

“Sermon on the (A)mount”

by Rev. Martin Woulfe & Deborah Cavanaugh-Grant
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Martin: Today Deborah and I are going to do something a little different. We're going to be speaking on the themes of spirituality and social justice. If we are successful – and we have not rehearsed this, have we?

Deborah: No. (Laughter.)

Martin: We will touch upon a number of points and hopefully weave them into something beautiful, coherent, and profound. We shall see! In particular, we're going to speak about social justice and how we as individuals, as this institution – this congregation – and as the larger movement participate in social justice, how we all participate in making something greater and grander than ourselves. And frequently we will touch upon the notion of spirituality or social justice. At least, in my upbringing, we often encounter those as two separate entities. But in this tradition, they are really parts of the same coin, different sides of the same coin. Because in this tradition we teach that if you are truly spiritually alive, then your life, your religious life, will include dimensions of working towards spiritual justice. And likewise if you are motivated to work for social justice, that feeds your soul and your spiritual life. So on that general introduction, I now invite Deborah to please begin.

Deborah: In thinking about this today, Martin and I – we haven't rehearsed; we have no idea what one another is going to say – the goal of this was to talk about justice in three different contexts: as individuals, as part of the UU congregation and then as part of this larger community. I thought about, well, what was I going to say to people for whom I have the utmost respect about your lives, what you do on a daily basis related to this justice issue. I feel such honor and to be blessed to be a part of this community and this denomination. So I looked up the word 'justice' and I thought, well okay, what does this word mean? I found what I thought was a pretty good definition: *It's posited as the criterion or human good in the social order. Justice: recognizing the inherent worth of human personality and seeking to secure the well-being of each. That is, expanding the quality of life. In ethical terms, we are mandated to treat persons as ends, and not means.* And I found this wonderful quote by a person I have a lot of respect for, Daniel Beregen, from my upbringing:

“The opposite of love is not hatred; it is indifference. When we have learned indifference, when we are really skilled and determined at the business of ignoring others, of putting our own well-being, our own options first, we may be quite certain that at that point, life has become hell.”

What does it mean to live a just life? What does one need to do? For me it means to be responsible and committed to being aware, number one; I need to pay attention, and then I need to act in a way that is in harmony with my values. For example, a core value for me is environmental justice. Protecting the natural

environment and the people, the wildlife that depend upon it by linking environmental security, human rights, and social need. Everyday in my job and in my personal life, I think about these issues. I learn about them and then I hope to act to promote this environmental justice. I often think about what I eat, what I buy, how it is grown and/or produced, how it is packaged, how I dispose of the waste, and how all of us on this planet are impacted by these choices. Now mind you, I mean, within some reason here because otherwise, I think, you would go crazy if everything you did, you thought about it in that way. I really do try to pay attention to this value that I have.

Another core value that I have is a sense of empathy, a commitment in service to those in my community. I think, out of respect and deference, I got that primarily from my mom, who from a very early age encouraged me to think about these issues, as a matter of fact, allowed me I can remember at 13, going down in Detroit – I grew up in Detroit – to a women’s rally. Think about how many of you have teenagers: would you let some kid get on a bus and go to some rally in the late sixties, early seventies? But she really allowed me to do that and gave me the freedom, understanding that was something, what I needed in my life. I think that is something I have carried ever since.

I want to close with this cool quote from this book:

“When everyday seems the anniversary of something awful, we do well to remember the story of the great-hearted soul, who ran through the city streets crying, ‘Power, greed, and corruption! Power, greed, and corruption!’ For a time, the attention of the people was riveted on this single-minded, openhearted person. All of life had become focused in one great question. But then everyone went back to work, only slightly hearing, some annoyed.

Finally, a child stepped in front of the wailing figure on a cold and stormy night. ‘Elder,’ said the child, ‘don’t you realize no one is listening to you?’

‘Of course I do.’ the Elder answered.

‘Then why do you shout?’ the child insisted, incredulous. ‘If nothing is changing, your efforts are useless!’

