

Justice and the Liberal Arts at Eastern Mennonite University

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Let me begin by saying that I come to this topic out of a particular context, that is, not only Christian but also Anabaptist Mennonite. The Anabaptist movement originated during the Reformation when a group of reformers insisted that being part of a faith community is a voluntary action, not one mandated by the state, and that baptism therefore occurs upon confession of faith. Traditionally, Anabaptists have been short on theory and doctrine and long on practice and discipleship, that is, following in the way of Jesus. Key Anabaptist values are discipleship and all that this means, community, service, and peacebuilding. With that background, let me address justice and the liberal arts at Eastern Mennonite University.

Recently I heard Desmond Tutu on public radio calling for war to be outlawed. He insisted that there is no such thing as a just war in modern society. In today's wars the people most hurt are those most vulnerable, particularly women and children. At about the same time I heard a woman expressing astonishment at what she viewed as the ignorance of her fellow citizen who couldn't understand why people around the world hate the U.S. so much. To this woman it was clear that the U.S. is seen as a bully and a greedy nation. As I thought about these two statements and reflected on a world full of hatred, wars, poverty, illiteracy, and disease where you and I participate as "haves" while the majority are "have-nots," I wondered, "Could there be a more urgent task than "developing just members of society?"

I will claim at the outset that justice is fundamental to our educational task as we see it at EMU. In our new vision, mission, and values statement, "we commit ourselves to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." Further, we invite our people to "witness faithfully, serve compassionately, and walk boldly in the way of nonviolence and peace." Our most fundamental commitment as a university is to raise up graduates who are committed to creating justice leading to peace, for you cannot have peace without justice.

How then do we build a curriculum that attempts this task? Where better to begin than with the general education curriculum for undergraduates. EMU is embarked upon a major revision of general education. The framework we have built begins with the words of Micah 6:8, "What doth the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" In an unpublished paper, Dr. Nancy Heisey of our Bible and Religion Department proposes an answer to the question of why this text from an ancient Judean prophet should shape our curriculum. First, she defines justice as right living in relation to our neighbors. Next, she argues that this text can be viewed as a credible summary of the message of the entire scripture, both Old and New Testaments. Third, she calls us to ask not just the usual questions of the academy, such as "Who am I?" but also "What does God want?" For Anabaptists this requires a life of discipleship and peacemaking. Dr. Heisey goes on to show how Micah 6:8 becomes the basis for

comprehending some fundamental truths and developing some important strategies, for instance understanding the differences in wealth among the peoples of the world, acknowledging our vocation as defending the poor and powerless, changing social policies, contributing to community solidarity, and creating a life focused on responding to others with God's kindness rather than on accumulating money or fame. I realize that teaching any of these themes is not a simple thing because none of them turn out to be cut and dried issues. Yet, we believe they are central themes of the good news and all of them are evident in numerous places throughout the EMU curriculum, both formal and informal, including the general education curriculum. Dr. Heisey further quotes scholars who have reflected on modern terrorism in light of Micah 6:8. Thus, Walter Brueggemann proposes that doing justice requires us to recognize that terrorism to some extent has its roots in a disproportionate distribution of resources and calls on us to respond not in kind but with acts to make right this injustice. This interpretation resonates with Mennonite theology and has been a frequently heard theme on our campus since the events of 9/11.

As we reviewed the general education curriculum and anticipated changes, what quickly became clear was that the nine-hour cross-cultural requirement that has existed since the early 1980's was nearly sacrosanct in spite of its high cost. This nine-hour requirement can be met in several ways. About a third of our students spend a semester abroad with a faculty member, typically in the Middle East or Central America, sometimes in Africa or elsewhere. Other students complete a 3-6 week experience in the summer and then complete additional coursework on campus. We also have a residential facility in Washington, D.C. where 10-12 students live together, study at nearby universities, and complete an internship. As Dr. Carroll Yoder of our faculty has claimed, effective cross-culturalists for our purposes have three ingredients: 1) home stays, 2) a foreign language, and 3) a third world context. Most of the settings we choose put students in situations where the contrasts between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the powerless, are stark and unavoidable.

For many students the semester abroad is their single most powerful learning experience. The learning made possible when one is truly vulnerable in a foreign culture struggling with an unfamiliar language, when one is exposed to widely differing perspectives and world views, when one is then forced to examine one's own assumptions--this is truly liberal learning with potential to change lives in significant ways.

