

# **GIVING LIFE THE SHAPE OF JUSTICE**

**A Sermon on the Second UU Principle,**

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**Wildflower UU Church of Austin, Texas**

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**I would like to begin my part of the service with a statement of gratitude to this and the 5 other UU churches and fellowships where I have had the honor and privilege of being a lay preacher. The word preacher comes with baggage for many of us, but I have made peace with the word and love to use it along with the word sermon. We could make an entire service on UU's and the controversy of liturgical vocabulary, but that is for some other day. Anyway, I thank you for being here and participating in my take on the second UU principle.**

**One of my personal gospels is the cartoon strip, Calvin and Hobbes. Bill Waterson pretty much nails the ills of society in these words:**

I think life should be more like TV. I think all of life's problems ought to be solved in 30 minutes with simple homilies, don't you? I think weight and oral hygiene ought to be our biggest concerns. I think we should all have powerful, high-paying jobs, and everyone should drive fancy sports cars. All our desires should be instantly gratified. Women should always wear tight clothes, and men should carry powerful handguns. Life overall should be more glamorous, thrill-packed, and filled with applause, don't you think?

Sorry, Calvin, I have to disagree with you on that one.

When the Worship Team discussed plan for sermons for the next year the subject of a need for another Sermon on one of the UU principles arose. I quickly volunteered to preach on the 2<sup>nd</sup> principle. My motive, though admirable in its generosity of spirit also had its ulterior component. To preach on the 2<sup>nd</sup> principle is to preach on all

the principles. I will list the principles now in kid friendly language, adapted from the 7 principles of the UUA by-laws.

As UU's, we agree that

1. Every person is important and valuable.
2. All people Should be treated fairly and kindly.
3. We should accept one another and keep on learning together.
4. Each person should be free to search for what is true and right.
5. All people have the right to speak out and have a say in things that matter to them.
6. We should help build a peaceful, fair and free world.
7. We need to take care of the earth, the home we share with all living things.

So, I hope you see that the 2<sup>nd</sup> principle, justice, equity and compassion in human relations, is the one from which all others flow. I liken this idea to the new commandment from Jesus which, in my opinion, supersedes the original 10 . His words are from John chapter 13, verse 34 “ A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another, as I have loved you.”

Principles and litanies of social justice abound in world religions and humanitarian organizations. Catholics have the principle of compassion for the poor. The United Nations charter has a list of basic human rights.

Islam is probably the most misunderstood and maligned religion these days. Shirin Ebadi, winner of the 2003 Nobel peace Prize said in her acceptance speech “Islamic law must be interpreted in a way

that upholds freedom of speech and religion. Whenever Muslims kill people in the name of Islam, you should know they are misusing Islam, because it is the religion of peace and justice.”

Our denomination lists our support sources for the principles collectively as “The Living Tradition”. However, the late Rev. Bill Gold called these sources the UU gospels. Today I am using the living tradition/gospels which are:

“Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

The words “ the powers and structures of evil” are used here as the philosophical opposites of justice and equity.

The 3 abstract nouns from the 2<sup>nd</sup> principle are derived from Latin roots.

Justice is the act of being in conformity with what is morally upright and good.

Equity is the state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair.

Compassion is the sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together ***with a desire to alleviate it.***

Rev. Dr William Murry rather cynically stated in a sermon at a meeting of his district in the northeast that many UU churches have 2 types of members: those who believe that spirituality should be the focus of the church’s work and those who believe that social action should be the focus of the church’s work. If that is true, we at WFC do not fit those paradigms. And for that I say-- thank God, thank the Goddess, thank the higher power, thank the human will, thank the human brain, thank reality. At our church, I think it is safe to say, our focus is a co-mingling of spirituality and social action. I choose to think the 2 are inseparable. For this church, may it ever be so!

So why are we Unitarian Universalists interested in social change? We come here seeking a religious community. We come here seeking a wholeness, which we can't find sitting at home or even walking in the woods. We come for the strength, affirmation and security which community gives us. That strength turns inward to support and nurture us individually and it stretches us outward to care for the immediate needs of the world's people and to be able to **change** the world

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“Justice”, wrote Benjamin Disraeli “is truth in action.”

