

**The Religious Imperative of a Living Wage**  
**January 10, 2010**

I don't know if I tell you all this often enough—I hope I do, but if not, let me tell you now: I love this congregation. I love the warmth, I love the welcome, I love that every age on the spectrum passes through our doors. (Remember what that spectrum looked like last Sunday during Time for All Ages, when people lined up by age, from 19 months to 92 years old. Remember? It was beautiful.) I love *those* things about you, and I love that Sunday after Sunday, year after year, you all are willing to go the extra mile to make sure that church—*good* church—happens.

And on Sundays like today, you literally, and figuratively, go a *few* extra miles. Not only do you find your way to this temporary home away from home, several of you load piles of chairs into your cars, and drive them here, to make sure everyone has a place to rest their souls, weary or not.

Essentially, what I'm trying to say is, you all make beloved community happen. You all, individually and together, in your searching and your working and your singing and your greeting one another, not only make beloved community happen, you show its transformative power.

Think about it. Think about the transformative power, for instance, of people opening up and telling their personal stories about birth, love, and death, as four Wildflowers did last Sunday, or of people sharing their lifelong spiritual journeys, as they do in the This I Believe services. Think about the transformative power of people saying, yes, we will bring our weight in food, or as close as we can to it, to church the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and collect nearly 4,000 pounds of food to take to a local food pantry. Think of people saying yes, I will take a week out of my busy life to go to the Gulf Coast and do hurricane recovery work. Think about those

things. Your generosity *and* your vulnerability are two powerful truths that I believe make Wildflower Church the beloved community that it is. I thank each and every one of you for your willingness to make it so.

And, because I am your minister, I invite you now to hold that vulnerability and that generosity and that sense of beloved community in your hearts and minds, and come with me, for a moment, on a little trip. Let's get on a bus, accompanied by people from other Austin area churches—men and women, Spanish speakers and English speakers, Catholics and Protestants, old and young, gay and straight alike—and go down I-35 to San Antonio, for a meeting of over 500 people from all over Texas—people from Dallas and Fort Worth, from Houston and El Paso, from San Angelo and Lubbock, from Laredo and Del Rio, from San Antonio and, of course, Austin. We gather in a hotel conference room. We grab

coffee and breakfast tacos and take our seats. As panelists gather up front, we can't help but look around at all the people, some vaguely familiar, some we've never seen before, some new friends we've made at other meetings. And then *this* meeting begins. With roll call, we hear, in Spanish and English, of all the groups being represented today, and when our own Kathy Murphy steps up to the mike and introduces herself, that she's from Wildflower Unitarian Universalist Church, and that she is here with nearly seventy other members of Austin Interfaith, we all rise and cheer. It feels good, doesn't it?

Well, in truth, yesterday, it did feel good. It did feel good when, OK, not all of us, but five of us Wildflowers did indeed take a bus down to San Antonio with other members of Austin Interfaith for an economic conference of all the Texas organizations of the Industrial Areas Foundation, also known

as the IAF. In large group gatherings and in smaller workshops, the topics we covered included public education, health care, state taxes and revenue, immigration, and the living wage.

By the end of the day, I was excited, energized and ready to change the world. It was if the call of Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes was echoing in my ears: “This do!—and lo! the ills of life will vanish and the terrors of society be no more.”

Along with that echoing call, I knew I had also experienced at *this* meeting, just as I do on Sunday mornings, the vulnerability and the generosity, the warmth and the welcome, the personal stories and the willingness to serve, that make manifest the transformative power of beloved community.

That's why I wanted you to come with me, if only in your mind's eye for now, to see what I saw. I wanted to offer you at least a peek into how the beloved community we share can and does grow from the core we already have, when we broaden our horizons and connect with the beloved *humanity* of those whom we might otherwise call strangers.

Of course, we don't necessarily need to travel to San Antonio to do so. Austin itself offers up plenty of humanity with whom to share our generosity and our vulnerability, and with whom, out of such sharing, we can create an even wider circle of beloved community.

Of course, again, in doing so, there's a risk we take. By choosing to know the stranger, we risk witnessing and acknowledging and *understanding* the suffering and the struggle that is around and among us. We risk seeing, in the words of Lao-Tse, those who "are left behind..." those who "are

kept hungry...” those who “are tipped out...” We risk seeing the presence of an injustice which in turn demands that we ask ourselves, as a religious people, how might we join in the struggle for change?

Now, I know that just the thought of struggling for justice might make some of us think to ourselves, it’s too much work. I’m exhausted just thinking about it. And I hear where you’re coming from. But let me tell you a little story I heard yesterday about too much work. (Now, this is a Unitarian Universalist paraphrasing a Presbyterian explaining an idea from the Hebrew Bible, but here it goes:) In Egypt, the Hebrew people were enslaved, and worked every day—*every* day—under the cruelest of conditions. As slaves, their value, basically, was equal only to their labor. That’s the little story of too much work.

