

In the Face of Such Inequities

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst
 The Reverend Alison Wohler
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“In the midst of a world marked by tragedy and beauty there must be those whose exuberance rises with lovely energy that articulates earth’s joys.....There must be those whose presence invites people to be themselves without fear....There must be those who gather with the congregation of remembrance and compassion, draw water from old wells.....There must be those who heal, transform, and bless life.” These are some of the words from our Call to Worship.

We have been celebrating many things this morning. We have been witnessing, paying attention, to our successes and our commitment to each other and this society, to the joy of creative expression (our banner), and to our hopes for our children. And we should be doing all of that, absolutely! A great part of why we choose to do this together rather than alone, is because we know how important it is to have this community of loving relationships, our resource, our well spring of hope. We are called to be here for each other.

But we are also called to do more. Amidst the details of our separate lives, as we share our joys and concerns and talk and sing, comes a revelation and a source of transformation. We are moved, through the similarity of our life stories and our appreciation of the interdependent web, to widen our thoughts and our responsibilities beyond the safety and self-satisfaction of this place. We see that our lives are connected beyond this society to the furthest reaches of what we can possibly understand. We must venture outside our comfort zone to what is not so comfortable.

Our Call to Worship this morning also contained these words: “There must be those who speak honestly and do not avoid seeing what must be seen of sorrow and outrage....There must be those who are restless..... communities of people who seek to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly on this earth....There must be religious witness.”

These words remind us that there must be religious witness to all the aspects of our existence, for celebrations of life itself, as well as concern for the inevitable failures of our human nature. We are called to witness to the injustices of the world, injustices that knock at many of the doors even in a state such as Massachusetts, even in a town like Amherst, even at the front door of this Society.

One such injustice, often neglected in this country as we try to put a dent in the face of so many global tragedies of economic and geographic failure, is the shameful fact that many in our midst, here in the United States of America, do not earn enough money, even working full time, to purchase the basic necessities of life for themselves and their families. These are the working poor – working for the ridiculous wage of \$5.15 an hour.

Each of us probably knows someone working for the minimum wage. We surely know people who cannot afford to buy health insurance, and whose employers are not providing it for them. At \$5.15 an hour, a person working full time will earn only \$10,700 in an entire year. For a single mom with two children, this is still \$6000 below what is defined as the poverty level in this country.

Just a few days ago, Howard Dean, for the Democratic party, sent out these statistics via the internet:

- The federal minimum wage has been stuck at the same rate since 1997. In the time since then the salaries of United States Senators have gone up by \$31,600, almost three times the entire yearly income of someone on minimum wage.
- The real value of the minimum wage is more than \$3000 below what it was a generation ago.
- The minimum wage is the lowest it has been in over 50 years relative to the average wage.
- Raising the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour adds up to more than one year of groceries, over 9 months of rent, a year and a half of heat and electricity, or full tuition for a community college degree.

Dean calls us to make our support known, by our signature, for Senator Kennedy's Fair Minimum Wage Act, which can pass this year if enough people sign on. He says that even the most out of touch Republican cannot ignore the wishes of 100,000 Americans, and 90,000 have already given their support.

In Kenton's pulpit editorial, he mentioned a related issue, the ever increasing gap between the rich and the poor in this country. A group called United for a Fair Economy, that seeks to narrow this gap, found that by the year 2004, CEO compensation at large companies had ballooned to 431 times that of their own workers. If the minimum wage had advanced at the same rate as chief executive salaries since 1990, America's bottom of the barrel working poor would be making legal wages of over \$23.00 an hour instead of \$5.15.

Corporate profits are being fed by cost cutting reductions to worker health care and retirement, lay offs and plant closings. More and more men and women end up working in what is referred to as the Service Industry, lowering the unemployment numbers but increasing the numbers of those working for minimum wage with no health insurance coverage.

It is shameful. Where are the ethics of our work places? To what god does at least some of the corporate world bow down? I do not want to generalize completely. The principles of Unitarian Universalism call upon us to work for justice in the face of such inequities. In 1964 the UUA passed a general resolution on poverty that said "poverty, in the midst of plenty, [is] intolerable to the religious conscience and incompatible with our principles of economic justice." Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker, over 150 years ago, called us not to charity, but to systemic change with these words: "The old poverty is parent of new poverty...Poverty will not be removed till the causes thereof are removed....we need both palliative care and remedial justice." We are called to do more than stick to the "safe" issues requiring only some of our extra cash.

While I understand that this subject is complicated, and that there will always be a tension between providing economic justice in the global arena and making sure we take care of our own, my gut

tells me that the level of the injustice in our society has now gone far beyond mere tension. What are we to do, in the face of such inequities?

What are we to do with our concern and our questions and our shame and our disgust about so many different forms of what boils down to just one simple fact: some people in this country believe they are better and deserve more than other people. Truth is that we're all in the same boat, and we're finding out just how small that boat is these days. With the water that poured out over the levees last summer, came a flood of truth. And that truth killed.

Among many other admirable organizations, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and UUs for a Just Economic Society are focusing much of their efforts on the issues we are talking about this morning. As an update to the special plate collection we took on September 11 last year, for the devastation of the Gulf State hurricanes, the joint UUA-UUSC fund to which we sent our \$4400.00 has topped the three million dollar mark and is doing much to help. I am proud that we were willing to contribute to their work in such a generous way.

I so appreciated Kenton's editorial earlier in our service. He urged us to move beyond our personal comfort zones and do something concrete.

I would like to call us to something else as well. There is no way my brief sermon this morning can adequately address all of what is eating at our sense of fairness and distributive justice. I call us to have a larger discussion – a congregational discussion – about problems of social injustice and what we would like to do about them. Some of our outreach will always be done on the individual level, but some of what I would like us to talk about is how we/you would like to address social justice as a congregation, in the name of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst. How can we make a larger impact on the world outside these doors.

This discussion may be a difficult one. This is partly because our open mindedness, that wonderful inherent quality of our liberal religious tradition, also leads us to a certain reluctance to commit. I think there are times when we need to get past that.

The subject is larger than this morning. So, too, must our response be larger than just being here on Sundays.

So, stay tuned.....

We'll talk again....

And let me know if you would like to be a part of that discussion.