we send 25.9 million tons of food to landfills in the U.S. every year. That's the equivalent of $43 billion spent on food we don't eat.[3]

This isn't to say progress hasn't or isn't being made. Between 1990 and 2005, the number of people who earn less than $1.25 a day decreased from 1.8 billion to 1.4 billion.[4] So, four million people are a little better off now than they were before. It's hard to know whether to be glad there's been some improvement or rattled that we're still talking about millions and billions of people living in abject poverty.

In Malawi, the government and the UN set up a creative voucher program so farmers could plant seeds with the right fertilizers. The program was a lifesaver for them; for the first time in forever it made them food exporters rather than famine-stricken importers.[5]

I once volunteered in Uganda for a few months with a New Zealand-based organization that worked with local groups. I chose to be posted out in Mukono, a small but bustling town a little way outside of Kampala. I volunteered with a number of other foreigners from Belgium to Canada, and we all came with ideas of how we were going to save Africa. We read books in the lounge on the weekends when we were back in from the villages. We watched documentaries on a laptop when the electricity was working, and we wrote in our journals constantly.

And then one day one of the guys asked no one in particular why the locals don't just stop having so many children and fix the child poverty/orphan levels. I'm shy when I first meet people, so I doubt I said anything in return, but now I see what his question was asking. If the population numbers are lowered there will be less of a demand on already-failing systems.

But he didn't factor in human nature. We were created with the blessing and instruction to multiply and replenish the earth. We were born to continue the human story and the presence and job of guardian and stewardship. And children are the heirs. In Africa, children are insurance. They are their parents' hands and feet, legs and sight when their elders' all start to fail. They are their people's social workers and social security system; they are their retirement plan. And they are also the only way their villages, towns, and countries will survive into the next generation.

So maybe the UN's plan to prevent 350,000 women and young girls from dying because of complications during pregnancy and childbirth every year is protecting that insurance and future. Dying in childbirth sounds like a plot from a Victorian-era set novel, complete with the butcher instruments and late-arriving doctor. It's not something we're supposed to be worrying about years into the twenty-first century.

Then there is the big MDG target, the one that will change the rest of the other targets from aims to lasting realities—"global partnerships" or, simply put, trade. International relations is murky on the brightest days, and international development, the more scientific alternative to "social justice" can be just as complicated. Not because the needs aren't plain—they are. We see them in reports, in photographs, in testimonies, in current situations. No, it's because changing injustices affects us too. It asks moral questions on trading laws that act as an inverted Robin Hood tactic and leave the majority of the world on the fringes. And a truly fair international relationship would mean that developing countries would stop being called the third world and would simply be countries in the global community.

We read about and see social justice in magazines, in feature articles, in YouTube videos, at festivals and concerts, and of course all over the Internet. In April of 2010, the *Guardian* newspaper in London launched a huge social-justice-themed article competition focusing on the needs in Africa and Asia.[6] The social justice movement has become so popular in this new millennium that it has inadvertently contributed to the ever-increasing promotional t-shirt production industry.

Yet before the term social justice became so widely known and so imperative, it was rooted in a Latin word and Roman mythology. *Aequitas* means justice, equality, conformity, symmetry, and fairness. It is from where our word "equity" is derived. Aequitas was also a minor Roman goddess who represented fair trade and honest merchants. Pictures of her holding a scale to depict the balance of fairness and equity have been found on ancient Roman coins. Perhaps for most of us today justice still means the same thing—fair opportunities for everyone regardless of who they are, where they are from, or what they look like.

In 1999 in the U.S. alone, there were a reported 1,202,573 non-profit organizations. By 2009 that number had leapt to 1,581,111 non-profit organizations.[7] These organizations were and are everywhere—but particularly at music festivals. Summer music fests are a staple of American and British life. They mark the beginning of summer, vacations, heat waves, freedom from work and school, campfires around which to talk about deep and meaningful things, and of course romances.

One of the least likely romances has been between humanity; yet there it is on the thousands of fliers copied at Kinko's. It's on the girl wearing the bright purple ribbon strapped around her forehead which reads "love" in paint. It's at the booths where a guy is selling woven Peruvian satchels to send the money back to the community he met last Easter. Something has happened to us, and it runs deep in our veins and in our breath. Maybe it's the revival that is preached so often, or maybe it's a slowing down and taking stock of things. Maybe we're opening our eyes and seeing with mercy what living in faraway lands looks like and have seen that what is happening there is meshed up with what is happening here.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when social movements and organizations swelled onto our social scenes. The founders behind Invisible Children are probably some of the better-known ones. They brought the plight of Northern Ugandans into American homes with their home-video camera documentary that collected the lives and names of those suffering under the Lord's Resistance Army.[8] A mere eight years later, the organization now has teams in colleges and schools across the country with scores of children, teens, and young adults saying the same thing: "What can I do to help?"

