

Delivered by faculty member Mr. Jacques Joseph at the Loyola Academic Convocation, February 12, 2009.

When Mr. Lyness asked me if I would be willing to address the school and discuss the meaning of being committed to doing justice, two concerns rushed down my spine. My first concern was my ability, or lack thereof, to actually speak English. My second concern was my expertise and experience on the subject. Am I committed to doing justice? Can I describe myself as a man for others? Am I doing my best effort to raise awareness about social injustice? I am here in front of you, humbled by the task of assessing my own commitment to justice and sharing the results with you.

The Grad-at-Grad states that a student committed to doing justice is starting to gather knowledge and experience about social issues so he or she can become a man or woman for others. I did not have the opportunity to benefit from Jesuit education. In fact, I used to despise anything Jesuit because Jean-de-Brebeuf High School was our archrival in basketball. Teachers did not speak about social issues unless it was part of their curriculum. Fate decided to compensate my lack of knowledge for social justice with years and years of experience.

Throughout my life, I have been targeted by many facets of hate and injustice. I have been targeted for the color of my skin and my cultural heritage. I have been called many names because of my complexion. My peers used to fear me because I was one of the 5 dark skinned students in my school. They would call us gang members or voodoo masters. I was targeted out of fear.

I have been invited to more sports try outs than any human being should be allowed to. The opposite sex would ask me on dates out of pure curiosity. My music teacher could not believe that I was a musician, citing that beatboxing is not music. My summers in Brooklyn were spent being chased by my own African American brothers, because Haitians were being accused of spreading AIDS in America. I was targeted out of ignorance.

Although those fateful experiences shaped me into the man I am today, I must ask myself if they made me into a man for others. I must answer that it was only a building block towards being committed to doing justice. I was merely a victim of injustice, but I was not doing anything about it. Being committed to doing justice implies that you must act on injustice. I was not committed to doing justice, because I was only painfully aware of social issues surrounding my being. I had a very selfish view on the social issues around me. I was waiting for justice, but I was not committed to bring it yet. I was not a man for others, but a man for myself.

The school fortunately offers you so many tools to open your eyes towards injustice that there is no need to wait for being a victim. From the classroom to the Camden trip, you can become more open to broader issues of social justice. Those opportunities will not only help you be more open to growth, but it will help you eliminate fear, selfishness and ignorance from your soul.

I decided to become more vocal on issues affecting myself and my community. I finally stepped out of my selfishness and started to denounce issues of injustice affecting not only myself, but also my community. I was fiercely denouncing issues of racism at school and in my neighborhood. I was loudly declaring to the world that I was black and proud and here to stay. I was imposing my difference upon my peers and I was forcing them to deal with it accordingly. I was seeing injustice everywhere. I was even looking for racism and bigotry where there was none. I was acting out of hate and anger. I was aggressively imposing my own justice, but I was not ready to do justice just yet.

The many opportunities for service provided by the school will raise and broaden your awareness about social injustice. When you decide to take action, it cannot be done out of hate and anger. Action against injustice has to be taken out of love and compassion. You cannot look for injustice in every situation. You cannot denounce your classmates as careless and bigots if they raise a subject that implies racial issues. You have the responsibility to share the gifts from your culture to your friends, but you have no right to impose it on them. The great Malcolm X started to denounce injustice with anger and hate. He then realized that it was not the way.

After overcoming hate with compassion, I was finally recognized as a known and respected member of my school community. I was participating in many drives for third world countries. I was also a member of Amnesty International. I did my best to promote Haitian culture to the school and raise awareness about Haiti's poor situation. I was also the president of the school's diversity club and was often called as a neutral agent of peace when two cultural factions were at odds. This newfound respect and appreciation from my peers made me realize at the time that there were many ways to be popular in school. My peers were very fond of me and I was making my action as public as possible, so I could keep that popularity. I was actually missing the point and the purpose of my actions. One day I looked at my WWJD bracelet and realized that Jesus never acted to gain popularity. I was not following Jesus' humble path. I had forgotten the religious purpose of service. I had let anger go, but I had let vanity replace it.

