



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Charity and Justice,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on October 24, 2010

Today is the final installment in my three part “Real Church” sermon series. It began a few weeks ago when I told you that someone, curious about this congregation, asked me, “Is it a real church?” Of course I said yes, but it got me thinking. What makes a church real? I came up with three things: welcoming diversity, going deep, and seeking justice.

When you hear the word justice, you may think of a courtroom or imagine the scales of justice. “Equal justice under the law,” is an expression of that legal kind of justice. I’m talking about something different. It’s not legal, but moral. It’s about how we treat one another and especially those Jesus called “the least of these”--the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed. In my reading of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, what most inspires me and challenges me are the parts about justice--the prophets, including Jesus, who weren’t afraid to speak truth to power, and who had a special concern for those at the margins. Who said working for justice is an essential part of what it means to be a person of faith.

The hymn we just sang, “Hail the Glorious Golden City,”¹ describes this impulse to build a just society like the one imagined by the prophets, as the hymn says, “pictured by the seers of old,” where wrong is banished and justice reigns. I imagine this city as a place where no one goes hungry, or gets robbed, where everyone has a home, and no one abuses another. Where schools are safe and havens for learning and growth, where people have decent work and earn a living wage, so there’s also time for rest and play. Where we see our differences--cultural, religious, racial, political--not as a threat, but as a blessing. And I wonder, how do we get from here to there? I know we’re not going to get there in my lifetime, but can we at least inch our way closer?

Where I went to seminary, we had a purpose statement that said the school was there to educate leaders “who serve and advance God’s mission of justice, compassion, and reconciliation.” We claimed that God is not neutral and we are called to be co-workers with God, doing our part to build that glorious golden city, the kingdom of heaven here on earth. This theology works for me--I find it inspiring and encouraging to realize that it’s not all up to me. That there is a long line of people who have been part of the struggle to serve and advance God’s mission.

But I don’t assume this is your theology too, or that it is the only way to seek justice. We have different perspectives and understandings, and our diversity is a gift and a blessing. The truth is,

¹ Hail the Glorious Golden City, words by Felix Adler, in *Singing the Living Tradition* #140.

there have been plenty of tireless workers for justice who weren't religious at all. And there are church people who care only for themselves, who do nothing to serve others or challenge the status quo. I still believe in the church, in its potential to change lives and to transform the world, and that's why I love stories of people putting their faith into action.

I'm as inspired by the ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement as I am by the stories in the Bible. They tell us that the best part of our human nature is our love and concern for one another and our courage in the face of adversity. That we each have the potential for evil and for good, it's up to us to choose how we spend these lives we have been given. Where will we stand, and with whom?

Every Sunday we say "Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest for truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer." We assert that service is a holy act. It's clear to me that being a church means standing on the side of love and justice. Listen to these words from Rev. King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," words he wrote to other clergymen who had criticized his social action work:

"So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent -- and often even vocal -- sanction of things as they are."

We have the right, and the obligation, to speak and to act on the issues of our day. Martin Luther King said a church that has lost its willingness to speak truth to power is "an irrelevant social club." So what are the issues we should be addressing? Today at coffee hour, ask someone about that. Start a conversation about how we can make a difference in this community.

If you come around here during the week, especially in the morning, you see a number of people who are living at the margins. Though we don't run them ourselves, we host two programs that serve those in need. The drop in center is open five days a week for folks who need a hot meal and a place out of the weather. The food pantry is open two mornings a week. We are something of a haven for people in need or in trouble. Twice a month you help prepare a meal for hungry folks, and you who do this know that the need is growing these days. At Christmas we often have a hat and mitten drive, we collect toys for children, we designate half of our Christmas offering for some worthy cause. All of these efforts are good ones, and make a real difference in people's lives.

But if you step back and look at them, you'll see that they all are like band-aids. They target the symptoms of the problem--hunger, clothing, all kinds of need--but they don't do anything to address the root causes of these problems themselves. These are examples of charity--of us giving from what we have to help make another's life a little better. Charity is good, and part of what we are called to do. It expresses our care, our compassion for our brothers and sisters in need.

