

# Rolheiser: Justice and charity – revisited

We're all familiar, I suspect, with the difference between justice and charity.

Charity is giving away some of your time, energy, resources, and person so as to help to others in need. And that's an admirable virtue, the sign of a good heart.

Justice, on the other hand, is less about directly giving something away than it is about looking to change the conditions and systems that put others in need.

No doubt, we're all familiar with the little parable used to illustrate this difference. In brief, it goes like this:

A town situated on the edge of a river finds itself confronted every day by a number of bodies floating downstream in the river. The townsfolk tend to the bodies, minister to those who are alive and respectfully bury the dead. They do this for years, with good hearts; but, through all those years, none of them ever journey up the river to look at why there are wounded and dead bodies floating in the river each day.

The townsfolk are good-hearted and charitable, but that in itself isn't changing the situation that's bringing them wounded and dead bodies daily.

As well, the charitable townsfolk aren't even remotely aware that their manner of life, seemingly completely unconnected to the wounded and dead bodies they're daily attending to, might in fact be contributing to the cause of those lost lives and dreams and that, good-hearted as they are, they may be complicit in something that's harming others, even while it's affording them the resources and wherewithal to be charitable.

The lesson here is not that we shouldn't be charitable and good-hearted.

One-to-one charity, as the parable of the Good Samaritan makes clear, is what's demanded of us, both as humans and as Christians. The lesson is that being good-hearted alone is not enough. It's a start, a good one, but more is asked of us.

I suspect most of us already know this, but perhaps we're less conscious of something less obvious, namely, that our very generosity itself might be contributing to a blindness that lets us support (and vote for) the exact

political, economic, and cultural systems which are to blame for the wounded and dead bodies we're attending to in our charity.

That our own good works of charity can help blind us to our complicity in injustice is something highlighted in a recent book by Anand Giridharada, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*.

In a rather unsettling assertion, Giridharada submits that **generosity can be, and often is, a substitute for and a means of avoiding the necessity of a more just and equitable system and fairer distribution of power.**

Charity, wonderful as it is, is not yet justice; a good heart, wonderful as it is, is not yet good policy that serves the less-privileged; and philanthropy, wonderful as it is, can have us confuse the charity we're doing with the justice that's asked of us. For this reason among others, Giridharada submits that public problems should not be privatized and relegated to the domain of private charity, as is now so often the case.

Christiana Zenner, reviewing his book in *America*, sums this up by saying: "Beware of the temptation to idealize a market or an individual who promises salvation without attending to the least among us and without addressing the conditions that facilitated the domination in the first place."

Then she adds: When we see the direct violation of another person, a direct injustice, we're taken aback, but the unfairness and the perpetrator are obvious. We see that something is wrong and we can see who is to blame.

But – and this is her real point – when we live with unjust systems that violate others we can be blind to our own complicity because we can feel good about ourselves because our charity is helping those who have been violated.

For example: Imagine I'm a good-hearted man who feels a genuine sympathy for the homeless in my city. As the Christmas season approaches I make a large donation of food and money to the local food bank. Further still, on Christmas day itself, before I sit down to eat my own Christmas dinner, I spend several hours helping serve a Christmas meal to the homeless.

My charity here is admirable, and I cannot help but feel good about what I just did. And what I did was a good thing!

But then, when I support a politician or a policy that privileges the rich and is unfair to the poor, I can more easily rationalize that I'm doing my just part and that I have a heart for the poor, even as my vote itself helps ensure that there will always be homeless people to feed on Christmas day.

Few virtues are as important as charity. It's the sign of a good heart. But the deserved good feeling we get when we give of ourselves in charity shouldn't be confused with the false feeling that we're really doing our part.