

“JUSTICE: WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?”

**a sermon by Preston Moore
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CALL TO WORSHIP

A shrewd participant in the struggle for justice once said, “Justice never can be a lofty ideal. It has no emotions or passions. It has no wings. Its highest flight is to the Blind Goddess that stands on the courthouse roof. It savors of syllogisms and fine distinctions which have no meaning or value in the important matters of life.” Now, what kind of words are these for celebrating Justice Sunday, an observance honoring the justice-making work of Unitarian Universalists around the country and around the world? To what meaning might these words open us about how we should compose ourselves for such work? Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

James Forbes is the Senior Minister of Riverside Church in New York City, an interdenominational, international, interracial church of over 2000 members affiliated with both the American Baptist Church and the United Church of Christ. He is a longtime friend of the Unitarian Universalist movement. In 2001, he spoke at UU General Assembly, on the occasion of the installation of a person of color, for the very first time, as our president. Dr. Forbes praised our justice-making, our distinguished five-hundred-year tradition of dissent and protest. And he offered us the challenge of a simple-sounding question. Why do we do it?

Dr. Forbes recalled Albert Camus’ famous observation that every protester proclaims a loud NO to whatever is being protested, but underneath that NO is always a YES. The word protest, after all, means to testify FOR something. So when we UUs protest and say NO to injustice, he wanted to know what we are testifying FOR.

It is not a question to be answered once and for all. And so, six years later, on the occasion of another Justice Sunday, it is worth reflecting on again. We could say, of course, that when we stand AGAINST injustice, we are testifying FOR justice. But that would be more of a paraphrase than a real answer, wouldn’t it? The real thrust of Dr. Forbes’ question is this: for Unitarian Universalists, is justice an end in and of itself, or is it a means to some greater, higher end?

To answer this question, we have to start with what justice-making is. In one way or another, the essence of it is equality -- evening things up on the basis of shared attributes or circumstances. All persons meeting a certain economic profile are entitled to foodstamps, assistance with housing and medical care. All citizens are entitled to vote, to get married. [pause] The policeman does not see a troubled youth who has been living in a literal or metaphorical garbage dump. He sees a person old enough to be held accountable as an adult for vandalizing a convenience store, within the clear meaning of a section of the penal code. Period.

The judge does not see a fearful senior citizen who has lived his entire life in an environment saturated with generations of racism and bigotry. He sees a restaurant owner who has refused service to people of color in violation of the clear terms of a public accommodations law. Period.

Justice-making blinds itself to the particularities of each person, both victims and perpetrators, seeing only those common denominators that are part of the profiles and categories it uses. Inevitably, it rests on the exercise of power to overcome the wills of those it is calling to account. If those called to account would respect the equalities in question of their own free will, there would be no need for justice-making.

Justice-making thus seeks to establish that people in a particular group are entitled to categorical fairness instead of categorical scorn or hostility. It accomplishes this by insisting on the substitution of categorical truths for categorical falsehoods. The categorical falsehood of racism, for example, is displaced by the categorical truth that all persons are entitled to equal treatment based on their common humanity, irrespective of color.

This achieves only a crude first approximation of the whole truth about the victims of injustice. The large, crucial part of the truth that resides in individuality and difference, rather than commonality and sameness, is consciously left in the blind spot. Justice-making does this because those it is trying to reach have been blinded by a false view of those victims of injustice. Blinded even to the the most basic commonalities between themselves and the victims, so that they cannot see the individual, particular truth of them one by one.

If the whole truth could be told and accepted by, and about, all of humanity, justice-making would disappear. This kind of truth-telling is the essence of love – to see and accept others for the whole truth they are, and to be seen and accepted by them for the whole truth we are. When human relating expresses the love in our hearts rather than the power in our minds, the way is revealed for us to embrace others with our eyes wide open, celebrating not only our commonality but also our individual differences.

As the theologian James Hillman observes of love, “The heart’s affections pick out particulars. . . . We fall for this one, not anyone.” This picking out reaches not only the factual truths observable with the eye, but also the range of potential truths in every person that are visible to the imagination. One of this morning’s poets sees not only a particular six-year-old boy, and falls in love not only with the keloid scar on his forehead, but also with his particular tragic and triumphal possibilities – alienated outsider, hard as a hubcap; loving father nurturing plants and people; and everything in between.

