

Economic Justice

10.20.13 Homily

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Madalyn Murray O'Hair said "An Atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An atheist believes that deed must be done instead of prayer said. An atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty vanished, war eliminated." It would seem, if we look to this definition, we Unitarian Universalists are all atheists. Mother Theresa said that "Only in heaven will we see how much we owe to the poor for helping us to love God better because of them". Well, we UUs have forsaken heaven and we don't believe in hell. Like Morgan Freeman's character in Shawshank Redemption, when the choice is to get busy living or get busy dying, we have chosen to get busy living.

The UU general assembly of 1964 said, in part, that "the Unitarian Universalist Association declares poverty in the midst of plenty intolerable to the religious conscience and incompatible with our principles of economic justice". This statement of conscience, and other declarations since, determines that it is part of our religious calling to address economic injustice in the here and now and not wait for some hereafter to solve all of our problems. And, although some of us be atheists, I am not one. It is not necessary to be a good atheist to behave like one.

My mom says we didn't have much money when I was a girl, but I remember being so wealthy. Perhaps we couldn't afford beds for everyone; what I remember is the joy at bedtime that came from the warmth of my brother's body as we snuggled up to go to sleep. Until I was five, we slept in the same bed and I felt safe and happy; I think I felt more like a puppy feels than most human children, made to sleep alone so early.

A few weeks ago Mary and Darlene did a service for Labor Day. As part of her homily Darlene addressed the fact that UUs are, by and large, thought to be white, upper middle class. And the Statement of Conscience mentioned above goes on to say "BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: That the Unitarian Universalists individually be urged to enter into person-to-person relationships with those who are economically, socially, politically and culturally deprived to the end that all citizens may fulfill their highest human potentialities."

Well, I like relationship. But this assumes that UUs are not already in relationship with these 'deprived peoples', and indeed, cannot be of the deprived, because we are to enter into relationships with these people. If it were 'us', we can assume that the relationship would be taken for granted. This assumption of the other in relationship to poverty is curious to me; while I agree that those who have certain resources have a religious obligation to be careful and generous stewards, there is danger here of entering into the zone of patronization and assumption.

Gandhi said that "Poverty is the worst form of violence". Frederick Douglass said that "Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel

that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.

So. Let's start here. What is poverty, and is there poverty in the United States? Some posit that even the poor in this country are wealthier than the well off in some places in the world. Tom Gorman, in *The Idiots Guide to Economics*, says that "In a Third World nation, a family with indoor plumbing, running water, decent food and clothing, and access to health care and education is quite well off. In the United States, however, millions of people who have those things are considered poor, because they have little else and those things constitute the bare essentials in America". So in the US you can have running water and an xbox and still need food assistance. When lights are a basic necessity, and you have to choose between eating and paying your light bill or your rent, I think most of us would agree that is poor.

And who are these poor people? In his travels around the globe, National Book Award winner William T. Vollmann has asked the impoverished a single question: "Why are you poor?" Barnes and Noble book reviewers summarize their answers.

For Buddhist Thais, the answer was simple: They had misbehaved in a previous life. Mexicans attributed their ill fortune to the chicanery of the rich; Yemenites refused to acknowledge their poverty because to do so would show ingratitude to Allah, the source of life. Japanese, too, denied being poor, but for a different reason: personal shame.

Personally, I like Everclear's statement of what it means to be poor and what it means to be pitied or condescended to about your poverty:

I hate those people who love to tell you

Money is the root of all that kills

They have never been poor

They have never had the joy of a welfare Christmas

Henry David Thoreau and Mother Theresa both spoke about choosing a life of what they called poverty. Thoreau said that when one simplifies their life, "solitude will not be solitude, poverty will not be poverty, nor weakness weakness." The choice they made, to be poor, is an interesting one. This privilege of choosing one's destiny seems to be reserved, in the present day, to those who have the means to do so. So being poor is different from living in poverty. Poverty includes, at least in the US, the notion that one cannot choose to do differently. If you are struggling with student loans and trying to get a job after grad school, many people don't consider that poverty, even though it looks the same when your lights get shut off or you end up on the street. And hunger is always hunger, no matter how many degrees and certificates you have. Generational poverty and the consequences of that poverty, whether criminality or chronic health problems or hopelessness are layer after layer of injustice. But no one who has ever been hungry thinks that their layer is any less real than anyone else's. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that poverty exists in many ways and in many spheres, and no one should be isolated in that state.

Here is a story.

I hear there was a time when being poor was not something to be ashamed of. You could work your whole life and never get 'ahead', whatever that means, but you didn't care so much because what you wanted was to work just enough to be able to pay your bills, and then take the rest of your time to spend time with your family. The American dream for poor people, for working class people, has never been to have so much that they never have to worry. The American Dream for so many has been to have enough that you don't have to worry right now, to have love and life and work and family around and near you, to have the means and the health to help your neighbors and your children and your church. And I contend that as real as poverty is for the poor, the poverty of fear in the middle class, the poverty of identification and compassion in the wealthier classes, the poverty of fear and loathing and the need to be far away and safe and different from what we fear, is just as real.

I have spent the last several weeks looking at economic justice, poverty, inequality based on class and income and race and historical oppression and honestly I'm sick of it. I'm sick of the research, and I'm sick of the poverty. I'm sick of the hopelessness and fear and shame in my own life when confronted with the choices I am looking at between being homeless or moving someone where life seems more affordable, but I would not be near family nor have an income. These choices are untenable to me and millions of others across the United States and across the globe.

And today, I ask you, what if we got rid of the other? What if right now, right here, in this room, we are impoverished? What if right in this moment there are people in the room who don't know how they will eat come next Sunday, or whether they will be able to pay for gas in their car to get to work, or keep the lights on or a roof over their heads? And what if you don't know about it because you are too busy trying to keep away from poverty yourself to see the suffering of others? What if poverty is not knowing your neighbors? What if poverty is having no place to go?

I will quote Frederick Douglass again. I, too, believe that "Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe".

We are not safe. There is too much oppression. There is too much justice denied. There is too much ignorance, and too much poverty. And while we work so hard for safety by separating ourselves from the other, the trenches of injustice get deeper.

What are we doing now, today, to combat this injustice? Every week, I spend time doing something for someone that has nothing to do with money. I work in the local community garden. I do a free Sing Along for folks who need music. I talk to the old folks who live in our neighborhood. I hold babies. I make and bring meals for folks who are sick, or lonely, or who have brought a new life into the world. I do not wait for folks to ask for help; I try to be one who offers it.

And this may not be enough. I cannot afford to build hospitals. But I can involve myself in life rather than escape into death. Despite my own poverty, despite chronic pain and illness, despite and because of my obligation to my family, I was raised UU. And what I know about being UU is that we do not wait for our own problems to be solved before helping others. We jump into the stream of life. Like the congregation who has as their motto "You will be cared for, and you will be called upon to care for

others”, my calling is not to a mountaintop. My religious calling asks me to seek solace in meditation and prayer and hope, and then to go out into the world and create hope with my own two hands. I am honored to be a UU, honored to be amongst those who would strive to end injustice in this lifetime. And this is my challenge to all of us.

Get rid of the notion of the other. When any of us are poor, we are all poor. Use those resources you have with generosity and stewardship. If you have knowledge, share it. If you have money, share that too. If you have food, or time, or love to spare, share those. And if you do not know what your neighbor needs, do not wait to find out. Ask now. There may be a heaven somewhere, but we’re looking to rebuild the one we already have.