

SACRIFICE, COMMUNITY, FULFILLMENT - #2:

Who Do You Work For?

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church
St. Petersburg, Florida - 04/15/18 – Income Tax Sunday

READINGS

Thoughts For Gathering

Who Works 360 days/year - Chinese proverb

What is Required of You? - Micah 6.8

Taxes are the Price - Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Invocation #594

Principles & Purposes of Unitarian Universalist Congregations

Meditation #567

To Be of Use, by Marge Piercy

Reading #1 Before Sermon

To Tend & Care For adapted, The Book of Genesis, chs. 1 & 2

Reading #2 Before Sermon

excerpt from *Two Tramps in Mudtime* by Robert Frost

TIME FOR ALL AGES, TIME WITH CHILDREN *When You Grow Up*

There was a six-year old girl. She was reading a book to her younger brother, about a child who went to summer camp. The child in the book said, “Summer camp is so great. You don’t have to worry about anything, except the one thing kids have to worry about all the time, ‘What am I going to be when I grow up.’” The six-year old reader put down her book, looked out the window, and shook her head with a sigh and said, “I hear ya!”

Is that something you worry about? Well, the girl went back to reading and when she finished the book, she put it down and said, “When I grow up, I’m going to be an artist first; then I’m going to be a scientist.” Hmmh. Well, you know, she could start now. She can draw, paint, dance, sing, video, write poems. She can pay attention to Nature – to rocks and shells to oceans and gardens, to animals including people – that’s all science. I say, start now.

Do you remember the story about Ms. Rumphius? Little Alice Rumphius? Her grandfather told her that there was one thing she really had to do when she grew up – remember? Make the world more beautiful. When she did grow up, she planted the seeds of a beautiful flower called lupine all around the wild woods and fields of her hometown. But she really had already started. She was kind to her grandfather – that was beautiful. She also helped him paint pictures of ships and the sea – and that was beautiful, too.

Now, I’m going to invite someone to join us who has helped to make the world more beautiful right here at our Unitarian Universalist Church of St. Petersburg. And I’d like you all to give her these flowers, one at a time. She is Jeri Huemphner-Gatz, our office manager, and at the end of this month she is retiring. And we want everyone today to have a chance to thank her while she’s still on the job – and there’ll be cake to celebrate during Refreshment time.

SERMON

FULFILLMENT, SACRIFICE, COMMUNITY, #2: Who Do You Work For?

If you will allow me to ask, I'd like to know if you have been satisfied with the role of work at each stage of your life so far. Any somewhat nagging regrets? Any plans for what your life's work will be from this point forward?

We read the Unitarian Universalist principles as an Invocation this morning. What I love about principles statement is that it lists what I see as our spiritual potentials for moving beyond surviving to thriving. The principles define the steps for developing profounder, more centered caring relationships with ever-widening gyres of life.

But I've just noticed that the Principles makes no explicit mention of work. Is that odd? We Unitarian Universalists are not entirely in the saved-by-faith-in-grace camp. I see us believing in work as a significant need and value and potential in our beings - and many wise humanitarians call work and love humankind's two undergirding potentials for surviving and thriving. But, except for love's partial synonym, *compassion*, our principles make no explicit mention of either work or love.

We talked a good deal about love in February. So this month and this morning I would ask us to consider the spiritual significance of work. What is contained in our seeds of potential for work? Who do you work for? What do you work for? What and whose interests do you serve in the expenditure of your daily time? In short, to what have you devoted your life? Practically speaking, to whom is the benefit of your life's work distributed and is it as you've chosen?

Looking back, I wish that set of questions had been addressed to me at the several stages of my life. Not so much what do you want to be when you grow up - but to what do you want to devote yourself? And I wish I had consciously asked the people whom I have admired over the years, To what have you devoted yourself, and why? Why an artist? Why a scientist?

It's not that I haven't absorbed some answers from my environments. I think culture and companions imbue us with answers. For example, nothing has impacted me more as to the significance of work than my experiences in the Peace Corps.

On any given day fifty years ago in the Pacific Islands of Micronesia, I would have seen women coming in from fishing and gossiping on the reef shelf with their pandanus baskets loaded with fish, distributing the bounty to those waiting on the shore and along the village path, to family, friends, fellow villagers, visitors. I would have seen men tossing coconuts and bananas and breadfruit down from the trees and passing them out with welcome to all comers. I would have been called with everybody else into the common house to share baked breadfruit and fresh raw tuna dressed in juice from just-picked limes and a little imported soy sauce. Children would have been running in and out beneath the thatched roof and everyone would have an eye on them and play with them if the opportunity presented. Nobody would have been considered late for anything, or too soon.

To what was their daily work devoted? If I had thought to ask, I imagine they would have answered, the well-being of each other and the pleasures of life in food, companions, and

children. Could that be your devotion? I imagine it would likely have been the common answer from any comparable stone-age society in a bountiful temperate environment with no significant external human threats and with no means to store up wealth or any possession other than esteem. But I admit, redistribution of goods and caring is an easy custom to maintain when you can't store possessions away for yourself -- or, if you could, you'd cut yourself off from life-giving mutuality with others.

The ancient Middle Eastern story of Genesis suggests that we are not essentially different from the garden of being from which we come and to which we return. So our work is to tend and care devotedly for that garden which is also each of us. The story even suggests that this alone is what gratifies the Being divine, the very dust of the garden itself - to be of use. Could that be your devotion?