This unblindfolded, all-out truth-seeing and truth-telling is the strongest possible medicine for healing spiritual wounds and moving us toward wholeness. Without using the word love, that shrewd participant in the struggle for justice with whom we began today celebrated this kind of love-medicine. Having given us a de-romanticized rendering of justice, he went on to declare “There is no uncertainty in the meaning and effect of . . . sympathy, or generosity, or of understanding. Without these,” he said, “a person is dead...These emotions grow from his associations with his fellow humans. They are the children of imagination. They spring from

sensing the weakness, the troubles, and the sorrows of all those who live. They make the whole world kin." So said Clarence Darrow, an extraordinary lawyer with a great mind, a great heart, and an intimate acquaintance with life's full range of tragedy and triumph.

It would be a terrible mistake, though, to let Darrow's clearheaded distinction between love and justice cause us to undervalue justice-making. If all-out love ultimately lives in the particular, in the celebration of individual difference, we have to ask what enables us to see difference clearly. To say someone is "different" means he has some things in common with us and some things not in common. Difference is perceived by comparison. In artistic terms, the figure of difference is made distinct by the ground of commonality. So to see difference with unclouded eyes, we first must see our true commonality. This is the vital mission of justice-making.

Until this foundation is laid down, we cannot reach that blessed state of all-out love in and of the particular. With rare exceptions, love takes flight from the courthouse roof. Justice-making builds an edifice tall enough to bring love, our ultimate destination and destiny, into view. Humility about the limits of justice does not gainsay the nobility of justice-making. It is an essential step in the movement toward love, truth, healing, and wholeness.

And sometimes the tidy sequence of justice first and then love just doesn't apply. Sometimes, a lovestruck heart soaring high above the courthouse roof feels injustice for the first time and utters an unabashed protest. "From this day forward, I am an abolitionist." Was blind, but now I see. The paths may vary, but the ultimate destination does not. It is always a question of getting to love. Getting there always requires beginning where we are, and asking how much particularity our hearts are ready for.

So like all metaphors, the image of blind justice does finally break down somewhat. Justice does not really wear a blindfold. It's more like a filter that lets in commonality and, for the time being only, keeps out particularity. But metaphors must always call up a vivid image, and a lady of justice holding up scales and wearing infrared goggles just wouldn't cut it, and so the blindfold.

Total blindness is not justice, but rather, hostility – the perspective from which those different from us have been so otherized by fear and ignorance that even the common humanity they share with us has been banished from sight. Sometimes this fear-induced blindness is possessed by such a rage that the word hostility cannot convey it. And so to describe it, we reach for the language of the deepest malice imaginable: genocide.

Genocide is happening again in our world. Each time it has happened in the past century – in the Nazi Holocaust, in Cambodia, in Bosnia, and just ten years ago in Rwanda, there have been solemn declarations of "never again." But here we are again, in Darfur, a province of Sudan in Africa where 300,000 people have been killed and two-and-a-half million have been dispossessed for being part of the wrong ethnic group. (The Sunday Bulletin item on Darfur says 50,000 have been killed. We must have gotten our hands on a very out of date figure for that.) The area of crisis has grown from the size of France to the size of Western Europe.

In all of 2006, ABC News devoted a grand total of 11 minutes to Darfur, a little under half the time it spent sensationalizing a false confession to the killing of child model JonBenet Ramsey. As they have each time before, the governments of the most powerful countries in the world have either been slow to respond, or actually have inflamed the conflict. The United Nations response is mired in intramural politics.

Our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, whose work we single out for honor and support this Sunday, is intensely involved in the campaign to stop the genocide in Darfur. Right now, there is no point in talking about that all-out love of particular people, one-by-one, in Darfur. We can only mount a campaign to move from blind rage to the partial sightedness of basic human rights. A campaign based on the hope that someday full vision may be restored, step by step. The hope of someday moving from hostility to charity to the full acknowledgement of human worth and dignity, and finally to a way of relating that deserves the name love. The UUSC has become the longest arm of our justice-making capacity. In Darfur, it is in a position to be so much more than Amnesty International with a chalice added.

This conception of social justice work answers the “why do we do it” question posed to us by the Reverend Dr. Forbes of Riverside Church. But we still need to know whether the answer makes a difference in what we do – rather than simply being an interesting explanation of why we do it. Some ways of pursuing social justice move us closer to our ultimate values. Others do not. Still others may even teach away from those ultimate values. Justice-making is not just a matter of what we do but also how we do it.