Spread the news that we have a very socially active community here at Wildflower Church. Our social action team and individuals on their own and in groups are actively supporting Hands On Housing, educating others about mental health and the safety of battered women and children, promoting literacy, providing school supplies for needy children, teaching compassion and support for rehabilitation of those in prison, working locally and globally on environmental issues , volunteering for highway beautification, serving in The Peace Corps, campaigning for gay rights, marching to protest the war, registering voters, teaching that birth control information and means are rights of all earth citizens, making our WFC a welcoming congregation to gays, lesbians and transgendered people, promoting elder care rights, mentoring underprivileged children, discussing compassionate death and dying issues, helping the homeless, contributing to the Capital Area Food Bank, using public transportation, offering living wages, and so on. I am sure I have left some out.

Our UU history is peopled with human instruments of social change: Clara Barton, Jane Addams, Susan B. Anthony, Dorothea Dix, Clarence Darrow, Julia Ward Howe, Florence Nightingale, Susan B. Anthony, Margaret Sanger, Malvena Reynolds, Daniel Elsberg, Whitney Young, and Christopher Reeve, to name a few of the more well-known ones.

Their voices call out to us to continue the good fight, for our work is far from done. “Injustice anywhere,” admonished Dr. King, “is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Here are a few facts about our planet that are humbling , especially for those of us who have lives of comparative wealth and freedom.

900 million people in the world are illiterate---9 million in the US are functionally illiterate.

3 billion people worldwide live on less that \$2 a day.

2,600.000,000 people in the world do not have access to adequate sanitation.

11 million children under the age of 5 die each year from easily preventable diseases such as diarrhea, malaria and measles.

25,000 people die every day as a result of poor water quality.

It takes 900 liters of fresh water to grow a kilogram of wheat, yet it takes 100,000 liters of fresh water to grow a kilogram of grain-fed beef.

I asked a number of my friends here in the congregation to go on line and take the ecological footprint test, and many of them have reported their scores. It is a way to show how much of the earth's resources you personally are using. I will not out those folks from here with their scores ---but they may choose to tell you over coffee. I do not want to tell you my score. Living alone in my own house, driving a car instead of using public transportation, and a few other things I would like to change drive my eco-hog score up. In my embarrassment and shame I have vowed to take the score a year from now and have a significantly lower score. A few years ago in LA I drove behind a big black "Hummer" with a bumper sticker which read, "Save our planet". Oh such a delicious opportunity for self-righteous indignation and yet, hypocrite that I am, I do not want to tell you my ecological footprint score!

One of our living tradition prophets wrote,  
"I cannot do everything, but at least I can do something."

It is easy to get overwhelmed and discouraged. In light of the statistics above one could sink in despair. What can we do? What difference can I make?

You may have heard the story attributed to Loren Eiseley the ecology writer. A man walking along the beach early one morning sees a young boy picking up starfish and flinging them back into the ocean. The man asks him why he was doing that. "Well, you see," the boy answered "these starfish that wash up on the shore overnight will die in the hot sun, so I am throwing them back in the water." Looking down the beach and seeing hundreds, if not thousands, of stranded star fish, the man says, " you'll never get to enough of them to make a difference." As the young man flung the next starfish toward the waves, he replied, "It'll make a difference to THIS one."

I cannot do everything, but at least I can do something.

In our UUA principles compassion is spelled out as the affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person, and as justice, equity and compassion in human relations. These principles are absolutely fundamental to UUism. We are united not so much by theology as we are by our commitment to love and justice. "Deeds, not creeds" is basic to us.

Our faith calls us to work to transform the world. If we preach the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we will be led to end poverty and homelessness and hunger and discrimination due to race, gender or sexual orientation. If we truly believe in justice, equity and compassion in human relations, we will be concerned about a more equitable distribution of resources and wealth and a living wage. If we truly believe in the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all, we will be working for these in every way we can. If we truly believe in the interdependent web of all existence, we will work to end global warming and air and water pollution. **These**, and not doctrinal correctness, are the **true** measures of a religion that is vital.

What else can we as individuals do? In the words of Robert Kennedy,

“It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

- ▶ I cannot do everything, but at least I can do something.



Be mindful of the negative “-isms” out there. Witness for our principles in our daily lives. Speak out against jokes or negative remarks in the form of homophobia, racism, religionism, sexism, agism, lookism. Etc.

Volunteer for some social action issue that you have never helped with before.

Recycle more—even in little ways. Use a junk-mail envelope instead of a purple post-it note---then put it in the blue bin instead of the trash can when you are through using and reusing it.

Buy local vegetables and fruits from farmers’ markets.

Take a cloth bag to the store whenever you can.

Pick up trash in your neighborhood.

Buy recycled products, or better yet. invent ways to use things others discard.

Xeroscape your yard

Turn out the lights when you leave the room.