‘Ah, dear child, I do not shout only in order to change them. I shout so that they cannot change me.’”

Martin: Let me begin by sharing a reading from Dorothy Day, which is in our hymnal.

“People say: what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread into all directions. One of our thoughts, words, and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There’s too much work to do.”

In my early upbringing, there was a general theme which my parents shared with me, and which was incorporated in my religious development. It was: be careful of what you think, because it will lead to what you do. Be careful of what you do, because it will influence the person you are to become, your general character. And so I have always been mindful of the fact that our thoughts and our actions are woven together and that it leads us upon a particular path.

In my own path, there have been many, many different causes that I have been called to support. At an early age, I joined Amnesty International, the ACLU, the NAACP, the Unitarian Humanists group, various interfaith initiatives, a group called Infact. I participated in huge demonstrations in Europe against apartheid. I have participated in Unitarian caucuses with Interweave, a gay and lesbian concern group, also with the Unitarian Universalists Ministers Association, and for many years, as you are familiar, I have worked for many years with Catholic Charities, either through working with youth in a group home or in a shelter. It occurs to me that the way that I have spent my efforts and my money has been like the different directions of a finger. Imagine each finger is a different cause. One cause, one finger. At times I have felt that all my energy, all my efforts were being scattered. In my heart of hearts, I knew that I was working towards a goal that I considered important, a better world, but that each different finger of effort was going off in a different direction. I always hope that I would find one way to unite them all into one solid fist, to have more action and more results. I am a very results-driven individual.

I think that many UUs and many people of good faith, regardless of which tradition they come from, often feel that way. They are called to support many, many different avenues of social justice towards creating a better society, but we do wish that there was one stream that would bring everything together to make a more solid effort, so that we could all see results. That, I think, is what we are going to be moving towards.

Deborah: Thinking about that issue, I was searching around to try to find a way our denomination addresses this issue. I was raised in a Catholic tradition and then a Lutheran one, where there was a lot of emphasis on social justice issues, and many opportunities to discuss this. I found this wonderful book called *The Prophetic Imperative: Social Gospel, In Theory and Practice*, written by a UU minister. Do you know him Martin? This guy?

Martin: What was his name?

Deborah: Richard Gilbert? Does anybody – is anyone familiar with this book?

Martin: Oh, Dick. I know him.

Deborah: In this book, he contends that, “the UU movement lives under a prophetic imperative, a religious mandate, for the corporate address of the church to the systemic problems of society. I cannot prove that. I do not assert it as a divine

imperative. I only feel it deep in my bones. Otherwise, we will be trapped in individualistic, self-interest, promoted by the dominant reactionary rhetoric, and by neo-conservative ideology...

End of tape. Some text lost.

Deborah: ...develop a covenant as UUs. I know a lot of us aren't really comfortable with that kind of thing. We say the seven principles and people feel like we are non-dogmatic. Well, what does that mean? In this book, he really says that we as a community, we have to have this covenant. And here are some of the aspects of the covenant:

"We become human beings by making promises and keeping commitments. A UU needs to do more than sign a membership book. Members should be encouraged to explore the disciplines of freedom that issue in some form of explicit faith and ethic. Creedlessness does not imply absence of belief. It implies personal responsibility to formulate a credo, one that has both social implications and responsibilities in a community of faith. We are covenanting creatures. This covenant is a covenant with all being, with creative, sustaining, transforming powers."

Then he goes on to say that this covenant is also both individual and social. We are responsible not only for individual behavior, but also for the character of our society and the preservation of nature. The fourth part of this covenant is that it's directed toward the deprived and the powerless. St. Ambrose, an early church father, suggests this is no new thrust theologically. And lastly, he (Gilbert) said that good fortune obligates. He said that this corollary relates to the reverence of life. So for me, I think, what I would be hopeful for as a member of our congregation, and I have the opportunity to serve on our Social Action committee, is that we maybe look at developing some type of a social responsibility covenant in our own congregation.

