

**THE EXPERIENCES OF LOVE #3 -
Justice: What's Love Got to Do With It?**

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church
St. Petersburg, Florida - 02/11/18

READINGS

Invocation: Hymnal #591 – *I Call That Church Free*, by James Luther Adams

Meditation: *Children Singing to the Sunshine*, from *The Souls of Black Folks*, by W.E.B. DuBois

Readings: *What Does Yehovah Require*, Micah 6, Isaiah 55
The Project of Belonging by John A. Powell

SERMON

Perhaps the most influential cause of human conflict and harm is injustice and that which leads to injustice. This is so contrary to the spirit of love that we've been exploring this month of Valentines and Black History that we really must address whether love and justice might not be connected.

For simple convenience we might define love as the desire to be close to someone and maybe to make their life better – or for wider circles of relationship, simply to do no harm and hopefully do good for unknown others.

Injustice might then be defined as deciding without cause that someone is not deserving of your love or respect or help and then choose to treat them in hurtful and harmful ways.

Perhaps the biggest force for justice and peace is applied when previously divided parties see they will be cared for equally, with the human rights and opportunities necessary to pursue happiness in one's society.

The challenge seems to be developing some potential within us that is inclined to act justly toward those whom we have been seeing as "not us", and so not trustworthy or deserving.

Martin Luther King, Jr., emphasized the power of love as the potential to be developed in seeking justice. Mohandes Gandhi, from whom King drew his on-violent civil disobedience strategies, emphasized the power of truth as the potential to be developed in seeking justice

They have both been effective to a degree. But so far they have not prevailed over the power of money and the human potential to always want more money and what it represents or buys.

If, as the song from *South Pacific* says, we have to be carefully taught to hate, then we may also need to be carefully taught to care and pursue truth and do justice.

In the 1970s, the dominant theory of moral and ethical development was that of psychology professor Lawrence Kohlberg and his team. As he had it, when we are children our ethical choices are set by specific absolute rules of behavior that we've learned will win our elders' approval and constitute a kind of contract for justice. Later, if we continue maturing as adults, we will develop our own general principles of right behavior as our own contract for justice. Oddly enough, according to Kohlberg's research, women did not achieve the highest mature ethical position nearly as often as men.

Along came Kohlberg's post-doctoral assistant Carol Gilligan who basically said, Women less ethical or moral than men? Get outa here. She began looking for explanations. It turned out that Kohlberg's research subjects were all male – not a single female.

Gilligan's own research then showed that women's moral and ethical development is based on the principle of caring rather than on contractual justice. This, Gilligan found, was because caring was women's societally assigned role – just as it was the men's societally assigned role to deal with contracts that prescribed the temporary dictates of just relationship.

When the Kohlberg team, guided by Gilligan's discovery, reassessed their data, they realized that people's value systems and development depend a lot on the environmental context within which they live and what roles they are directed to take. And they found that those who pursue the path of contractual justice and those who pursue the path of caring justice to the end will ultimately come to the same place – defining justice as ensuring everyone gets the caring they need to survive and thrive.

Recent psychological and neurological research has complicated this understanding of what I think we can also call *spiritual growth* – our growth in caring relationship with wider circles of existence. It turns out that Nature has evolved in us a genetic predisposition to categorize things, including people, and to exclude and stigmatize and discriminate against those whom we categorize as different and so come to perceive as different and believe are different. (One can even do it to one's self.) From Mother Nature's perspective, this is one of our tools for surviving the threats of life – because threats tend to come most seriously from what is “not us.”

But here let's go back to the song from South Pacific, *You Have to Be Carefully Taught*. Okay, we have to be taught what to categorize as different, as unconnected to us, as undeserving of equal treatment, as a possible threat. But here is our opportunity to merge and enlarge justice and love. We can also teach ourselves to see others as connected to us (or perhaps better, learn how they are connected to us) and not as different in ways that are threatening or requiring exclusion.

You can be carefully taught to hate. And you can also be carelessly taught to hate. But you need to be carefully taught to see past unimportant differences to the common ground of human potential that can make us all friends and family. Education and familiarity are our

guiding tools, I think, beyond the neurological paths for competitive surviving to the neurological paths for cooperative thriving..

These ideas don't seem new. But wealth and power and fear of loss are great obstacles, especially among those who already are getting the short end of the stick.

The principles in the UU Association's covenant (which covenant is printed at the front of our two hymnals) gives us pretty good guidelines for how we can grow spiritually – in caring and truth and justice. But perhaps it is worthwhile to point out a few of the many exemplars of this growth:

Last Sunday, which was Transfiguration Sunday on the Christian calendar, I mentioned Jesus' trip to the mountaintop and his transformation, his transfiguration, into a being of light. By then he had seen the suffering of the multitudes, beyond the ability of a single hand to sooth, including his. It changed him from being just a healer of individuals to being a person who sought to be a healer of oppressive institutions – and with that he began his journey to Jerusalem (the center of oppressive power and of hope) in time for the Passover festival of liberation, to witness (as he told the Roman governor Pontius Pilate) to the Truth for all the oppressed and impoverished.

