

COMPASSION & JUSTICE IN OUR PRINCIPLES & LIVING TRADITION
UU Spirituality III

This is the third and final sermon in my UU Spirituality series for this summer. I have talked about the importance of Justice and Compassion separately and now I want to talk about how important it is to see them as working together and to discuss how they provide a foundation for our UU Principles & Sources of our Living Tradition. Our 2nd Principle calls us to promote *justice, equity and compassion in human relations*.

In the Hebrew Testament, there is a concept of *Mishpat and Sedaqah* which can be translated as Justice and Righteousness with the connotation that justice can only be fulfilled in situations of right relationships between people and God. Justice and right relations are seen as inseparable, so that there is no justice outside of relationships. We likely get our modern sense of Justice as an ideal from Greek thought, but I think that the Hebrew sense of justice in right relationship is probably better because it gives a context to justice that just makes more sense. An idealized justice can hardly explain the reason for the great disparities in sentencing between whites and blacks though it is somehow used to justify and rationalize such differences. It is only in the relationships, broken though they may often be, that we can understand and work to repair such evil long perpetuated by our justice system.

Compassion is all about right relationships. It is what we feel and how we respond to other beings. It is compassion, empathy and sympathy for other beings that allow us to have relationships with others in the first place. If we do not feel a sense of compassion, empathy or sympathy for others when they are having difficult times, we are somehow lacking, in a sociopathic sense. What we are able to do about those feelings and what we choose to do may vary considerably depending on our abilities, gifts and resources, but to lack those feelings entirely is to lack a basic part of our humanity.

It is the interplay of our senses of compassion and justice that determines our responses to various people and situations in life. If we take the UU Principles seriously, we ought to affirm the worth and dignity of every person, promote and practice acceptance and encourage growth, promote a world with peace, liberty, and justice for all, and respect all existence. That is a pretty broad range of responsibilities. Our 2nd Source Statement for our Living Tradition cites *Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love.*

In both our Principles and Sources there is a mixture of things we are challenged to do internally such as using our consciences and searching for truth and meaning, and those external things which we are called to do to build a better world, especially practicing compassion and doing justice. This mixture of personal practices and outside actions is not unusual in both American and World religions, but it helps to remind us that a full commitment to our religious faith requires both a personal sense of meaning and an outward commitment to shaping a healthier world. Even those who practice their religion at home, reading the New York Times on Sundays can likely accomplish much of the internal part of developing ethical principles and morals, but the external part of our religion, the practice of justice and compassion is what really requires a shared effort. It is when we join together to take action for the common good that we are strongest as a community.

A spirituality of compassion and justice is an engaged spirituality, not a spirituality practiced alone at home, but a spirituality that involves a shared effort to build relationships, insure justice, and practice compassion. And while it may have a meditative component of preparation and completion, it is a more active spiritual practice. It may involve demonstrations to bring awareness, collective actions such as marches, or shared efforts such as in soup kitchens.

At times a spirituality of compassion and justice may also involve figuring out the best response to war, famine, drought and flood and other natural disasters. In the past year, it has become abundantly clear that racism is not only alive and well, but resurgent in our country. The incidence of black men being shot by white police officers with or without cause is totally unacceptable. And it is seriously out of proportion to the number of all shootings. The number of persons of color, especially blacks stopped and cited for minor violations is also out of proportion to the number of whites stopped for similar infractions. For decades we have been able to talk about progress at least against overt racism, but now it appears that overt racism is reappearing to join the more subtle forms of racism that have been practiced in recent years.

Quiet disengaged forms of spirituality are inadequate for our time and inadequate to express our religion as described through our UU Principles and the Sources of our Living Tradition. I do not advocate violence toward persons or institutions, but I challenge us to engage in a nonviolent campaign to bring our nation to justice and equality through the practice of compassion toward all persons.

As the wealthy in our country have gained increasing power over our government and a disproportionate control over what happens in banks, corporations, and markets, it is time for people of good will to say enough. It is time to call for elected officials who are responsible to the people and not corporations. It is time to call for an amendment to declare that corporations aren't persons and it is time for the wealthy to pay a fair share of taxes. Any spirituality or religion that does not address these matters is failing to address human needs in our own country, no matter what good it may be doing otherwise.

We have supported the rights of women and of GLBTQ persons and seen much progress, but now we must again take up the cause of Blacks, for racism against Blacks has again become a major societal problem. Even if I do not entirely agree with the tactics of the campaign, Black lives absolutely do matter and white folks and others need to say so!

As Unitarian Universalists, our spirituality cannot be divorced from Justice and Compassion, for they are at the core of our shared beliefs. We may not all respond with the same enthusiasm to the call to Justice with Compassion, but this is the area in which our varied beliefs all call for a response. It is out of the values behind the principles that our religion stands or falls, and our failure to act for justice with compassion would at the very least leave us open to that old charge that UUs can believe anything they want. We do have some important shared beliefs, and they are well expressed in the Principles and Sources.

These are difficult times in our nation and the world. Unemployment is down, foreclosures are down, salaries are up a little, and after years of upheaval it feels like things have settled down a bit in our country. Around the world, things are not so simple. The economic growth in China has slowed, Greece is still a problem for the European Union, and the worldwide recovery is not nearly as strong as the US recovery. Here we have gotten comfortable again, even with the stock markets' very recent volatility, we are still pretty comfortable. Why should we upset things? Why do we need to call the top 1% to account for their success? Don't they deserve all their profits? Why do we need to call the police to accountability for their shootings? They almost always claim justification. Why should we make ourselves uncomfortable for others who may or may not be guilty of something? Why risk our own status? Why risk our own freedom? Why stir things up?

All too soon, those in power may come for us. Our successes, our pensions, our bank accounts, our health and well-being are only secure if our nation remains strong, democratic, and free. Few of us have off-shore bank accounts or stockpiles of gold. If the markets crash or the banks fail, most of us may lose what we have. Our commitment to engage in insuring justice with compassion in our nation may be the only thing that really will help to insure the life style to which we have become accustomed!

As Unitarian Universalists, we tend to be among the most engaged and civically minded people around. We also tend to be the most cautious in following IRS rules to maintain our non-profit status by avoiding advocacy for any particular candidate for elected office. Sometimes UUs think that we need to avoid any political discussion, but it is only promoting particular candidates and parties that is against the rules. We can speak freely about issues, ballot initiatives, and government actions, and we can certainly challenge police policies and practices that are discriminatory or racist. We can also speak freely about the beliefs we have in common as expressed in our UU Principles.

To speak our truth, even to those in power, ought to be our highest most sacred spiritual practice. We have not come to this religion by chance. We have all chosen to be a part of this tradition that encourages us to discover our own beliefs and walk along the pathways of our own journeys. Many of us came to Unitarian Universalism from Christian religions, others as a product of our own search for truth, and some grew up in this tradition and have decided to remain. We each make our own choice when we declare ourselves to be Unitarian Universalist, and again each time when we take a stand based in our beliefs. Unitarian Universalism does not tell us what to believe or what to do, so it is always a choice that we make. Even on those matters expressed in the Principles on which we mostly share beliefs, it is our choice of how we act out those beliefs and how we prioritize those beliefs.

As I close these thoughts on Spirituality, Justice and Compassion, I challenge us each to seek what is good and right and true in both our beliefs and our practice. There are many challenges faced by people all around the globe, and our very planet and her other living beings also face significant challenges to their future. What we do in our lives in the coming days and years could make all the difference. May our Spirituality of Justice and Compassion lead us to making good choices for our own lives, our community, and our world!

So may it be! Amen!

Unitarian Universalist Association Principles and Purposes

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- 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.

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.