Robert Benne argues in his recent book *Quality with Soul*, in which he describes six colleges and universities that have remained strongly connected to their religious traditions, that to do so the university must be convinced that its Christian account told according to its own tradition addresses the central questions of life. And our friend Richard Hughes in his wonderful little book *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* suggests that teaching from a Christian perspective necessitates helping students ask ultimate questions. He poses such questions as: "How can I triumph over fate and death?" "Am I an acceptable human being?" "Is there any meaning in life, and if there is, what is it?"

There is little doubt that a semester spent with a faculty member in the Middle East will require students to confront these questions. And that the Christian account as shared through the perspective of an EMU faculty member will address these questions with an appeal to discerning the meaning of justice in that context. Thus, this cross-cultural curriculum creates what we know can provide powerful learning, that is, experiential learning combined with careful, guided reflection. Who am I? What is the meaning of life? What shall be the meaning of my life? These and similar questions are at the heart of the experience. When one spends a semester in the Middle East or in Central America, the justice theme in relation to these questions becomes a major part of daily conversations. The questions addressed are: How can justice be achieved in this situation and how shall I be a part of the solution? Students discover there are no easy answers to these questions. Yet struggle with them they must and will. There is no escape.

The justice theme, as I indicated earlier, can be found throughout EMU programs. Every day as I go down the steps to the family room in our home I come face to face with a quilted wall hanging on which the word “justice” stands out in the upper right hand corner. The word “justice” is there along with nine other words, such as agape, partnership, presence--concepts explored in our nursing curriculum as expressions of caring in the nurse-client relationship. Those concepts were built into the curriculum some 10-12 years ago when that department was my home at EMU. The module that develops these concepts suggests an atypical analysis of justice. For instance, Jesus’ story of paying the same wage for those who began work at the end of the day as those who started with the sunrise suggests that justice has less to do with our notion of fairness and more to do with caring for needs and expressing a generosity that is undeserved. The module takes students back to the Old Testament jubilee which calls for “upsetting the social order at regular intervals,” that is, returning land to the original owners, freeing slaves, and canceling debts. The jubilee model purports that justice is about redistributing resources that tend over time to become maldistributed. We do this because we are stewards of resources that belong not to us but to God, and because God in his generosity has freed us from our captivities and our response is to become more like God in expressing compassion toward others. All of this is applied to nursing and our call to serve the poor and go beyond bedside nursing to creating public health systems that truly serve the poor.

Not surprisingly, the catalog introduction to our business department expresses a vision for developing graduates who “work for fairness and justice.” Conversation with our theater faculty reveals their passion for using theater to examine issues of justice in our modern society. One of our newest majors is Justice, Peace and Conflict Studies. This interdisciplinary major provides a background in biblical studies, theology, history, and philosophy in order to explore conflict transformation and restorative justice concepts.

As I prepared for this panel, I once more read the chapter in Donald Kraybill’s book *The Upside-Down Kingdom* called “Free Slaves” in which he addresses the jubilee model. As I did so, I felt heavily the inadequacy of our attempts to teach justice for I realize how far we as an institution depart from this model. For what good is a curriculum directed

toward justice if our institutional structures do not model what we preach? Right now our institution is discussing whether the limited resources for next year's budget should be put into an across the board salary increase or used to maintain certain benefits. You and I both know that annual across the board increases lead to an ever widening gap between the highest and lowest salaries. Several of our dedicated faculty have graciously pointed this out. Isn't it just this that the jubilee was designed to correct—the tendency over time for resources to get maldistributed? Is this jubilee business relevant today—in the world you and I inhabit where higher salaries are necessary to attract faculty?

I am reminded again that teaching in a Christian context is a humbling profession. As we deliver not only facts but also call students to a particularity of values and behaviors, we are confronted with our own inability to measure up. We too become learners alongside our students. Together we remember the prophet Jeremiah (9:25), “This is what the Lord says, Let not the wise man gloat in his wisdom, or the mighty man in his might, or the rich man in his riches. Let them boast in this alone: that they truly know me and understand that I am the Lord who is just and righteous, whose love is unfailing, and that I delight in these things. I, the Lord, have spoken!”

Works Cited

- Benne, Robert. *Quality with Soul*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001.
- Hughes, Richard. *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001.
- Kraybill, Donald. "Free Slaves." *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978.