

Social Justice – Site Preparation
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I was asked to share some thoughts, this morning, on Unitarian Universalism and social justice. In thinking about this topic, this rather overwhelming and truly unwieldy topic, I decided that I should try to find out more specifically what questions people have, what they're curious about. So, using Facebook and Twitter and talking to random people at my local YMCA and taking a field trip to Asheville, North Carolina, I gathered quite a few questions, and this morning, I'll try to answer a few of them, randomly selected, more or less.

1. How, if at all, is the duty of Unitarian Universalists to promote social justice different from the duty of liberal main line Protestants or of unchurched secular people of good will?

Social justice is everybody's responsibility, isn't it? What kind of nation, what kind of world do we want to live in? What kind of nation, what kind of world, do we want our children and grandchildren to inherit? Justice will be part of it, won't it? Now, of course, justice isn't our only value – peace, knowledge, beauty, Beethoven, beer – they're all important, too, but let's never let justice fall off our list.

Or perhaps you – more likely not you, but someone else – might be tempted to say, or at least to think, “screw the other people, as long I can live the kind of life I want, that's what's important to me.” But that kind of attitude raises some questions, doesn't it?

First, what kind of world do you want to live in? Would you be content to live in a world where all your desires were satisfied, but the people around you suffered?

Second, how long would such an arrangement last, with you happy and thriving, and others second class citizens, or not even citizens at all? You may need cooperation from others to get what you want. You may face a revolution.

Third, even if all goes well for you, what about your children and grandchildren? Can you guarantee that they'll be on top? Do you care?

So let's all of us work for justice, whether we're UUs or not.

2. What makes social justice a religious issue, and what, if anything, makes it different for us than it is, for example, for the folks across the street, at Trinity UCC?

When was social justice *not* a religious issue? Remember the prophet Amos, many centuries ago, speaking on behalf of God:

21 ¶ I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
(Amos 5:21-24; biblical cites are to NRSV)

Also Micah:

6 ¶ "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

8 He has told you, O mortal, 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? (Micah 6:6-8)

And remember the prophet Jesus, several centuries later, introducing himself to the people of Galilee:

14 ¶ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16 When he [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,

17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:14-21, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2a)

Or just look again at our seven principles. (You'll find them in the hymnal, turn to hymn #1, then turn back a page.) The word "justice" appears in two of them:

(2) Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;

(6) The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

I would argue that the other five all relate to justice as well, especially ##1 and 5.

But there was a second part to the question – is our UU concern for justice different from, or greater than, the concern for justice across the street, for our United Church of Christ neighbors and landlord, or for main line Protestants generally?

I hesitate to speak for others, but I did grow up in a Presbyterian family, and I was trained for the ministry at a United Methodist seminary.

Here's yet another biblical passage for you,

25 ¶ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25) (see also "A certain ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 18:18); "As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17))

One of the concerns of Christianity, going back to the New Testament writers, was what happens to us when we die? or, how can we be saved? Saved, that is, from unpleasantness after our decease. Here are three of the answers that Christian theologians have offered:

(1) We are saved, or we are admitted into heaven, if our behavior makes us worthy.

(2) We are saved by God's grace, if we have sufficient faith.

(3) God decides in advance who goes to heaven and who goes to hell, and there's nothing – actually, almost nothing – that we can do about it.

We Unitarian Universalists have a different view of death, and of what comes next. A variety of views. A typical view is that when you die you're dead, full stop. And one possibility that probably receives close to 100% agreement among us – I don't think that we could reach 100% on $7 + 5 = 12$ – one favorite is that there is no hell, that no one will spend eternity in the flames of the pit.

Thus our concern is with this world, not with the next one.

A second way that UUs can often – not always, but often – be distinguished from main line Protestants is with respect to our view of God, and of prayer. We – most of us, at least – do not envision a God who intervenes in the world. Or, as a metaphorical theist might put it, we are God's hands. If there is to be justice in the world, it is up to us – God won't do it for us. We're rather fond of the slogan, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice,"

but we realize, as did the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., that this moral arc won't get to justice without our help.