Fortunately though, when the Hebrews escaped Egypt and slavery, and when Moses came back down from the mountain with the ten commandments, one of the commandments proclaimed that the Hebrew people *must* honor the Sabbath. This meant, along with honoring their God, who had rested on the seventh day, that they were called to see *themselves* as more than just laborers. They were now *obligated*, in fact, to spend time in rest, time with their families, time in reflection. They were obligated, in other words, to remember and reclaim their inherent worth and dignity as human beings.

Now, being that the first of our seven religious principles is that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, it might seem natural for us to respond to this story with yes, of course these people, escaped from slavery,

deserve to practice the Sabbath. Of course they should be, and are, valued for more than just their labor.

But when we fast forward a couple thousand years to, say, 1912, and hear, as we did in Debbie's reading, about the living and working conditions which Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes railed against in New York City at that time, we are forced to ask how free many of our kindred men, women and children have been throughout the millennia.

And when we fast forward from 1912 to the present moment, and the present place, and take a look around, still we must ask ourselves why it is that so many people in our own community are still unable to practice a real Sabbath—to have time for rest, for family, for reflection; for, as John Haynes Holmes puts it, “physical recreation and moral inspiration”? We must ask why it is that some of our Austin neighbors are treated, to paraphrase Holmes, as labor units,

and not comrades, as pack-animals or machines, and not fellow-men and women.

If that sounds dramatic, let me share with you some statistics that speak to the conditions under which many Texans live and work. According to the Center for Public Policy Priorities here in Austin, as of December 2009, 3,748,995 Texans live below the poverty line; 75% of Texan families living in poverty have at least one or more workers in the family. As of October 2009, the Capital Area Food Bank reports that “Texas has the second highest rate of food insecurity in the nation, at 16.3%,” here in Austin, “approximately 175,000 people receive food through Capital Area Food Bank’s efforts,” and “43% of the households [receiving food there] include at least one employed adult.”

In other words, nearly half the people receiving food assistance at the Capital Area Food Bank are working, but are not making a living wage.

What's a living wage? Essentially, a *living wage* (as opposed to a minimum wage), ensures a family the basic rights of food, shelter, clothing, public education, decent health care, and Sabbath, without having to receive public assistance.

What's the bottom line for a living wage? Here in Austin, the Department of Health and Human Services, as well as the city-owned electric utility provider, Austin Energy, determine that anyone with income levels at or below 200% of the federal poverty level is eligible for public assistance. If we use a one-income family of four as the standard family unit, and use the United States Health and Human Services formula to calculate what 200% of the federal poverty level is, we arrive at a living

wage needing to be at least \$44,000 per year, or \$21.20 per hour. Dipping below that, and again considering a family of four, people working at 175% the federal poverty level earn \$18.55 per hour, and people working at 150% of the federal poverty level earn \$15.90 per hour.

Contrast these numbers with the *minimum* wage of \$11.00/hour that is offered to many employees of the City of Austin. That translates to \$22,880 per year, which is just over half of what is considered a bottom line *living* wage here in Austin. Many of the same people who work for the city must also receive public assistance from the city.

Then there are those who work at the State of Texas minimum wage, which is \$7.25 per hour. You can see, even with *three* people in a home working at the minimum wage, that this barely raises them to 200% above the federal poverty level. With three people working fulltime, or perhaps with one

person working two fulltime jobs, or any combination thereof, little room is left for people to experience their lives as much more than the sum of their labor. In such an economic system, there is no room for rest, for family, for “physical recreation and moral inspiration.” There is no room, in other words, for the kind of vulnerability and generosity that makes for transformative, beloved community—the things *we* get to experience at *least* every Sunday.

Now, next Sunday, immediately after our service, the Wildflower Austin Interfaith team is going to host a civic academy that will explore how the living wage ties in with tax subsidies that are being offered by the city to large corporations considering moving to Austin. We will go into more details there, and illustrate in more depth how the poor keep getting poorer, while the rich get richer. I encourage you

to attend that academy, as one small step in joining the struggle for justice and change.

Remember: the Hebrew people had a really powerful (and kind of cranky) God, Moses, and the Red Sea on their side in their struggle to escape from slavery and return to lives that affirmed and promoted their inherent worth and dignity. We might see things through a slightly different lens, and play down (way down) the role of God and prophets and miracles, but we're still no less obligated to stand up for justice alongside those who seek freedom from poverty.

And remember: we're not being asked to cross the Red Sea ourselves. Just Lady Bird Lake. That's where City Hall is, and that's one place where our voices can make a difference, especially if we join them with the voices of those who truly are struggling to live decent, dignified lives in this weird, blue, progressive, caring, creative city we share.

So here is my call to you, and to myself, which is really the call of John Haynes Holmes nearly a hundred years ago, and perhaps the call of God him/herself millennia ago. Let us strive to give our neighbors “a chance from babyhood up.” Let us “open to them the doors of opportunity... share with them the favours now granted to the favoured few.” Let us “strike from their limbs the chains of an unjust economic system,” and most of all, let us “treat them as brothers [and sisters], not as slaves—as comrades, not as labour units—as fellow men [and women] not as pack animals or machines. Believe in them, emancipate them, co-operate with them. This do!—and lo! the ills of life will vanish and the terrors of society be no more.”

This is my call, and to this I say, amen.

Hymn #109, As We Come Marching, Marching