Opinion

Guest Voices



The Kentucky State Capitol building in Frankfurt, Kentucky (Wikimedia Commons/Mobilus In Mobili)



by John Stowe

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Editor's note: *This text was presented by Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, on Oct. 19 as the keynote of the annual assembly of the Kentucky Council of Churches. It is reprinted here with Stowe's permission.*

> Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs" [Luke 12:1-3].

There is a certain pharisaical yeast of which Kentuckians should be very aware! If I were a member of the majority party of the Kentucky legislature, I would be more than a bit concerned about secrets being disclosed, backroom deals coming to light and legislative texts that are magically altered between the time they are presented to the public and when they are voted on to become law.

Now, in my position as a religious leader, as a Catholic bishop, I certainly cannot tell people how to vote and I cannot promote a partisan agenda for political purposes. But I am also committed to telling the truth and sometimes we have to call them as we see them.

If a different party had a supermajority in both houses of the legislature, I would likely be calling them out on something. But with our eyes and ears open — critical eyes and discerning ears — I think it is incumbent upon people of faith to denounce what goes on in the commonwealth that is not in promotion of the common good.

When various national publications rank the commonwealth of Kentucky 45th among the states when it comes to our health and 39th in the country overall, when various polls rank Kentucky as high as fifth in the nation for poverty, wouldn't you think that lawmakers would be concerned with something more beneficial than banning books, or creating more secrecy about the funding of public agencies?



Chaunda Lee, a single mother of eight who has five children living with her, reads mail she received regarding her food stamp aid, in Louisville, Kentucky, Aug. 19, 2021. (OSV News/Reuters/Amira Karaoud)

Do you think that the pronouns a student chooses for themselves is the priority to get under control or that placing limits on the union dues collected is the best way to improve the quality of life for workers?

As we witness the ongoing destruction of the natural beauty that everyone would agree is especially abundant in Kentucky, is it really in the best interest of Kentuckians to add more bureaucracy to the process of retiring coal-fired electric generators? Or leaving federal money for green energy conversion on the table?

Some of the legislation passed in this last legislative session would be bad enough if Kentucky ranked highest in quality of life and well-being of the population. If our schools were world-class throughout the commonwealth and if everyone had access to quality affordable health care. But that is not the Kentucky in which we live and work, as much as we would like it to be.

We come from a variety of faith traditions, all of which celebrate creation as a manifestation of God's magnificence and God's goodness, God's artistry and God's care for all of creation. My own Franciscan tradition believes that creation is the overabundance of the love of the Holy Trinity, spilling out from that loving relationship and giving life to the world.

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We come from various churches that read the Gospels as an affirmation of human dignity and understand the story of Jesus as the Son of God who entered into human history with all of its joys and sorrows, pains and pleasures. We believe in a God of life who placed humanity in a garden to be cultivated and even when we caused ourselves to be expelled from that garden because of disobedience, willingly offered his life to bring us back and burst forth from a garden tomb risen from the dead!

We believe that as those given dominion over creation, we have the responsibility to preserve it and use it in ways that will not destroy its bounty for future generations. And we believe that as the crown of creation, human beings have unlimited dignity because we are made in the image and likeness of God and have been loved into being.

Those values and principles cannot be for Sundays only or for inside the church house alone. As Christians, we must hold and live those values always and everywhere, 24/7. So, we should not accept accelerated destruction of the environment nor indifference toward those that are losing their homes and livelihoods here or afar because of climate change and the ever-more-frequent natural disasters that accompany it.



Margaret Myu Mang, a Myanmar Catholic, holds her child, Nicholas, 1, near their damaged home Bowling Green, Kentucky, March 3, 2022, weeks after a tornado ripped through the town. (CNS/Bob Roller)

We cannot accept that the Second Amendment is treated as though it were inscribed on Moses' tablets of the law instead of in a time and place before automatic weapons even existed and when militias were necessary protection for the common good.

We cannot accept the presence of multigenerational poverty and all that results from such misery because of the lack of opportunity in peoples' hometowns or counties.