Thus our concern is with this world, and there's no one else to rely on.

3. What about the Bible as the foundation for social justice?

Here the question is, what is the source of our moral values? How do we know what is right and what is wrong? How do we know which path leads to justice, and which would lead us astray?

I quoted Amos, Micah, and Jesus earlier, reasonably familiar passages, attractive to us in the values they express. But wait – here's the conclusion of a long parable that Matthew includes in his gospel:

32 "Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'

34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matt 18:32-35)

Here's another passage from Matthew:

18 ¶ In the morning, when he [Jesus] returned to the city, he was hungry.

19 And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once. (Matt 21:18-19)

And here's the conclusion of another long parable from Matthew's gospel:

8 "Then he [the king] said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy.

9 Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.'

10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe,

12 and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless.

13 Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

14 For many are called, but few are chosen." (Matt 22:8-14)

I don't think we should learn our moral values or fine tune our sense of justice from passages such as these. The unforgiving slave behaved badly, we can agree, but is torture ever acceptable? I don't think so. Zapping a fig tree for not providing fruit on demand, is that any way to treat Mother Earth? And not wearing the proper attire to a wedding, a social gaffe perhaps, but doesn't the punishment seem a little extreme to you? It does to me. Jesus, by the way, as described here by Matthew, accepts without protest the institution of slavery. [*slave*, in Greek, *doulos*, translated "servant" in King James version; a slave (literal or figurative, involuntary or voluntary; frequently, therefore in a qualified sense of subjection or subserviency):--bond(-man), servant]

You can't use these passages in Sunday School. That's three examples from Matthew. I've spared you Revelation and Leviticus.

So if the Bible is not always a reliable source for our moral values, where do we get our sense of right and wrong? Reason and experience and empathy, that's the short answer, incomplete to be sure, but a good starting point.

Let's consider, briefly, the example of Kim Davis, the county clerk who went to jail – held in contempt of court – for refusing to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. She based her refusal on her Christian belief, grounded in the Bible.

But her position – in addition to being a misguided interpretation of freedom of religion under the First Amendment – is based on a very unscholarly, superficial, and incomplete interpretation and understanding of the Bible and of the people whose stories are told in the Bible, uninformed by real life experience in the 21st century, indeed, uninformed by life and thought in the past 1900 years.

I have no problem with using the Bible as a starting point, but it should not be our ending point as well, and it is a very challenging, difficult book to understand – actually, a diverse collection of books.

4. Our first principle proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person - is that more than feel-good rhetoric?

We "covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." That's quite a remarkable statement. Its biblical foundation is from Genesis: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind [*adam*] in our image, according to our likeness.'" (Genesis 1:26a) Its theological foundation is the rejection by Unitarians, more than two hundred years ago, of the doctrine of original sin. It's a remarkable statement and a challenging statement.

The first challenge is to define personhood. Would we leave anyone out? I'll get right to the point. What about abortion? Can we exclude that newly conceived entity from personhood, and thus from the protection of this covenantal affirmation?

I'll leave that question for you to ponder and move on to the next challenge: capital punishment. Most of us, I suspect, are against it; I certainly am. But here's the question, do we treat the convicted and without the least shadow of a doubt truly guilty terrorist serial killer, as a person of worth and dignity by locking him up for the rest of his life – I assume it's a he – and throwing away the key, or by promptly dispatching him with a dignified execution? I don't think that's an easy question.

5. Our fifth principle advocates the use of the democratic process, not only in our congregations, but also in society at large. What are the implications of that?

I could, at excessively great length, describe and lament the shortcomings of our nominally democratic electoral system in the United States, but let me skip ahead instead to two equally provocative issues. [see, for example, "Entwining Two Rights in California: Voting and Driving," editorial, NY Times, 9/17/15, p. A34]

First, the fifth principle refers to "society at large," and the sixth principle refers to "world community." One of our goals is a "world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." Here's the question, is "society at large" the same as "world community"? That is, do the two terms refer to the same thing? Should we have world-wide democracy, with one person, one vote for a government of the world? Or consider this question: do we, citizens of the United States by birth, have a greater right to live here than, for example, the refugees fleeing the civil warfare in Syria?

