

What is Justice?
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FIRST READING: From Hebrew Scriptures

Leviticus 19:9-10: When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

Exodus 22:21-27: You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry...If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.

From Deuteronomy 24:17-22: You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

SECOND READING

**From the Sermon, "On Being a Good Neighbor"; from the book, *Strength to Love*
Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr.**

I should like to talk with you about a good man, whose exemplary life will always be a flashing light to plague the dozing conscience of man. His goodness was not found in passive commitment to a particular creed, but in his active participation in a life-saving deed; not in a moral pilgrimage that reached its destination point, but in the love ethic by which he journeyed life's highway. He was good because he was a good neighbor.

...

What constituted the goodness of the good Samaritan? Why will he always be an inspiring paragon of neighborly virtue? ... The Samaritan had the capacity for *universal altruism*. He had a piercing insight into that which is beyond the eternal accidents of race, religion, and nationality. One of the great tragedies of [our long human] trek along the highway of history has been the limiting of neighborly concern to tribe, race, class, or nation.

...

The real tragedy of such narrow provincialism is that we see people as entities or merely as things. Too seldom do we see people in their *humanness*. A spiritual myopia limits our vision to external accidents. We see [people] as Jews or Gentiles, Catholics or Protestants, Chinese or American, Negroes or Whites. We fail to think of them as fellow human beings made from the same basic stuff as we, molded in the same divine image. But the good Samaritan will always remind us to remove the cataracts of provincialism from our spiritual eyes and see men as men...[The Samaritan saw the man] as a human being first, who was only a Jew by accident. The good neighbor looks beyond the external accidents and discerns those inner qualities that make all men human, and, therefore, brothers.

SERMON

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Last fall as I worked with some other local interfaith ministers on annual Sleep Out for the Homeless fundraiser, the group of us ministers got into a discussion about issues of justice and helping people who are disadvantaged. The other ministers in attendance were generally liberal Christians who were Lutherans, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, and Episcopalians. They are a good group of people, and I very much enjoy my interaction with them and the work we do together. But at one point I said something about the importance of “social justice,” and one of the ministers reacted immediately, saying, “Oh, we would never say that in our church!” Since I knew we were all fairly liberal, and since we were all, in fact, working on some issues dealing with Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners, I was quite taken aback, and asked what she meant. Well, she herself didn’t mind what I said – it’s just that she said the people in her congregation would never use the phrase “social justice.” Still in a state of surprise, I asked what term they do use. And her reply was simple. “We call it mission work,” she said.

Since that time I’ve thought about this conversation repeatedly. Here in our liberal religious Unitarian Universalist tradition, we typically do not use the phrase, “mission work,” nor do we go on “mission trips.” What we do here in our church, and in most churches in our association, is the work of “social justice” or “social action,” and we simply go on trips to New Orleans or Appalachia, or the reservations of South Dakota to do what we can to help the people in those areas.

It seems that, even though our terminology is different, and comes from different sources, our action itself is very similar. The term “mission” arises from the teachings of Jesus in his numerous sermons and parables where he defies the letter of the law to preach the justness and love contained in the spirit of the law as written down in the books of the Hebrew Scriptures. Under these teachings, this is not social justice; this is the will of God. It is not that the liberal Christians I know interpret Hebrew or Christian Scriptures literally, or imagine God as an old, super big human man. They understand that ancient cultures sought codes of conduct to enable humans to live in close proximity, and that God is a force that draws the best out of humanity in the form of both codes of conduct and prophetic teaching. So “mission work” is one form that modern Christians use to live out divine teachings that instruct us humans to live in accordance with our highest nature.

Even though “social justice” may not be a term used by some Christians, and though it may sound to some of them like a term used by radical people, it is still a term we use to indicate human action according to our highest ethical aspirations. And though Jewish and Christian scriptures and traditions contain the roots of the sources for our ethical behavior, we also draw on the traditions and holy scriptures of many of the world’s religions as sources for our ethical behavior. We Unitarian Universalists are just as prone to temptation, fallibility, and pride as anyone else, but we also engage in our ethics largely from our Universalist heritage, the branch of our religious ancestry that believes in the inherent worth and original goodness of each person, rather than in their supposed original sin. It is from this belief that our altruism arises.