We cannot accept the continuation of white supremacy (the white way is the right way, or the only way) or the oxymoron of Christian nationalism.

In many of our churches this coming Sunday, we will hear a classic Gospel text used in the debates about the church and politics. The passage from the Gospel of Matthew describes a scene in which the Pharisees, who advocated for a biblical

theocracy based on Israel's autonomy and who sought to vigorously enforce Mosaic Law, join forces with the Herodians, supporters of the puppet king that the Roman Empire imposed upon the Jewish people — whose values were opposite that of the Pharisees. Politics, as they say, makes strange bedfellows — even outside of Kentucky!



Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, prays over members of Pax Christi USA Aug. 7, 2022, at the Pentagon in Virginia. (CNS/Dennis Sadowski)

When they joined forces in an attempt to discredit Jesus, the nonviolent and humble carpenter's son from Nazareth, he must have really been seen as a threat to them. They posed a question on a theme that will inevitably create controversy and division in any time and place: taxes.

The question seems simple enough at face value, "is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But it is designed to be a trap no matter how it is answered.

For Jesus to say yes to the legality of Rome's taxes would be to legitimate the empire's occupation of the Jewish nation and would infuriate the Pharisees who could only denounce him as not being truly of God. If, because of his heritage and faith, he would declare the Roman tax to be illegal, he would set himself against the Roman emperor and could easily be accused of being a revolutionary.

But instead, Jesus calmly turns the tables on them, by asking them to take a coin out of their pockets. By the fact that they had such a coin, with the forbidden graven image of the face of Caesar on it, that is the Caesar considered a god by Rome, they demonstrate their hypocrisy as well as their participation in the Roman economic system.

Because they are engaged in Roman economics, it is legitimate to pay taxes to the one whose face is on the coin. "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's." This well-known saying of Jesus has often been inappropriately used to claim that the church should not be engaged in politics. Caesar's things to Caesar and God's to God.

But what if we asked the question, "Where is God's face and inscription to be found?"

We would have to answer that it is found on you and I, made in God's image and likeness with God's own law implanted in our hearts. And, so, whatever is human belongs to God, and all that promotes or denigrates human flourishing becomes a theological issue, that is, appropriate for the churches.



The choir leads the music during Mass at Rosary Chapel in Paducah, Kentucky, Oct. 16, 2022. (OSV News/The Western Kentucky Catholic/Elizabeth Wong Barnstead)

Hence the great document *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council, which treats the issue of the church's relationship with the world, begins by saying, "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

And as followers of Christ, the church can ask, "What does the Lord require?"

The short answer is found in Micah 6:8, the inspiration for this assembly, "To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

We, as a Council of Churches, have from the beginning been committed to fulfilling that requirement and have been consistently asking ourselves what it means and how are we to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God in our day and age and present circumstances.

Perhaps it is easier to begin with what it doesn't mean. To act justly cannot possibly mean to cause young people who are already suffering from gender dysphoria and the accompanying higher rates of suicidal ideation and mental illness to be further alienated by denying their experience and any references in literature or otherwise to people with similar experiences of life, and forcing them to use restrooms and changing rooms that make them uncomfortable, or denying their ability to consult a counselor in confidence.



Transgender rights advocates gather near the Kentucky House chamber March 2 in Frankfort, Kentucky. On March 24, Gov. Andy Beshear vetoed a sweeping Republican measure aimed at regulating the lives of transgender youths. (AP/Bruce Schreiner, File)

To act justly cannot mean to allow offended parents to remove from libraries and schools whatever it is that offends their sensibilities, even if those very books and materials are life-giving for others. To act justly cannot mean reading history only from the perspective of the dominant race and culture, or to minimize our own

historical participation in slavery and genocide to protect the feelings of white children.

To act justly cannot mean to deny the poor access to adequate health care, meaningful work, or to allow polluters and those who have abused the Earth to get away with a fine so small as to be easily placed on the ledger as the cost of doing business.

