

JUSTICE: HUNGER, POVERTY, AND VIOLENCE:
WHO'S RESPONSIBLE?

Justice work is important to most Unitarian Universalists, but deciding what work for justice a congregation might do together is much harder. There is so much to do and individual UUs tend to each have so many groups or projects that they favor, support, and with which they have already engaged. Sometimes there have been ministers or leaders in congregations who were very actively involved in one or many works for justice so that the congregation could just follow along, and sometimes perhaps just cheer on the efforts of such leaders. Many UU congregations have become involved in the Standing on the Side of Love efforts, others with Black Lives Matter, and a number with PICO community organizing efforts. This morning I want to look briefly at some of the issues and then challenge us to do more to address one or two of them as a congregation. I hope that this sermon, the UU Justice Ministries of CA workshop this coming Saturday and the conversations described by Tom Amato that will happen on the 17th will all help to move us forward toward some kind of shared action.

Hunger, poverty, and violence are symptomatic of a larger cluster of societal problems which are neither new nor easily solvable. At one point Jesus is reputed to have said something like, "the poor will always be with you." Ever since societies started to develop there were differences in wealth and power that tended to stratify each society. Some of the differences in power were based on democratic processes such as elections, but more often differences were based on size, force, success in battles, and the desire of some to have power over others. Today class, race, and gender differences have influenced access to education, opportunities for work, areas where people may live, and all measures of success that might be applied. Add to those broad categories of difference, mental health issues and you have a hint how we got here.

Now there are also issues of physical and mental health due to disease, genetics and birth defects, injuries to body, mind, and spirit, addictions, and a number of other factors that may limit an individual's ability to work or succeed in modern society. The pattern in recent years is for certain politicians to blame anyone not succeeding for being lazy while allowing corporations to pay workers less than a living wage. In our "pull yourself up by your boot straps" society, it is easy to ignore the ways that corporations have avoided any responsibility for the lives or health of their workers while demanding ever increasing productivity in even part-time work. Military veterans, often returning home with undiagnosed injuries or PTSD, end up homeless in overwhelming numbers. The poor, often Black or Latino, who never had an opportunity for quality education at any level tend to be caught up in patterns of poverty, joblessness, homelessness, hunger, and violence in disproportionately high numbers. These differences in class often by race tend to be perpetuated generation after generation because there are so few opportunities to change the story.

And of course, we all know the story. Many of us are bleeding heart liberals, but even with the best intentions we are able to accomplish so little to facilitate real change. Sometimes it is all we can do to talk about the problems, publicize the problems, and perhaps gather to demonstrate for change. It isn't enough but it is something. Because of the numbers of times UUs have showed up for demonstrations with those yellow Standing on the Side of Love shirts, we have become known as the Love people and the yellow shirt people. As with every measure of UUs in modern times, there aren't enough of us, but a disproportionately high number of us tend to engage in demonstrations and work for social justice. And we have a long history of engagement, from early work by Universalists and Unitarians to abolish slavery back in the 1700s and early 1800s through engagement in all kinds of social problems.

The question for today is: how will we use our energy, effort, education, social standing and superior intellect to actually make a difference? When people like us, educated progressive middle class mostly white folks stand up, people do listen. With as many people as are listening to a certain loud-mouthed individual and Evangelical Christians this year, it is high time that we get involved!

As has happened so often in partisan politics in recent decades, the poor, the uneducated, immigrants, and persons of color are being blamed for all the ills of society, with all the fixes surprisingly benefiting mostly the rich. Interesting that there is such outrage among some over raising the minimum wage while the inflated salaries and benefits of corporate executives and the outrageous profits of drug companies and oil companies and the subsidies they enjoy are ignored. And evangelicals want this called a Christian nation? How are such disparities of wealth and so many gaps in the social safety net Christian? Those values aren't in the Bible and they certainly aren't in Jesus' teachings!

Justice has never been easy to achieve or maintain, but our society has moved far from the ideals of the founders and further still from the kind of equality and justice with compassion that most typified Jesus' teachings. Every religion has at its core the ideals of equality, peace, justice and compassion. These are lessons from all our Living Traditions and the values behind our UU Principles. Even if we do nothing to further these values, we say we support them every time we read our Principles and the statement of our Living Tradition. Most of us do work to bring a world of peace, justice, equity, and compassion, but there is more that we can do together!

It is hard work to choose one project or area of need to address. There are always concerns about setting aside and neglecting other important projects, even if we decide to focus on one area only for a year or two. Most people do recognize that we can accomplish more together, that we might actually see progress in some social justice work within one or two years. It can also be a wonderful thing to become known as the church working to accomplish something for justice. Even to be known as the church with the rainbow flag is nice, but there is more we could do! There is certainly more that we stand for!

So what are the justice areas that we can agree to work on together? There are certainly enough of them in Stockton, the Delta and in the Central Valley! Between the UUJM Training, the PACT conversations, and hopefully our conversation in a few minutes, perhaps we can narrow down the possibilities and move toward choosing a project to really put our effort into.

These are particularly challenging times as we prepare to elect a President and representatives at all levels of government. For some, everything is wonderful and profits have never been better, while for others stagnant wages have meant it is harder each year to just get by. Increasing minimum wages will help, but it will be years before they are fully implemented. And now, it appears that global climate change and polar warming will raise water levels more and sooner than earlier predictions forecast. The world itself, water, land and air is at risk, and we have done too little too late to stop the worst effects of climate change. Now we will have to adapt to a different world itself since we didn't stop the overuse of fossil fuels, the over increase of population, and the pollution of soil, air, and water. Ecological concerns involve patterns that are hard to change, but will continue to impact all the living beings of earth for centuries to come. And by the way, the biggest impacts of pollution are often felt in immigrant and impoverished areas.

Homelessness, unemployment and underemployment, wage inequality, racism, sexism, heterosexism and homophobia, injustices in the access to quality education, health care and insurance, limited transportation choices, concerns about safe housing and neighborhoods, alcohol and drug addiction, and even access to adequate food stores are issues regularly faced by people in our area. And of course there are an endless string of individual issues faced by people in Stockton and San Joaquin County. These issues I have listed are just a few of the most obvious. If I were a Christian, I could see why dreams of heaven and an escape from the problems of this world would be so popular. But we are Unitarian Universalists and we have a long history of looking into the most difficult and challenging problems with hope and courage.

And so, I put the question to you now: Where do you think we can most effectively make a difference in this community, city or county as a congregation?

I will bring around the mic so you may share your responses!

Thank You for sharing your responses! I encourage you to think about the responses shared, the skills you can bring, and the possibilities for making a difference as we continue to think together about this over the next few weeks!