

Rhythms of Justice and Mercy

by Chris Schoon, director of Faith Formation Ministries

True confession: I lack rhythm. Somewhere between what my ears hear and how my hands clap, my feet tap, and the rest of my body moves, the beat gets distorted. It's like watching a video with delayed, out-of-sync audio. Nothing lines up the way it's supposed to.

But that doesn't mean I don't try. In fact, I love listening to music, singing along (admittedly, out of tune), and dancing around the house. I'll randomly tap out patterns on a table or my laptop when I'm thinking, and I occasionally pick up my son's guitar and attempt to strum a few disconnected chords. Simply put, I make a joyful noise. Though I am not a musician, music is still one of the ways that I engage with the world around me. I can even say that music *forms* me.

Perhaps the rhythm that I find most challenging and most important, however, is God's heartbeat for justice and mercy. It doesn't come naturally to me. God's love for people who have been marginalized, discarded, and taken advantage of reverberates throughout the Bible:

He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:18-19)

He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets prisoners free,
the Lord gives sight to the blind,
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,
the Lord loves the righteous. (Psalm 146:7-8)

“Does it make you a king
to have more and more cedar?
Did not your father have food and drink?
He did what was right and just,
so all went well with him.
He defended the cause of the poor and needy,
and so all went well.
Is that not what it means to know me?”
declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 22:15-16)

And there are more—many more—statements in Scripture that we could listen to, hearing in them God's heartbeat of justice and mercy guiding, confronting, comforting, and forming the people of God.

But I have to admit that despite being so clear, so consistent, and so strong, God's heartbeat gets distorted and out of sync as it works its way through my body, my calendar, my home, my bank accounts, my work, my relationships. And this is why I find that *practicing* justice and mercy is so central to my ongoing formation as a disciple, follower, and sibling of Jesus. Justice and mercy are the tangible expressions of loving our neighbors as God has loved us. They are the ways that we live like Jesus here and now, affirming the goodness of God's breath and image in others and anticipating the overflowing shalom of God's coming kingdom.

From where I sit, I see at least four formative aspects of justice and mercy practices.

Imitating God's character

The first and most consistent cadence of discipleship surfaces in Jesus' invitation: "Come, follow me." We are formed into God's character as we imitate Jesus. Historically the church has called this practice *mimesis*, which means "imitation." Justice and mercy practices usher us into the patterns of loving others that Jesus Christ declared were central to his mission (Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 4:14-21). These practices serve as tools through which we learn to imitate Jesus so that his image is formed in us (Galatians 4:19), thereby cultivating God's character in us.

Being attentive to the image of God in others and in us

Justice and mercy practices also train us to recognize the image of God in others. Matthew 25's record of the sheep and goats parable teaches us that what we do to the people we ignore (or to the people we consider to be the least valuable and important), we do to Jesus. This justice and mercy passage is about our shared participation in God's image. One could even say that justice and mercy practices are important both because other people have been created in God's image and because we embody God's image as we put justice and mercy into practice.

Growing in our capacity and practice of loving our neighbor

As we practice justice and mercy, we become immersed in working out what it means to love particular neighbors in their particular circumstances, and we become more aware of the systemic challenges and barriers that often contribute to injustice. In this way, practicing justice and mercy tangibly teaches us what it looks like to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:28-34). As the apostle John emphasizes, this formative work in loving our neighbors is essential in understanding and living out what it means to love and know God (1 John 4:7-12).

Participating in the shalom (abundant life) of God's coming kingdom

Finally, through justice and mercy practices, the Spirit forms us to more fully and more faithfully participate in the life of God's coming kingdom. As prophets (Isaiah 65:17-25) and the book of Revelation (Revelation 21:22-22:5) point to, this "beautiful community" is marked by the end of violence and the flourishing of all people. Justice and mercy practices make us apprentices for living here and now as citizens of the new heaven and new earth.

Invitation

For me, and I imagine for many others, learning to imitate the rhythm of God's heartbeat takes repeated intentional practice. I find that I need to frequently listen to the echoes of these rhythms in Scripture's record. I need to watch and learn from others who have been tapping out and playing the rhythms of God's justice and mercy much longer than I have and more naturally than I do. I also find that I need to do more than listen; I need to actually put justice and mercy into practice (James 1:22).

As you consider how you can learn and practice the rhythms of God's justice and mercy, you are invited to check out the Faith Practices Project's justice and mercy resources. These resources are designed to help you imagine different, practical ways of imitating and keeping the rhythm of God's heartbeat. As you experiment with these practices, we'd love to learn alongside you. Share your practices with #CRCFaithPractices and tag us on Twitter (@crc_ffm), Facebook (@faithformationCRC), and Instagram (@crcfaithformation).