But charity also divides us into the haves and the have-nots. It puts the giver in the power-up position. It makes the receiver beholden to the generosity of the giver. An extreme example of this is those black tie charity balls--people dress up in fancy clothes and eat expensive food so they can write large checks to help poor people. What's wrong with this picture? What if those people spend an evening serving food to the hungry, or working at a homeless shelter? How might that change things, if rich and poor could see each other eye to eye, as fellow human beings, and hear each other's stories?

Please hear me--I'm not against charity. It is good and necessary and needed. When our charitable work brings us in closer contact with those in need, it's more likely that our hearts will be changed and we will feel compelled to work for justice. We begin to understand, as the hymn says,

We are builders of that city
All our joys and all our groans
Help to rear its shining ramparts;
All our lives are building stones.

But let's not delude ourselves that charity is going to, by itself, change the world. That's what justice is for. Jim Wallis, who leads the progressive Christian group Sojourners, challenges folks across the political spectrum to see that working for justice is what we are called to do.

He says, "while social justice begins with our own lives, choices, and sacrifices, it doesn't end there. Those of us who have actually done this work for years all understand that you can't just pull the bodies out of the river, and not send somebody upstream to see what or who is throwing them in."² It's not only about helping the poor, it's about changing the systems that keep people locked in poverty.

Wallis continues, "Private charity... wasn't enough to end the slave trade in Great Britain, end legal racial segregation in America, or end apartheid in South Africa. That took vital movements of faith which understood the connection between personal compassion and social justice."

I have to tell you that I struggle with justice work. I want to be part of changing our city and our world for the better. But I don't always know where to put my effort. I'm not one to join every protest that comes along, and I wonder where what I have to offer is most needed. It helps when I remember that we are not all the same--that some of us are organizers and others are workers, some are more active and others more contemplative. We each have a part to play and we need one another. That's why I love this description of church by Anne Lamott:

"Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food."³

² From "What Glen Beck Doesn't Understand About Biblical Social Justice," available at :<http://blog.sojo.net/2010/03/24/what-glenn-beck-doesnt-understand-about-biblical-social-justice/>

³ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 100.

That's my image of church too, where we each find our place doing something to make the world better and more beautiful. It begins with asking yourself, "What might I do?" With paying attention to what is happening around you, and wondering, "How might I get involved?" Asking, "What is needed?" And, "What are my gifts?" This is not a solo pursuit--working for justice means joining hands, forming coalitions, building bridges. I'd love to see us joining more with people from other traditions because this is work we can't do alone. It can be tiring and challenging and also liberating and transforming. And it is core to being a person of faith.

Mother Teresa said, "What I do you cannot do; but what you do, I cannot do. The needs are great, and none of us, including me, ever do great things. But we can all do small things, with great love, and together we can do something wonderful."

None of us can do everything. But will you commit to doing something? To finding one way to get your hands dirty, to do at least one thing to help out someone in need? We are already a congregation that cares and that is doing things to make a difference in our city. But we have just begun. I can imagine how vital and transforming our church will be when we are known as a place that carries its faith out into the community, that really walks its talk. When new folks are coming here not only because we are a welcoming community that helps you to go deeper in the spiritual life, but because we have earned a reputation for being a hotbed of justice work, a community of liberation.

Next week is our annual observance of those holy days that call us remember those who have died: All Saints, All Souls, Samhein, Day of the Dead. This will remind us that we each are mortal. We don't know how much time we have. Today, and this week, I invite you to reflect on this. How are you going to spend your days? What will your legacy be? Will the world be better because you were here?

A few minutes ago, we sang

And the work that we have builded,
oft with bleeding hands and tears,
oft in error, oft in anguish,
will not perish with our years.

I hope you believe this, because it will give you strength to do the work you have been given to do. Please, have faith that the love you give away, the efforts you make for justice, these are building stones, that become part of that glorious golden city. Our actions may seem small, but done with love, they become something beautiful and good, something larger than ourselves, something that lasts.

Amen.