We're all familiar, I suspect, with the difference between justice and charity. Charity is giving away some of your time, some of your resources, for the benefit of others. One form of charity is to give away money. But we should also remember 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 man has a pile of money. He decides to give away some of his money to help others. While he's doing this, he's also able to help himself. He's able to live more comfortably and secure his future. In the end, he's made himself better off.

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 suggests, is a part of the justice system. But it's also about looking to change the conditions and systems that put others in need. When we give away money, we're not necessarily changing the systems and conditions that put others in need. We're just giving away money. And we're not necessarily providing the resources and wherewithal to be charitable.

That our own good works of charity can help blind us to our complicity in injustice is something highlighted in a recent article in The New York Times. The author, Ron Rolheiser, OMI, writes: “Beware of the temptation to idealize a market that professes to be about the common good. We tend to think that if we’re good and charitable, we’re doing our part... We tend to think that if we’re good and charitable, we’re doing our part. But we’re not. We’re just doing what we can to mitigate the effects of the systems and conditions that put others in need.”

Ron Rolheiser, OMI