Vanity also led me to think that I was actually better than my peers. I would even make jokes about my classmates and schoolmates. I was known to be the best resource if you needed a joke against another student. One day, I went too far and made a joke that left one my basketball teammates in tears. My teammate was gay and he felt uncomfortable around me from that day. He was a good friend of mine and from then, he thought I despised homosexuals. I did not know he was gay. I had never said anything bad about the gay community and I was proud of that. Then again, I had never said anything good about it neither. I thought it was just a joke. Once again, I was missing the point of the religious purpose of doing justice. Jesus did not save the adulterous woman to make fun of her right after. He did not go to dinner with the "social outcasts" so he could despicably talk about them to his apostles. I was taking advantage of social issues to improve my own social status. I was not serving justice, but justice was serving me.

It is very important for you to understand the true meaning of service. Christian faith, or any religion for that matter, implies a commitment to a just society. Helping the unfortunates should

not be a springboard to achieve a certain social status. Christian Service should not be a tool to improve your own future, but a tool to improve the future of those you help. Loyola school demands that you invest time in Christian service so you can become a man and woman for others. The day that you will stop seeing service as a requirement and actually begin to see service as a duty will be the day you will become a man or woman for others. Loyola School hopes that you will eventually recognize injustice and act about it without our help or intervention. You will then actually serve justice instead of justice serving your own personal goals.

Committed to doing justice implies a lot more than going out of your comfort zone and help people in need. It implies more than writing letters and advocating many causes on the school newspaper or bulletin board. It implies being more aware of selfish attitudes and tendencies that lead one to treat others unjustly. Before you go out and fight injustice in the outside world, you must be aware of injustice right around you. How can you participate in Brownbaggers if you make fun of homeless people in Chemistry class? How can you participate on Camden and negatively comment on scholarship students at school? How can you be a member of Amnesty International or CREED if you are constantly commenting on your peers with different backgrounds? Jesus said that you must remove the beam from your eye before you look at the straw in the eyes of your neighbour. Look at your own beams before you look at the straws that reside in society's eye.

I am now older and wiser... or so I think. I have learned from my past mistakes and I am better for it. I try as much as possible to help for the sake of helping. I realized that being a teacher is a great vehicle for my quest to become committed to justice. I can now share my past mistakes with you so you can avoid them in the future. I can do my best to raise your awareness on many social issues. It would have not been possible if I was still working in a lab for Pfizer. I am currently getting a masters degree in education so I can serve the Loyola community even better. It is important for me because I truly believe that teachers are here to help you help others.

Today, we are honoring students who achieved success in academics for the first semester. I am sure you must be asking yourself: what does academic excellence have to do with justice? Academic excellence is probably the most important part of the grad-at-grad that will help you become a man or woman for others. Remember that you are the leaders of tomorrow. Our role as teachers is not only to teach the curriculum, but also to influence you to influence others. For you to become a legitimate leader that will reach an influential position to serve justice, you need to be academically excellent.

You have the opportunity to be in a school that can help you attend great colleges. Those great colleges will help you obtain influential and powerful positions. With those positions, you will not only have the necessary power, but also the crucial influence to raise awareness about social issues. Never forget that education is the best tool to fight injustice. Martin Luther King was right when he said that education is the road to equality. Academic excellence is the vehicle you must use if you want to devote your life to serving justice.

Now that I have shared my analysis with you, I ponder the same questions. Am I committed to doing justice? Can I describe myself as a man for others? Am I doing my best effort to raise awareness about social injustice? After this address, I am certain of two things: First, Mr. Lyness will probably never ask me to address the school ever again. Second, assessing yourself as a man or woman for others is almost impossible to do, so I will let you be the judge of that. In reality, we can only assess our efforts to be committed to do justice, but we never really know if we actually achieve the status. We can only ask you to try as hard as you can to achieve that particular status. At the end of day, you will never know if you have become a person committed to doing justice. Who will answer those questions, then? Society, and maybe history, will answer those questions for you.