On this Sunday of Martin Luther King, Jr., weekend, it is appropriate to pause in the midst of the world’s pain and problems to consider how we may define justice, what it might look like, and how our sense of justice may be different from that of another religion or culture.

For most of human history the primary form of justice was vengeance. This was altered slightly into a form known as “retributive justice,” a theory of justice that considers appropriate punishment as a morally acceptable response to crime, especially regarding satisfaction and its psychological benefits. This model was institutionalized first in the Code of Hammurabi, written down by the Egyptian ruler almost 4,000 years ago, and then included in the laws of Moses (Leviticus, Exodus and Deuteronomy) some 2,500 years ago. Those laws are the ones we know with the familiar phrasing of punishments that include “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”

At the same time, other sections of these codes were in place to provide safety and hospitality for those in the culture who were most likely to be in danger, in particular, widows, orphans, travelers and resident aliens, all of whom had no power or legal standing in Jewish society. Back in seminary, we discovered biblical scholars who noted that phrases or commandments from God to not oppress the poor, the widow, the orphan or the alien occurs over 600 times in the Hebrew Scriptures.

When Jesus, a Jew who taught and preached in the tradition of the rabbis, came along some 2,000 years ago, this is the spirit of the law that he taught. Rather than emphasize the rigid letter of some laws, Jesus instead emphasized this spirit – found hundreds of times in the Hebrew Scriptures – of hospitality and justice. His teachings were not of the retributive kind, but rather they emphasized divine compassion and forgiveness because that is the rule of natural law, the law of a creation that makes mistakes and learns from them, a rule that says when a fire burns the ground, the grass will grow back and reclaim it, and that the softness of water will, if given enough time, smooth the edges of rough broken rock.

It was Jesus who taught, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” And also, “You have heard that it said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of God; because God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

The teachings of Jesus were dangerous – and still are – because they turn the notion of retributive justice upside down. His teachings were very close to a new form of justice gradually being practiced in more places around the globe. This is “restorative justice,” which is a theory of justice that focuses on crime as enacted against an individual or community rather than as against the state. Rather than privileging the law and the state, restorative justice engages the victims, the offenders, and their affected communities in search of solutions that promote repair,

reconciliation and rebuilding relationships. It also shows the highest rates of victim satisfaction, true accountability by the offender, and reduced recidivism.

Ultimately, whether or not we gravitate toward one of these forms of justice, they are still both forms of justice that react to events that have already taken place with a clearly identified victim. But there is at least one more form of justice that is proactive, positive, and concerned with addressing things that are unfair even by an outsider with no immediately discernable stake or victimization. This is what we may call “social justice.”

Sometimes, despite whatever laws are absent or in place, it seems as though justice exists in the same way that some people see art: we may not always be able to define it, but we know it when we see it! In general terms, it seems as though social justice has to do with being good, whether by commandment from a divine order, or as a natural tendency of a healthy, living organism.

In his 1963 sermon called, “On Being a Good Neighbor,” Martin Luther King, Jr., speaks about the good Samaritan in Jesus’ parable in a way that reminds me of us, since we do not define ourselves exclusively as Jews or Christians or any other religion. We are Unitarian Universalists, and in some cases we could easily be seen to be as much of the antithesis to these religions as a Samaritan was to a Jew so many years ago. King writes that the Samaritan’s goodness “was not found in passive commitment to a particular creed, but in his active participation in a life-saving deed.” King goes on to say that, “the Samaritan had the capacity for *universal altruism*. He had a piercing insight into that which is beyond the eternal accidents of race, religion, and nationality.”