In the marriage amendment battle last fall, many secular organizations and more than a few UU churches focused on arguing that the amendment was overly broad – that it swept in all sorts of groups other than gay and lesbian people. This was perceived – probably rightly – as a good strategy for getting Virginians who were hostile to gay and lesbian people to vote against the marriage amendment anyway.

Jennifer and I wrote an op-ed piece on behalf of the church, addressing the anti-gay and lesbian thrust of the amendment explicitly, and in religious terms. We argued that it treated our neighbors as less than human, by denying them the uniquely human power to make promises -- one of the most important promises a human being can make: a marriage vow. Now, in news media retrospectives, opponents of the amendment are described simply as having objected to it as overbroad. This is what stuck. It is a message that backhandedly implies that the amendment would have been fine if it had confined its prohibitive effects to gay and lesbian people – a message that violently injures our values.

I don't disrespect the judgments made by secular organizations and some UU churches concerning how to conduct this justice battle. I don't even say with absolute conviction that the way Jennifer and I chose to conduct it was better. I do say that as a group, UU churches in Virginia should have paid as much attention to the “how” of our justice-making as the “what”. Justice-making that aims solely at winning battles over rights and does not move us closer to full-out love and truth-telling is justice-making that I have trouble squaring with our mission.

These are problems over which secular justice-making organizations don't need to agonize. Their missions are clearer and simpler: vindicate rights. period. We have higher and more complex aspirations. We see every injustice in terms of a triangle composed of those targeted by the injustice, those committing it, and those protesting it. We see the souls of all three as wounded by injustice. And we gladly accept responsibility for moving all three toward healing and spiritual wholeness. It isn't supposed to be simple.

I had to learn these lessons the hard way. As some of you know, in my home church in Oakland, I once organized a social justice program called "gotCOM." This was when the "digital divide" was first becoming a hot issue. GotCOM's mission was to provide low-income families in West Oakland with computers, technical training, and internet access. GotCOM ran into big technical headaches – compatibility problems, equipment needing some rehabilitation, and lots of time spent testing and troubleshooting. I got very concerned about whether we could achieve the ambitious goals I had set.

I had long talks about these concerns with a minister friend in the Oakland church who was experienced in anti-racism work. She said that the computers and internet access and training were fine things to do, but the crucial piece was whether the volunteers and the families experienced a shift in relatedness. This, she said, was what we and the families had to give each other. She didn't use the word love explicitly, but looking back, it's very clear to me where she was trying to steer me: first, toward a shared experience of essential sameness rather than circumstantial difference. Second, toward seeing our marginalized West Oakland neighbors as rounded characters in the human drama, and celebrating our individual differences. And with that clear vision, falling in love – the love that friends, neighbors, and even just plain fellow citizens can start to feel for each other when justice has been done, when commonality and equality have been honored.

We are not the NAACP, or the Sierra Club, or Equality Virginia. In Oakland, if I had been working in such an organization instead of a church, I might have missed these important lessons about the deeper purposes and possibilities of justice-making. And if that lovestruck young man in this morning's reading had been somewhere other than in a church, hearing a sermon about slavery, his heart might not have taken a great leap. We are not just a conscientious secular justice-making organization with a chalice added. We are in the business of healing and wholeness, for ourselves and for every life we can manage to touch. Our justice workers are our EMTs, intervening when the lack of love we call injustice is as patent as an open wound. Intervening down the street and as far away as Darfur.

If justice were an end in itself for us, we could take our entire budget, and liquidate our property, and write big checks to some of those very fine secular justice-making organizations. We could go down to their offices and volunteer. We're not doing that. Instead, we're putting together the money to run the church for another year. Because we aim to fly far above the top of the statue of blind justice on the courthouse roof. We know it is time to claim our mission, time to fulfill our dreams. We're taking flight. It is our sad fate to have inherited a sinful world of genocide, hostility, demeaning charity, and injustice. But it is our destiny to transform this world into place of all-out love for each particular inhabitant of it. It is in our stars. So I ask

you, in the name of justice, of love, of truth, of healing, of wholeness, of your soul, of my soul, and of all souls, will you say of your church once again this year, “what a bargain, let’s buy it.”

AMEN.