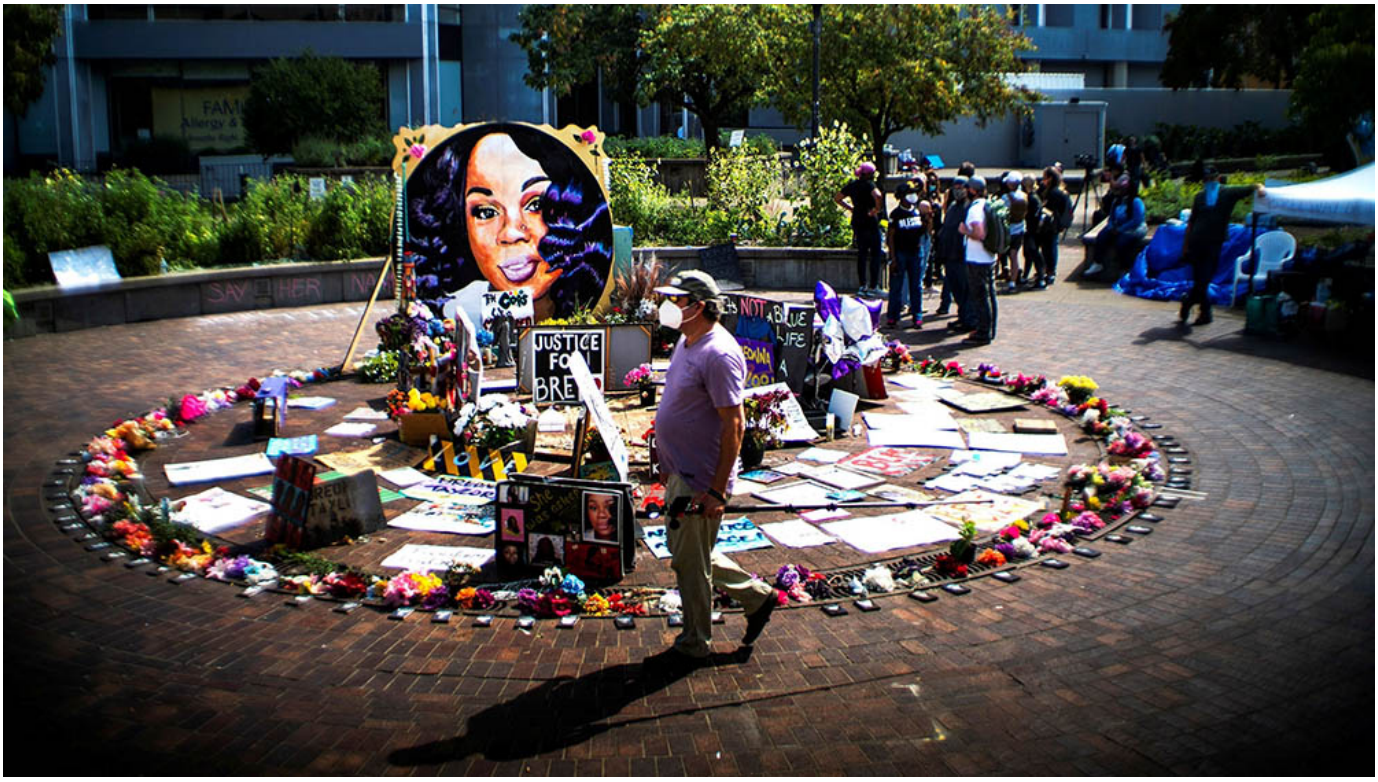
To act justly cannot mean to underfund schools in poor districts while schools in wealthier districts can have the best of everything. To act justly cannot mean to keep certain people out of certain neighborhoods or buildings because of their race or economic status.

The list, of course, is much longer.

To love mercy cannot mean that we seek the death penalty for people who were minors when they committed a crime, or were mentally ill or disabled ... or that we seek the death penalty at all. To love mercy cannot mean that we want teachers armed in their classrooms so as to stop potential shooters.

To love mercy cannot mean that people who have done their time and paid their fines are still denied the right to vote, still unable to find work to make a decent living, and face so many obstacles to rebuilding their lives. To love mercy is not to lock up juveniles in facilities where they cannot be protected and become even more cynical about their place in life.