In our world, even today, it is easy to get caught up in the tribalism of our daily work and family life. It is easy to care the most about the people who look like us, talk like us, and behave like us. It is also easier to care about someone in our neighborhood than in another neighborhood, someone in our state than in another state, or someone in our country than in another country. But King says, “The real tragedy of such narrow provincialism is that we see people as entities or merely as things. Too seldom do we see people in their *humanness*. A spiritual myopia limits our vision to external accidents. We see [people] as Jews or Gentiles, Catholics or Protestants, Chinese or American, Negroes or Whites. We fail to think of them as fellow human beings made from the same basic stuff as we, molded in the same divine image. But the good Samaritan will always remind us to remove the cataracts of provincialism from our spiritual eyes...[The Samaritan saw the wounded man] as a human being first, who was only a Jew by accident. The good neighbor looks beyond the external accidents and discerns those inner qualities that makes [each one of us] human, and, therefore, [related].”

Both Christian mission work, when it is at its best, and our social justice work, when it is at its best, help us to take the “cataracts of provincialism” from our spiritual eyes and look beyond our own tribe to the world around us. This year as we attempt to look beyond the walls of our own tribe here on the corner of Walker and Rice Streets in Wayzata, we are focusing our congregational social justice efforts on three areas: the environment, health care, and issues relating to people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. Unfortunately there are so many other issues to address. There are ongoing issues like racism and poverty, and there are the sudden surprise issues like the earthquake in Haiti. But it is difficult for one congregation of 200 people to save the world all by ourselves, so we need to narrow our focus and collaborate with other groups.

Because we cannot do it all, or all at once, I am forever grateful there are groups out there like the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee that collaborates with local people and groups in places like Haiti when disaster strikes. Our liberal theology promotes the notion of “deeds, not creeds,” so it is difficult for us to know what to do sometimes when an earthquake or a hurricane strikes in places far away. I am grateful for the existence of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee for a number of reasons, but partly because it gives us something familiar on which we can focus.

Among the other groups out there, the UUSC works from their knowledge that when the disaster strikes, people are in very different situations, determined by race, class, and gender. According to their printed information on this disaster, “We begin from the cause-and-effect relationship between how people were marginalized before the earthquake and how that will affect their access to relief. We contact grassroots organizations and work with them as our partners on the ground, listen to their concerns, bring in our reflections from our disaster experience, and together shape a program that is relevant, looks at people as survivors, not victims, and begins from the needs they articulate.”

As we consider an essential ingredient in the work of justice as “removing the cataracts of provincialism,” and since it falls under GBLT issues, one of the areas of our congregation’s social justice emphasis this year, I was also struck this week by the work of the conservative Republican, Theodore B. Olson. Olson, you may remember, was the attorney who took the “Bush” side of *Gore vs. Bush* Supreme Court case that ushered George W. Bush into office in the 2000 elections. This week, Theodore Olson (as one of two attorneys) will argue on behalf of two gay couples in *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*, a federal case challenging Proposition 8, the California initiative that outlawed same-sex marriage. In a *Newsweek* article this week, Olson writes, “Conservatives and liberals alike need to come together on principles that surely unite us. Certainly, we can agree on the value of strong families, lasting domestic relationships, and communities populated by persons with recognized and sanctioned bonds to one another. Confining some of our neighbors and friends who share these same values to an outlaw or second-class status undermines their sense of belonging and weakens their ties with the rest of us and what should be our common aspirations. Even those whose religious convictions preclude endorsement of what they may perceive as an unacceptable “lifestyle” should recognize that disapproval should not warrant stigmatization and unequal treatment” (pages 50-52).

In addition, and in particular, Olson writes, “We encourage couples to marry because the commitments they make to one another provide benefits not only to themselves but also to their families and communities. Marriage requires thinking beyond one’s own needs. It transforms two individuals into a union based on shared aspirations, and in doing so establishes a formal investment in the well-being of society” (p. 48).

This from our “enemy,” a conservative Republican.

The work of justice has to do exactly with this quality of thinking beyond one’s own needs. It has to do with a quality of hospitality, of providing safety and welcome to the most vulnerable among us: the widow, the orphan, the traveler and the resident alien. It has to do with the quality of being open: not having a closed mind, but an open mind; not having closed arms, but open arms; not having a closed and hardened heart, but a heart that is open to the pain and suffering of fellow human beings and the pain and suffering of the earth.

As we travel together down this dangerous Jericho road, may we not pass by the wounded, but see one another as reflections of a divine image, of being human beings first, and therefore, related.