It's that one simple question that delves into the core of social justice. It is not merely reading the news of national and international tragedies and thinking detachedly as Bob Geldof's 1980s hit song "Feed the World" eloquently put it: "Well, tonight, thank God, it's them instead of you."[9] Instead, social justice invites us to partake in the messy affair of human life, both in its horror and beauty. It asks us to examine our own lives, to see beyond the borders of our neighborhood lines or far-reaching geographical and linguistic differences to see what we all have in common—humanity.

There is a couple in Nashville, Tennessee, who opened a thrift store nearly two years ago with the simple desire to give proceeds to refugee children in the area so they could buy new school uniforms or have dresses for their proms. When I asked them why they called their store Humankind they replied, "The name Humankind simply refers to the fact that we are all human—part of the human race, with all the same basic needs, one of those needs being clothing."[10]

It started with Christina teaching a third grade class at one of Nashville's metro public schools for a year and noticing one little Somali boy. He was the smallest boy in the class with one of the longest names—Abdirahmani. Every Monday he would come to school in his clean, freshly pressed yellow button-down dress shirt that was too big and wear it every day until it could be washed and ironed over the weekend. It wasn't that his family was lazy or neglectful but that he didn't have enough school-appropriate shirts. Abdirahmani wasn't the only one in need in a class where half the students were Somali or Sudanese refugees—in need not only of a school uniform but of the confidence and normality clean clothes can give.

Nashville, Tennessee, has many refugees. They're from Iraq, Iran, Somalia, Sudan, Myanmar (Burma), and other places. They hope for a peaceful life where they can work, learn, and rest in safety without the fear that hounded them before. They live where we don't see them until Nashville Public Television shows a special on "next door neighbors"[11] and we learn how many had become new citizens.

Nashville isn't the only city where people live in bubbles. We all do; we just don't know it. Imagine having neighbors you didn't know existed. Imagine living in a city where the lines are so neatly drawn you don't notice that you've never met anyone Kurdish because there aren't any Kurds anywhere around you. They don't go to the same grocery store, or the same doctor, or bank, or park.

When I lived in Nashville, I ran a project for a while called "My Name is . . ." I had met some refugees and new immigrants and they were interesting; their stories were rich and their hospitality was even better. And I wondered why my col-

leagues didn't know that not far from where we worked there was an Iraqi family in which the mom made the best sweet date pastries. It was a project about making real introductions between refugee communities and their American neighbors. It said hello with the words of Iraqi and Burmese children and with their colorful hand drawn pictures. They gave stories of school lunches, their families and best friends, their favorite toys and hobbies—all those things that are important when you're nine years old.

When we talk about humanity and its needs and the fight to see justice being done, we sometimes forget these topics are not new. In the Old Testament, God commanded Israel: "Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor" (Zechariah 7:9-10). Numerous times throughout the Bible, God goes on to remind Israel, and in turn, us, to *protect* the vulnerable—not exploit or ignore them.

Jesus took the plea further and summarized the majority of his whole ministry in his most famous teaching: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). Or, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). From the Beatitudes to overturning the tables of the money changers in the Temple, Jesus made his stance on fairness very explicit. His response to the hunger of a crowd of 5,000 was just as compassionate and as active as when he wept outside the tomb of his good friend, Lazarus.

Jesus cared about people in such a burning and unceremonious way that it shocked countless people, riled his critics, and earned him flocks of admirers to his sermons. And yet one thing that it so spectacularly wonderful about the way the gos-

pels are written is that it is not just the fantastical large events that are reported but the smaller, more awkward ones too.

When Jesus met a Gentile woman in the Tyre and Sidon region, his first response to her request for help for her daughter was silence. Utter silence. Jesus kept so quiet while the woman continued to ask for help that his disciples insisted he send her off to stop her begging (see Matthew 15:21-28). Then when Jesus did finally speak it was only to remind her he first had to help the sheep—Israel. It is as though Jesus was reaffirming all the racial prejudices of the day between the Jews and Gentiles, something that would definitely have led to a lawsuit today. And yet this woman who was fighting for her daughter's life to be spared was undeterred. She replied to his statement with wit and humility and earned acclaim from him: "'Dear woman,' Jesus said to her, 'your faith is great. Your request is granted'" (Matthew 15:28, *NLT*).

