

October 15, 2023
Building Hope
James 2:14-17

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food ¹⁶ 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? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

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~~I want to help
the needy.~~

I want to help dismantle the
systems that make them in
need.

Someone in our congregation posted this meme a couple weeks ago, and I noticed that several of you marked that you "liked" it. It highlights an important distinction between charity and justice. The red line through "I want to help the needy" might suggest that one is more important than the other, but both are necessary, and both are mandated by our faith. James, in our scripture reading for today, makes it explicitly clear that you can't call yourself a person of faith and ignore the basic needs of your neighbor. Yet, if we keep seeing our neighbors in need, we are also obligated to ask, "why?"

The term "upstream" is prominent in the field of public health. A parable illustrates upstream terminology. The parable goes like this: You and a friend are having a picnic beside a river. You've just laid out your picnic blanket. You're about to have a feast when you hear a shout from the direction of the river, and you look back. There's a child thrashing around in the water, apparently drowning. And so, both of you instinctively dive in, you fish out the child, you bring

them to shore. And just as your own adrenaline is starting to recede a bit, you hear a second shout, you look back, it's another child also apparently drowning. And so, you go right back in, you rescue that child, you bring them to shore, and then it's two more children. And so, in and out, you go and you're saving kids, you're also starting to get tired and right about then you notice your friend swimming to shore and stepping out and then walking away as though to leave you alone. And you say, "Hey, where are you going? I can't do all this work by myself." And your friend says, "I'm going upstream to tackle the person who's throwing all these kids in the river."¹

Charity and justice are both expressions of serving the needs of our neighbor, but they are two different things. Charity addresses immediate needs. Charity is social service. Justice, on the other hand, is about social change. Justice responds to long-term needs. Justice is public, collective actions.

Charity is easier. It satisfies our need to feel good about helping and it is important in addressing the immediate needs of our neighbors. If someone is hungry, they need food. But charity doesn't address the root causes of persistent need, only justice does that. It is both and.

The National Cathedral in Washington DC has a "Human Rights Porch" to honor champions for human rights and social change. In 2012, two stone images were added to the porch; Rosa Parks and Mother Teresa. Rosa Parks was a devout civil rights pioneer and Mother Teresa won a Nobel Peace prize for her charity with people who were destitute, suffering, and dying. In an NPR story about the dedication of these two individuals, Scott Simon, noted that these two women were across from each other on the porch, and he imagined them having much to talk about.² It is interesting to imagine.

Mother Teresa was the person pulling babies out of the water. Rosa Parks was the one running upstream to make it stop. Rosa Parks was a trained activist. She was one of the first women to join the NAACP. She organized protests and passed the literacy test to earn the right to vote. She didn't refuse to give up her seat on that Montgomery bus because she was tired. She later said, "I wasn't tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day...No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

Mother Teresa dedicated her life to providing comfort to the suffering sick and poor. She founded the Missionaries of Charity which went on to create orphanages, home for people with HIV/AIDS, soup kitchens, and schools. But she never directly challenged the systems that caused suffering. That is why some question why she was included in the "Porch of Human

¹ <https://www.strivetgether.org/together-for-change-podcast-dan-heath-upstream-solving-problems-before-they-happen/>

² <https://www.strivetgether.org/together-for-change-podcast-dan-heath-upstream-solving-problems-before-they-happen/>

Rights.”³ Yet, because of her proximity to the poorest of the poor and the dying, she was able to be a voice for the oppressed.

We need acts of charity, and we also need those who are willing to run upstream. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the systems of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary.”

Whenever we serve the needs of our neighbor, we must do so with great respect, being careful not to “other.” We must respect people’s dignity. We must seek to come alongside our neighbor in a spirit of accompaniment, rather than taking over or assuming we know is best. Charity can become toxic, and even do harm, when we do not work alongside the people we seek to serve and when we fail to understand and address the injustices that create the need in the first place.

There is always something going on here at FCCO. You are a generous congregation when it comes to responding to the needs around us. In addition to our many charitable projects, we also support organizations that can serve people in ways that we can’t. We also remain committed as a congregation to supporting the work of the General Church which in addition to funding life-giving projects around the globe, amplifies our voice as we work for justice.

The distinction between charity and justice isn’t always clear cut. One informs the other, or one inspires the other. When we are in relationship with the people we seek to serve we are more likely to confront the injustices they are facing. Rather than being THE NEEDY, or THOSE PEOPLE, they become our friends and our neighbors.

Currently, our congregation is partnering with three other congregations assisting Afghan refugees with resettlement. This ministry, called New Beginnings, is not only forging new relationships, but also growing our awareness of all the challenges people face when they flee violence and war. New Beginnings welcomes you as a volunteer if you are interested and appreciates the many ways you have already stepped up to support our Afghan neighbors.

FCCO has a rich history of this kind ministry and generosity. New Beginnings is just one example of what we are doing. As we prepare for our 140th Anniversary Celebration on November 12, we are highlighting some of that history in this season of stewardship. During our stewardship time today, Joe Perring will share a bit about Habitat for Humanity in Orange County, and FCCO’s participation in the creation and work of this amazing organization.

Today’s sermon title is “Building Hope,” and that is what we seek to do as we respond to the great need around us. The call to build hope challenges us to see beyond the immediate need and to consider how we can be part of building a hopeful future for all people. You don’t have

³ <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rosa-parks-and-mother-ter b 1512216>

to be Rosa Parks or Mother Teresa. You be you. Start where you are. Do what you can. Share what you have. Use what privilege you have to advocate for those who have no voice and no power. Take time to run upstream. May we all, in ways large and small, be builders of hope.