Martin Luther King, Jr, had also been to the mountaintop and saw that the suffering of the people transcended race and nationality and gender and creed – and so he had turned toward Washington (the center of oppressive power and of hope) to lead the Poor People's Campaign – a movement that has been dead since his assassination – but is now being revived.

Buddha was awakened for the first time when he was shown the streets outside his father's pleasure palace, streets full of human suffering from fear and longing, from illness, aging, and death. And he was awakened for the second time, permanently, when (through the graciousness of a passing milkmaid who stopped him from starving to death) he realized that caring compassion - letting go of our internal and external divisions and settling in the flow of life energy that ceaselessly transfigures us - is the way (eightfold though it may be).

Malcolm X saw the same longing and suffering in all humanity when he joined the massive annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. He saw that White people were with him, not as enemies but as fellow sufferers and aspirants for union with the ultimate goodness. And his attitude and message changed to one of common universal caring.

Mother Teresa felt bereft of a sense of God's direct presence in Calcutta. But she was somehow sustained by the call from the streets for daily caring and by calling to the world that justice must be done with caring.

As Albert Schweitzer struggled to keep his medical mission open in central Africa during World War II, he struggled to find a spiritually sustaining principle to guide him. The principle he settled on was "Reverence for Life.'

I'm happy to add that on the day during the constrictions of World War II that he realized that his mission hospital's large unmeetable debts would force him to close it down, he received an exceptionally large unexpected check, from the American Unitarian Association. He researched who that was and realized he was one, too – and soon thereafter he became a member. Surely a greater blessing for the Unitarians than the money they had sent. Love and justice and money can go together – though mainly they haven't yet.

Awakening to a desire for justice through caring might occur when you hear little children singing to help the sun on its heavenly way, as it did for W.E.B. DuBois. It might happen when you realize our common need to belong and that it must be our project – as it has been for John A. Powell and as it was for Jesus, asking not who is my neighbor, but whom can I be neighbor to.

With that genius insight – to whom can I be neighbor - the walls come tumbling down. Suddenly the humility that Micah called for makes sense to me. I think it means, we must all serve one another - not just ourself and our loved ones. Our love must be to embrace with Caring and Justice. We won't be alone, because we will be a team, a communion.

That is the power of the 40 congregations of our interfaith social justice group, FAST (Faith and Action for Strength Together), working for justice together with caring. That, I believe, is the path to greatness – and with MLK, Jr, we can proclaim that everyone can be great because everyone can serve.

It's really the only way, I think. It puts you in absolute sync with what James Luther Adams called the ultimate source of existence – the power of life that is pouring ceaselessly forth to serve all.

We are on an adventure of the spirit for caring and for justice. With reverence for life, may we travel it together.

READINGS

Invocation: Hymnal #591 – *I Call That Church Free*, by James Luther Adams

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence,
that sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands.

It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority.

This covenant is the charter & responsibility & joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.

I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship,
that protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom;
that yearns to belong to the church universal.

It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition,

giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.

It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.

The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers: the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing.

It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit "that bloweth where it listeth... and maketh all things new."

Meditation: *Children Singing to the Sunshine*, from The Souls of Black Folks, by W.E.B. DuBois

Generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse.... If somewhere in this whirl and chaos of things there dwells Eternal Good, pitiful yet masterful, then soon in Its good time America shall rend the veil and the prisoned shall go free. Free, free as the sunshine trickling down the morning into these high windows..., free as yonder fresh young voices welling up to me – swelling with song, instinct with life.... My children, my little children, are singing to the sunshine, and thus they sing: Let us cheer the weary traveler, cheer the weary traveler, let us cheer the weary traveler along the heavenly way

Readings Before the Sermon

What Does Yehovah Require, Micah 6, Isaiah 55

What does the Being of our beings require of us?

Only to do justice, to cherish kindness, to walk humbly with It.

And is not this the humbling fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

The Project of Belonging by John A. Powell

The human condition is one of belonging. We simply cannot thrive unless we are in relationship.... If you're isolated, the negative health consequence is worse than smoking, obesity, high blood pressure—just being isolated.... If you think about Black Lives Matter, it's really just saying, "We belong." How we define the other affects how we define ourselves. And so when we define the other at an extreme distance from ourselves, it means we have to cut off large parts of our self.... Part of it is our fear that we are holding on to something and

the other is going to change it. And the other is going to change it—but we're going to change the other. If we do it right, we're going to create a bigger "we," a different "we."