(And, a personal favorite of mine—shower with a friend)

Think globally, but act locally.

Remember the starfish.

At least I can do something.

Join with others.

**Margaret Mead reminded us, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."**

Join with others in organizations which promote social changes. I offer 3 examples you may want to look into.

The UU Service Committee, an affiliate with the UU Association, trains and organizes its members and supporters to advocate for legislative policies which foster social justice. They also educate them about human rights issues and rally thousands of UUSC members who have joined their Human Rights Network into action each year. Members of the network receive action alerts on key UUSC public policy issues and are encouraged to contact their legislators to advocate for just laws.

UUSC staff members work with members of Congress, the executive branch, and other U.S. government and United Nations officials to press for U.S. domestic and foreign policies that respect, promote and protect human rights. Go on line and find out how to join, or talk with members of our Social Action Committee here this morning.

You may wish to put your money and energy into the Human Rights Campaign, which specifically strives to end discrimination against Gay, Lesbian, Bi, and transgender citizens.

The mission of grassroots.org is to serve as a catalyst for positive social change by connecting businesses and non-profit organizations and providing forums for offering free action oriented information and how to volunteer on important projects. Check it out on line.

I cannot do everything, but at least I can do something.

A religion without responsible ethical action is not genuine religion.

When I say love and compassion I do not mean words on a greeting card. Love is an action verb in this matter rather than an abstract noun. It is extending yourself on behalf of others. It leads to a concern for justice, for love without justice is mere sentimentality. Love that is meaningful is active. For us, caring for others is a spiritual matter. Service is a spiritual matter. Social justice work is spirituality at work.

Concern for one's fellow human beings and for the environment leads to social justice work. True spirituality does not mean that we turn our backs on the world but that we have a foundation and a center for our lives from which we can live more meaningfully and with greater awareness of life's joys and sorrows. Spirituality and social justice go together. Love one another.

Moreover, I believe that social justice work is a form of spiritual **growth**. It has been for me. My strongest contribution to justice is to teach and promote literacy. President James A. Garfield said in a speech "Next in importance to freedom and justice is popular education, without which neither freedom nor justice can be permanently maintained." Think, if you are not already, about the little boy in the story for all ages this morning. Though he worked a man's job all day, he finally learned to write his name. In different circumstances, as in living a middle-classed life in our country, he would be reading and writing and learning the planets.

I also think that one of the foundations for social justice work is the sense that we are not isolated individuals but part of the human community. I like to think that the word Unitarian now refers not so much to the oneness of God as it once did but to the oneness of humankind.

This sense of the unity of all things implies that instead of every person being devoted to his or her own selfish desires, we need to be devoted to the common good. Only when we as a nation put the common good ahead of our own personal interests will we begin to

become the nation we should be. Meanwhile it is this sense of human solidarity that is part of our UU spiritual foundation for social justice work.

So to me that foundation is to be found in these things: love, compassion, empathy, caring for others, our seven principles, affirming the worth and dignity of every person, a sense of human solidarity and a sense that what we do for others is a deeply spiritual matter.

Iconic American mother, Rose Kennedy frequently quoted Luke chapter 12, verse 48 to her children: To whom **much has been given, much will be expected.**"

The hymn for which my sermon is named is one of my favorites and it always moves me:

Carolyn McDade wrote "Spirit of Life" very late one evening or early morning in 1978 after returning from a social justice meeting that was mourning the very recent assassination of San Francisco City Supervisor Harvey Milk. Harvey Milk had been the first openly gay person elected to public office in the state of California. His election had made it seem possible that indeed gay people could be elected to public office and his murder by another City Supervisor brought home the great fear and hate that still existed in this country. The meeting she had left had been emotionally painful. People began to question if it mattered what they did or how they could continue. And Carolyn McDade says writing this song was writing a prayer. "It was not written. It was prayed into being. Even now I remember the despair... finally at home, my family asleep, I did what I so many times had done. I moved to the piano. In the dark I sat. As always, in singing my heart was freed. There was no plan or expectation in that moment, only a deep and immediate plea by a despairing soul to all that moved generatively through life. My ardent desire was to stay faithful to the movements I loved, to the people of these movements, their tally of goodness toward a world healthy and just for all, a world in which reverence shone among us. The prayer was complete. It connected me and continues to connect me with that which I need in order to continue on."

I close this morning with that prayer.

Spirit of Life, come unto me.  
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.  
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea, move in the hand,  
giving life the shape of justice.  
Roots hold me close, wings set me free,  
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

Blessed Be!