If that question is too easy, here's another: Is democracy up to the challenge of climate change, of global warming? That is, can we, as a people, as a world, deal with an existential challenge – an existential challenge that will always remain off in the future, until it's too late, and we're done for? Will democracy work here, or must we rely on a beneficial, paternalistic but authoritarian regime to save us from our folly and short-sightedness? Here again, I don't know the answer.

6. Should we UUs expect to agree on social justice priorities and on solutions to social justice challenges?

Jesus instructed us to feed the hungry. (Matt 25:35a) But when Jesus was confronted with the task of feeding a large crowd that had gathered to hear him preach, he resorted to his supernatural power to somehow convert five loaves of bread and two presumably normal-sized fish into enough food to satisfy five thousand people, without even counting the women and children – and with 12 baskets of leftovers, which they presumably took to the local homeless

shelter. (Matt 14:13-21, see also Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10b-17, John 6:1-15) We can't do it that way.

Give a man – or a woman – a fish, feed him for a day; give him a rod and reel, and teach him how to fish, feed him for a lifetime. You've heard that, I'm sure. But why stop there? Give them an education, and open their horizons far beyond fishing. Also, preserve the ecosystem so that fish will still be available in abundance for our grandchildren.

There are choices to be made; there are competing principles available. Do we emphasize individual responsibility or collective responsibility? Do we prefer market solutions or regulatory solutions? Do we prefer taxpayer-funded relief or private charity? How do we balance the trade-off between equity and efficiency? Do we favor programs that directly favor the disadvantaged or do we favor programs that enable and incentivize the rich to invest in job-creating projects? How do we balance rehabilitation and retribution in criminal justice? Is affirmative action fair? Is it effective? Should education be controlled locally or centrally? Or should it be a free-market commodity?

I'm sure you could keep adding questions to this list for quite a while. The point is, there are choices to be made, and it would be most surprising – indeed, alarming – if we all agreed on all of them. So, guided by experience and reason and sympathy for one another, let us move forward, probably not in a straight line, always aware that we are not infallible, but forward toward justice, forward toward what some would call the kingdom of God.

7. Do we want to be more engaged in social justice work in order to bring about more justice in our society, or would this just be a way to bring greater attention to our congregation and to inspire more people to come through our doors?

Ideally, and in the long run, the two motivations go together. Effective involvement in social justice will bring more people to us, and with more people, we can be more effective in our work for social justice.

8. Should we work on social justice as a congregation, with other UU congregations, with other congregations whether UU or not, as individuals identified as UUs, as individuals not prominently identified as UUs, as volunteers, as paid workers, as contributors of time or money or both, through political activism or through issue-oriented organizations? And do we ever get time off?

Yes. Yes, to all of the above. And most certainly yes to time off. We all need a sabbath. We all need a sabbatical. We all, if we are fortunate enough to live that long, reach the point where we can say, I've had my turn, I've done my share, I did my best – now it's up to you.

Now, on the question of who we should work with, we should feel comfortable working with other congregations on, say capital punishment, even if we might not want to work with them on other issues, such as abortion rights or marriage equality.

9. A small congregation can't do everything - why should we focus on social justice rather than, for example, creating and sustaining a vibrant and vital program of faith development for persons of all ages, especially for the young? or for having the best music of any church in Gettysburg, regardless of size? or creating a model small group ministry program, providing intellectual stimulation, pastoral care, and a pathway to greater spirituality for all participants? On the other hand, why not discontinue Sunday morning worship and spend our Sunday mornings working together on social justice projects?

Good questions. Too bad we're out of time. But you can continue the discussion of this question and all the others during coffee hour, and in the days and weeks ahead.