When I first read this story I was mortified and confused at Jesus' approach to the woman's suffering. It was only with time that I was able to peel the story back to see how God was challenging all of our hidden superiority complexes and drawing us back to the fact we are to have compassion and mercy despite what our histories and cultural differences may suggest.

In September of 2006 I took God's mandate to care for the downtrodden quite literally and spent my savings on a plane ticket, sold my extensive collection of clothes and jewelry, and worked two jobs in order to fund a volunteer position in Naggalama, a tiny Ugandan village. I was adamant that I wanted to give back to others at least some of what I had received. Some may say it was the age old Western guilt that motivated me or my naïve Christian ideals that launched me into the over-

crowded classroom that served ages four to twelve, but I think that simplifies it too much.

Naggalama has one hospital and it's barely equipped. The walls were a pale yellow, and the floor was plain, worn concrete. It was my first week there—I had arrived a week too early, so I was following the local community center staff around and trying to get my bearings. On one of those days, while a man named Samuel took me on a tour of the hospital, a woman and her friend rushed in with a bundle in their arms. I couldn't see what it was at first because it was wrapped in a *chetenge* (an African print sarong-type fabric). Then the package was unwrapped and I saw the frailest set of limbs fall on to the bed. The doctor later translated for me that the women had walked miles to bring the little girl there. She had malaria, and she was dying. It was my second day on my placement, and I was watching a child die. I know it's cowardly, but I wanted to go home in that moment. I suddenly understood and could see what working for social justice would mean, and I didn't want it.

When you see children in sweating malaria fevers, or school houses that were being built but have been left unfinished because the funding has run out, when you see people staring at you unexpectantly because you're just another foreigner who's come to help for a bit and then leave, you start to wonder what you have to give. How could you possibly understand what it means to wake up before the rooster cries to collect firewood for the stove and collect a few vegetables for lunch as that's the only meal you and your family will be eating? Or what it means to walk miles, literally, to fill up a yellow jerry can and carry it back miles, even though it's nearly the same height as you? Or what it means for this to be your life every day without even the slightest chance of something different?

I would have given up if it weren't for a stranger in the village who quizzed me about whether Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister at the time, or maybe the UN, had paid for my plane ticket to come over. Upon realizing I did this voluntarily without any sponsorship or funding, the stranger stopped, looked at me closely, and said, "Thank you for remembering us."

* * *

It is easy to picture DEET sprays, mosquito nets, and volunteering in Uganda. The news reports, award-winning photographs, and anthologies have given us eyes to see those troubles. There's something profound about poverty so severe and being part of the solution. But possibly a few miles from where we all sit, there is another kind of justice happening.

David Gould and his family of five pastor and love the challenged, low-income community at the intersection of Nashville's South 6th Street and Shelby Avenue. Every week they open their doors, kitchen, and quite possibly their sanity to a motley of people who are fighting off and caving in—to drugs, violence, abuse, and a poverty that is peppered across America. They offer food, basic home and personal goods, a chance to talk about the week but perhaps more importantly, recognition.

The Goulds know people's names. They know where they live and how their children are doing in school. They ask about those family relatives and that landlord. They don't miss a beat. In the summer they hold services in the parking lot and worship with these neighbors. They hold them and pray with them when they come forward and sing the songs they know over and with them. They dish out hot dogs and chips or spaghetti. They give out sweet tea and water to lessen the burning heat.

And they listen to them and encourage them with a simple, old message: "Don't give up."

Social justice is the old concept that has found a new home in this much smaller world we live in. The Internet, WiFi, Facebook, Twitter, Skype, and twenty-four-hour news mean information and ways to contact are all around us. Distance is barely an obstacle anymore; everything is closer. We know when there's a revolution and a mudslide and people are left without homes or protection. We know when one country fires at another or leaves people displaced in their own lands. We know when something goes wrong at a rig and oil just keeps spilling across the ocean and devastates marine life. We know when guns, drugs, and violence escalate on our street and leave scores of teens dead.

If technology has brought us close to what is happening to each other in real time, recent economic struggles have woven us even more tightly. The 2008 economic crisis saw banks collapsed, homes lost, jobs taken, and an international spending slump—the worst we'd seen in years. For the last couple of years everyone has been trying to restore the economy and our trust as we now face spending cuts, unemployment, high rent and taxes, and rising food and fuel prices.