The Hebrew kingdom descended from King Solomon was divided and crumbling around the year 700 BCE due to the greed and distance of the wealthy few and the anger and deprivation of the impoverished multitude. So the prophet Micah invoked the covenantal terms of justice, kindness, and humility as the requirements for safety and happiness in the land. This was his proposal as the true exercise of human potentials. Fulfilled, it could restore strength to the nation and discourage alien empires from incursions. Do we have cause for devoting ourselves to justice, kindness, and humility?

In the Far East also, for thousands of years, the culture of rice farming has advocated ceaseless work in the rice paddies in devotion to the well-being of family, community and the fields themselves. I remember the Chinese-influenced rice-culture of Vietnam in the flooding of the monsoon season - the farmers and oxen embodying Marge Piercy's dictum, literally submerging in the work worth doing well as a pitcher submerges to be filled. I remember the pride in the rice paddies, all ordered for water flow between neighbors, all luminescent purple with the sun rise seeming to come up through the waters, all decorated with patterns of young green rice stalks - beauty and productivity in harmony - vocation and avocation - need and love - bread and roses - one work. Could this be your devotion?

The poet Marge Piercy's line about being submerged in the task also brings to mind Johnny Cash's song: "I was born one morning when the sun didn't shine. I picked up my shovel and I walked to the mine. I shoveled sixteen tons of number nine coal and the strong boss said, 'Well, bless my soul.' Shovel sixteen tons, whadaya get - another day older and deeper in debt. Saint Peter don't you call me, cuz I cain't go - I owe my soul to the company store." Turns out, America, oppression didn't end when Solomon's temple fell or George Washington took office.

And I think of George Harrison's anger when he learned in 1966 that a large chunk of his income was being taxed at 95%. From that came his song "Taxman" - "Let me tell you how it will be: There's one for you, nineteen for me; 'Cause I'm the taxman, yeah, I'm the taxman... And you're working for no one but me."

But I wonder how that working class fellow felt as he saw the decline of tax rates and significant income redistribution erode the services for health, education, housing, and employment that had secured and empowered his life and that of The Beatles. As a great Unitarian said, "Taxes are the price we pay for civilization." Oppression doesn't end just because we aren't aware of it or of its causes.

So, each of us might ask ourselves, What have I been working for - for the surviving and the thriving of myself, my family, community, country, and all of life - or for the luxuries of bosses, masters, and rulers? Whose interests are you devoted to serve – and how did that happen? Was it your choice at each stage of life, as child and student, as young single, as homeowner, as husband and father, as grandfather and elder? What will you choose to devote to next? Will it be a free choice? Will you get to grow and fulfill your accumulating potentials?

It seems that the question of our potentials for growing up need not be a question that only kids ask – bless their souls. There are many worlds into which we are born anew.

I mentioned at the outset that the UU principles don't mention love or work. But what if we changed "affirm and promote" to "devoted?"

- We are devoted to the inherent worth and dignity of every human being.
- We are devoted to justice, equality, and compassion in human relations.
- We are devoted to acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.
- We are devoted to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
- We are devoted to the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.
- We are devoted to the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Is that not work we could submerge ourselves in and that we could love wholeheartedly, for it is opening up our potentials and allowing us to grow and to enhance well-being well beyond ourselves.

I think that is what this church is here for – for us to help one another turn each of our potentials into devotions. I think we are doing pretty well as a small but growing congregation, almost recovered now from some years of misfortune and disappointment, though not forgetting their lessons.

Our membership is at a 22 year high except for a blip 17 years ago. Some might step back now and not see that we need everyone's devotion as much as ever. But this is no time to step back. It's time to step up. If you belong here because you are devoted to finding your best values and your best work and to helping others do so, I know you will pledge your money and time to where your heart is. Pledges are the price we pay to get civilized. I hope you agree that this is good cause for devotion.

Thank you, all.

READINGS

Thoughts for Gathering

- None who rise pre-dawn 360 days/year fail to enrich their family. – *Chinese proverb*
- What does the Being of all beings/Yehovah require of you, but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with Being Itself. – *Micah 6.8*
- Taxes are the price we pay for civilization. – *Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*

Invocation *Principles & Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association (Hymnal, #594)*

Meditation *To Be of Use,* by Marge Piercy (Hymnal, #567)

Reading #1 *To Tend and Care For* adapted from The Book of Genesis, chs. 1 & 2

Then Being expressed humankind into being, with dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. Male and female they were created, blessed to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and tame it, given every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, was given every green plant for food. The Being of beings placed the human beings in the garden of Eden to tend it and keep it and eat from it until they returned to its ground. And indeed, it was very good, that sixth dawning.

Reading #2 excerpt from *Two Tramps in Mudtime* by Robert Frost

Good blocks of oak it was I split,
As large around as the chopping block;
And every piece I squarely hit
Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.
The blows that a life of self-control
Spares to strike for the common good,
That day, giving a loose my soul,
I spent on the unimportant wood.

Out of the wood two hulking tramps
(From sleeping God knows where last night,
But not long since in the lumber camps).
They thought all chopping was theirs of right.
Men of the woods and lumberjacks,
They judged me by their appropriate tool.
Except as a fellow handled an ax
They had no way of knowing a fool.

Nothing on either side was said.
They knew they had but to stay their stay

And all their logic would fill my head:
As that I had no right to play
With what was another man's work for gain.
My right might be love but theirs was need.
And where the two exist in twain
Theirs was the better right--agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.