To love mercy cannot be allowing no-knock warrants in the middle of the night or having different standards of application of the law and justice depending on one's race.



People in Louisville, Kentucky, gather near a memorial for Breonna Taylor Sept. 25, 2020. In March of that year, white police officers shot and killed Taylor, a 26-year-old Black emergency medical technician, during a raid on her home.
(CNS/Reuters/Eduardo Munoz)

And to walk humbly with God cannot mean that we discriminate against those who do not share our beliefs. To walk humbly with God cannot mean that Muslims are to be treated with disrespect or kept out of the nation altogether. To walk humbly with God cannot mean that we quietly accept rising incidents of antisemitism.

To walk humbly with God cannot mean that we leave the LGBTQ population without basic rights of equal protection under the law and permit discrimination on the basis of gender. To walk humbly with God cannot mean that we leave the traveler beaten up in the road without help because they are undocumented, the wrong color, or of ambiguous gender.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we are mere weeks from a statewide election. We must think seriously and discuss in our time together and in our own congregations whether or not we believe that participatory democracy is the best system under which we can act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

Because the darkness under which laws are made, the lack of unbiased and fact-based news and information, the refusal to accept the results of fair elections, the unchallenged lies and smears offered by politicians who would distort the truth for their own gain, and the lack of access to the right to vote for too many of our citizens are all diminishing and risk destroying our democratic system.

We are here as survivors of a global pandemic that some in our midst still deny even happened. We are survivors of a global pandemic even though some of our population refused to sacrifice their personal convenience for the common good. We are still here because of leadership in the commonwealth that urged us to remember that we were all in the same circumstances and needed to care for and watch out for each other.



Students in Louisville, Kentucky, practice social distancing on the first day back to school March 17, 2021, after COVID-19 restrictions were adjusted. (CNS/Reuters/Amira Karaoud)

None of us wants to return to lighting green lights because of deaths from a virus again. But let's not confuse our inconveniences and sacrifices as an attack on our rights. There are too many real rights under attack in our land to be distracted by this.

Pope Francis lamented that the fearful experience of the COVID pandemic did not unite the human family to protect the vulnerable, find a cure and restore the world to normalcy. Even though the virus did not respect borders or boundaries and attacked across races and economic status, we did not overcome those differences in order to find healing together.

He fears a climate catastrophe even worse than the pandemic that if we cannot face together will destroy us. On Oct. 4, he issued a companion document to his 2015 encyclical on the environment, lamenting that we have not done enough in these last eight years to slow the destruction of the planet, much less to reverse its course.

Acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God must entail working for clean energy, sustainable development, and lessening the burdens of climate change that weigh most heavily on the poor.

Related: Pope Francis takes on climate deniers, 'irresponsible' Americans in new climate letter

Another related consequence of the pandemic has been the increase of isolation, mental illness and suicidal tendencies, especially among the young. While few among us are full-fledged mental health professionals, those who are such professionals tell us that just the expression of concern or letting someone know that they matter or that they are loved can reduce the likelihood of suicide. And we can all do that, even many times a day.

Since we don't know the burdens another carries, we should be much more generous with mercy and kindness instead of participating in the incivility that has become so common; even our bumper stickers are more rude, vulgar and violent these days.

Acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God definitely means recognizing and affirming the dignity and worth of each human person.

Fr. Greg Boyle, the Jesuit pastor of Dolores Mission, the poorest parish in Los Angeles, located at ground zero of the gang warfare in that city, uses a provocative line from a well-known Christmas carol to describe his work and what he believes is the mission of all Christians: "Long lay the world in sin and error pining, 'til he appeared and the soul felt its worth."

Helping souls feel their worth: gangbanger souls, poor souls, black souls and white souls, undocumented souls, Muslim souls, Jewish souls, atheist souls, LGBTQ souls, racist souls and all kinds of souls all have inestimable value.

Can we commit ourselves, as we work for a more just and equitable commonwealth, to help the souls we encounter, to feel their worth ... their worth in Christ Jesus who laid down his life for them and for us? Maybe, above all, that's what the Lord requires.