If we were concerned for the poor in the past, we're now having to be concerned about running our own homes against rising costs, finding work when there barely is any, and trying to reconcile this new era where our money, governments, and business leaders are fragile. And yet, it's now that we have to scour our hearts and see that we're all in this together, some worse than others, but we all need each other. Charities and not-for-profits still need us to be outraged by the greed of some

that has imprisoned and punished others into generations of poverty. They still need us to be indignant and resilient about wanting justice served fairly for all. And those on the edge need us to remember and fight with and for them.

Micah and his prophecies fill up only a small book toward the end of the Old Testament, but their message is loud. Micah sounds like a sensitive soul, worried about what was happening in the small towns and villages that neighbored him. He speaks of hope, and he speaks of doom—the common extremes of his time. But then he lists questions about what God wants from us in all of this, from sacrifices of rams to ten thousand rivers of oil (see Micah 6:7). He settles on one plain and resounding answer: "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

We still need to show mercy and seek fairness. We still need to see the needs of others, see them as more than our own. That is when hope becomes more than an idea and justice becomes true, genuine love for people. And it's not that we're being asked to do this on our own; we've been given an example that was in flesh and blood. And we've been promised his company as we try to live this out. But maybe living it out will demand more than we think because it all has to start *in* us before we can see it *out* there.

Making the rights journey

Human rights are broken. You've done the reading, watched the documentaries, heard the stories, seen the evidence. Now what?

Join Amnesty International in taking practical steps toward undoing the unfairness that surrounds us. Register with the Rights Journey and sign petitions, participate in a discussion forum, join a "virtual" event, and add your efforts to teams of others to help bring about change.

Use your voice. Start here:
http://www.amnesty.org/en/rightsjourney

Dinner talk

There's a ton of information out there and online about the injustices around us; keeping it all to yourself could bring on the onset of spontaneous human combustion.

Why not organize a dinner, invite some friends over, and quiz them on their knowledge on the world's hunger, trade, and health issues?

Don't just show off—educate.

Information upload

Reading = quest for knowledge and understanding.

Broaden your horizons and read as much as you can about social justice issues. It may just give you something highly witty and intelligent to add to the conversation that's been going on for years.

Not sure where to start? Follow the dots . . .
http://www.librarything.com/tag/social+justice

Traveling sisterhood pants

According to the UN, women and girls are the most likely to go without education or opportunities. They'll also be the ones collecting the water, working the subsistence farms, feeding the livestock, and getting the daily meal ready—all before everyone else wakes up.

Women in the U.S. also face their own struggles. On September 15, 2010, 70,648 women were receiving medical treatment as victims of domestic violence. Domestic violence hotlines received 22,292 calls.

Show your support by seeking out a women's shelter in your area and taking them your used, but good, clothes, shoes, and accessories.

Go to http://www.nnedv.org/resources/census.html for more information.

Let's party, baby

Okay, I know you thought I was going to say put on your kitten heels or that sleek vintage vest you just found at Goodwill, but how about throwing a party for all the babies born in poverty without the basics?

Every year, 536,000 women and girls die as a result of complications during pregnancy, childbirth, or the six weeks following delivery. Ninety-nine percent of them occur in developing countries.

Every year, more than 1 million children are left motherless. Children who have lost their mothers are up to 10 times more likely to die prematurely than those who have not.

Throw a baby shower, bake (or buy) a cake, invite your friends who have tons of baby onesies that they've been desperate to get rid of and send them off with a card and lots of love.

Go to http://www.maternityworldwide.org/pages/alternative-gifts.html to learn how to send off your gifts.

Buzz off

Africa's biggest killer isn't AIDS; it comes from those little parasites that make a drill sound right by your head when you're trying to sleep.

Malaria kills a child in the world every 45 seconds.

Close to 90 percent of malaria deaths occur in Africa, where malaria accounts for a fifth of childhood mortality.

There were an estimated 243 million cases of malaria in 2008, causing 863,000 deaths, 89 percent of them in Africa.

$10 will buy an insecticide treated net, and pay for distribution and education on prevention.

$10 will save lives. That's humane economics.

Send a net to sub-Saharan Africa with:
http://www.nothingbutnets.net/nets-save-lives/

Pantry wonders

The local church is a catalyst out there. It's the community center, refuge, hideout, second home, only home, childcare, counseling center—the saving grace to so many.

In India, it fights for the *dalits* or "untouchables."

In Camden Town, London, it gives the homeless a place to sleep safe from London's cold streets.

In Indianapolis, it's the comfort to the woman who recently divorced and is trying to work out what life is like with just the kids.

Most churches have a volunteer sign-up program. Put your name down, give a little time, see what love feels like.