

LIVING WITH JUSTICE & COMPASSION 2015!

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our
congregations;
A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our
congregations and in society at large;
The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Our Unitarian Universalist Principles are really all about Justice and Compassion. They include respect and acceptance for the individual and for the individual's beliefs, as well as for the connections between all things, emphasizing peace, liberty and the freedom to search for truth and meaning. The Principles will someday be replaced by a statement better fitted to its future time, but for now the UU Principles state pretty well what we Unitarian Universalists strive to do and be.

When I studied with Matthew Fox at the Institute for Culture and Creation Spirituality, we talked frequently about how Justice and Compassion were at the core of that community as well as coming from each of the major living world religions. Justice and Compassion are core beliefs for human beings, even if the first evidence of human murder has recently moved back to some 430,000 years ago. When Justice and Compassion are not practiced well enough, violence too often has arisen in human communities. The recent spate of violence in our own community attributed to gangs can also surely be correlated with injustice and a shortage of compassion.

Our society has the highest incarceration rate for the first world, disproportionately involving black men. We also have the greatest disparity between rich and poor, and the least effective social safety net. For those with wealth it is the best of times, for those without, these times are terrible.

Recent efforts to dismantle the affordable care act, social security, welfare, and other safety net programs continue to exacerbate the disparity between the haves and the have-nots, and that is just within these United States. Corporate persons continue to exert their power over elections, governments, and individuals. Not that greed and disparities of wealth and power are new, but the chasm continues to grow wider faster between the wealth and power of workers and that of owners and bosses.

Several centuries before the time of Jesus, the prophet to Israel, Micah, summed up the expectations of religion in a famous passage 6:8:

He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

The gospel of Matthew remembers Jesus as answering the question of the greatest commandment in 22:37-40:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

Our Judeo-Christian roots are all about justice and compassion. The Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12 also balance love and justice as taught by Jesus:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

*Blessed are those hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they shall be satisfied.*

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.*

Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

In some Eastern religions, Karma accrues to balance the scales when compassion and justice are or are not practiced. Some teachers might talk about civic duty or responsibility, morals or ethics to encourage the practice of compassion and justice. Compassion and Justice are old concepts in human community, for anywhere even a few human families shared space there must have quickly developed a code of expectations for treating others. The sins of individuals and groups are essentially the absence of or failures in compassion and justice. It is compassion and justice that must at root be the norm for any collaboration of humans.

So then the question for today is why expectations of compassion and justice within our own society and around the world are not being met? What is it about our time that has allowed so much injustice and so many failures of love to infect our world?

Obviously corporations are benefiting in disputes that result in war. The military-industrial complex continues to reap windfall profits from wars and rumors of war and preparations for war, but so do foodservice companies, oil companies, mining companies, companies that fabricate steel, other metals, fiberglass and plastics, carmakers, transportation companies and various others. Though many economic models have promoted the beliefs that wars are good for the economy, recent studies have shown that peacetimes are actually better and more prosperous on many scales. Those who are richest just keep getting richer, in wartime as well as in peacetime. Peacetime likely brings more opportunities for those who are not already wealthy.

In wartime and in peacetime, injustices abound in our society. Trickle-down economics never spilled much beyond the top one percent, and current efforts to keep minimum wages from rising based on threats of job losses similarly benefit the top one percent. It is time for a broader base of employment either through private sector employment or the public sector. This is the way of justice and compassion, and will sooner fix the failing infrastructure of our nation than will the tax-cuts promoted by too many millionaires in Congress.

There was a time, in fact there have been many times when people in our nation joined together in common cause to make things better for everyone.

Today, the top one-percenters join in common cause to make themselves richer, while the other 99 percent too often seem satisfied to accept the status quo presented on cable TV with occasional stories in between the commercials and select corporate approved news. We may not quite live in a bubble of blissful ignorance, but we certainly are not being encouraged to take any action that would change the way things are in our country or the world. It takes an effort to make oneself really aware of the injustices in South Stockton, let alone the world.

Our religious forebears pushed against societal norms, struggling to support the rights and dignity of many of the oppressed in society. We occasionally can come together long enough to focus on one or two of the big issues, such as immigration and equal rights for LGBTQ persons, but such common efforts have become far too infrequent in recent years. Our Unitarian Universalist Principles still challenge us to work for justice with compassion, but it takes a lot of effort to get UUs organized to do anything! And of course, the injustices in society are complex and better hidden than the outright racism and sexism of previous eras.

The immigration battle is cast as if hordes of Mexicans were crossing the border without even trying to enter the US legally, while the reality is that the quotas of Mexicans and other central Americans are so small that millions of fieldwork jobs would go wanting every year if workers did not cross the border and the wealth disparity between the US and anywhere south of the Border remains immense. There are many possible solutions, but none of them seem to satisfy enough of the Tea Party and other Republicans to actually pass Congress.

Racism is less visible today than in the Jim Crow era, but often simmers just below the surface of modern life until it boils up as it has recently in Ferguson, Brooklyn, and Baltimore. Why in today's world are there not near equivalent numbers of persons of color to match the makeup of cities? Why are we not the color-blind rainbow society that befits our founding documents? With all the alleged genetic and intelligence differences long since debunked, what is left other than the racism maintained differences in opportunities and wealth?

We should see this time as a crossroads from whence we will go forward to build a society and world as inclusive as the hope within our Unitarian Universalist Principles. It seems more likely that anti-Asian and anti-Russian sentiments may come forward in response to a number of current events, but racism and anti-immigration sentiments have not yet been excised either.

So instead of seeking to work together with other nations and all peoples to solve problems of population, pollution, global climate change, and the particular problems caused by oil and other carbon based fuels, we continue to focus on the little threats to domestic tranquility even as we ignore the chronic disasters already unfolding in changing patterns of drought and flood. The racial and immigration battles distract us so easily from the bigger dangers that threaten all life on earth. We, of course, need to solve all these problems, but oh how easy it is to just tune it all out and ignore them.

We, the masses, remain tranquilized and distracted. Karl Marx is quoted calling religion the opiate of the masses, but I wonder whether Television has become an even more effective opium for the masses.

The full quote from Karl Marx (actually) translates as: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people". –Wikipedia

This is a strange time in which we live, an era complicated beyond any reason by complex sets of laws and regulations seemingly intended to protect individuals but often more effective in protecting corporations from any liability or responsibility for the negative consequences of any product or service. Justice is elusive when judges have no freedom to make the punishment fit the crime, and compassion is not allowed to interfere with the hard and fast rule of the law.

There are so many problems to deal with in society today, it is discouraging, disheartening, and easy to see why so many allow themselves to be distracted, or rather that so many of us so often allow ourselves to be distracted! I believe that most of us do our best to live by the Unitarian Universalist Principles, and that we do accomplish many good things. I also believe that we could find ways of better working together to make a difference.

I would love to see us pick out one issue to deal with and then really give it our combined effort for a year or even 2 or 3. Our energy given to address any problem would help and would give us a shared project, something that we might become known for doing. We could take our rainbow flag and sponsor a Pride Parade on the Miracle Mile. We could create an afterschool program for children with no place to go. We could build on our commitment to the Boggs Tract Garden. We could become the place to go for forums on Global Climate Change, or Immigration, or so many other things. The opportunities are almost endless. The thing we need to do is choose a project and move forward.

Our UU Principles call us to live and work for Justice and Compassion. I challenge us to do more to make Justice and Compassion real in our congregation and community!

So May it Be! Shalom, Salaam, Namaste, Blessed Be, and Amen!