Martin: I didn't press for us to rehearse this because there are certain themes that inevitably do arise in common. Covenant of course is one of the basic themes. People will ask, what makes this congregation different from a political interest group, or a group like Amnesty International, or some other group. Some people will say what makes us different then from a country club? And it is primarily the notion of covenant: the covenant that we do come together as a people to focus our energies, our efforts, our ideals towards one common goal. And each congregation will have some variation on the theme of what is that goal for which they are striving. But they tend to agree with the words of Margaret Mead, who wrote, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

In this institution in recent times, you have heard that we are supporting Habitat Humanity. It is an interfaith initiative; it is a good one. We had a small group of carolers around at Christmas time, that went out knocking on doors and singing our hearts out, raising money for the Ronald McDonald House. Earlier this year we collected money for

Guest at Your Table. Last Sunday, we collected money for the Living Tradition Fund, supporting ministers and seminarians in need. As members, we pay dues both to the Central Midwest District and to the Unitarian Universalist Association, supporting the development of religious education curricula for the entire denomination, and also supporting both new congregations and existing congregations. I suspect that some of that money in the future will be used to bail out UU ministers who officiate at gay and lesbian weddings.

In this congregation we also support fair trade. We support the Welcoming Congregation. We support the Green Sanctuary. And this is really just the tip of the iceberg. There are many ways that people do support a broad spectrum of good causes through this congregation. Some people serve through their generous volunteering: the leadership on committees, doing the legwork on those committees, serving on the board. Some of the things that you take for granted as you walk in: setting up the chairs, the arrangement of the flowers, all the little details that go into this congregation. It is no coincidence that today is the beginning of our pledge effort. You have seen these cards – I hope! This is your referendum, if you will, on the work of this congregation. We ask to you support this congregation both in terms of your volunteer labor, but also to contribute a fair share of whatever monies you can to support. You will also have noticed, I'm sure, during the last few weeks, the other card that says: This chair costs \$1,200 per year. Several people have remarked, well can't we get cheaper chairs! (Laughter.) And of course today this card was on every other chair, and I just wonder how many people instinctively chose not sit on one of these, but chose on one of the ones next to the side! (Laughter.) It is an effort that we will all work together on. Everyone bring their gifts to the table, great or small. We just ask that you are thoughtful about how you are contributing to this community. How you are supporting, not just paying the electricity bills or my salary or whatever costs are incurred by this congregation, but that you are supporting the greater mission of this congregation, which is working towards social justice, which means, in essence, a better world.

Deborah: Just as an aside, one of the kids – I teach Sunday school, 3rd through 5th grades – brought one of those cards. I won't say who it was, but it was very humorous. They said, they would just bring a chair from home! (Laughter.) I said I don't think that's what they really meant, and then we got into a whole conversation about what that really means. They are very interesting people to be around!

Today is Justice Sunday. If everyone would look into their bulletin, there will be a handout from the UU Service Committee, which is also referred to on the cover. This is one of the reasons why Martin and I are addressing this issue today. Thousands of UUs nationwide are going to join together to take action for social justice. We celebrate the vital role that we as individual UUs can play to support the work of UU Service Committee. We can often forget that we each have the power to help stop injustice in our world. The UU Service Committee works every day to put an end to this terrible injustice worldwide.

So what is this thing called the UU Service Committee? It's a nonprofit membership organization that is grounded in the seven principles. It has thousand of members and supporters. It's a powerful voice for justice and human rights in the United States and internationally. And, as Clare said, a note of history for UUs: it was founded by women and men during WWII to help victims of Nazi oppression in Europe. The role of the service committee in social justice work has taken many forms since 1939. It has consistently worked to empower women, support the struggles of oppressed racial, ethnic, and indigenous groups, and to defend the rights of children.

So how does this committee work? It works through a combination of advocacy, citizen action, and partnership with grass-roots organizations. Even though it's called the UU Service Committee, it's not a part of the UU Association. It's a separate organization. The programs are based on the belief that people working for economic change and social justice in their local communities know what it is best for themselves. It helps to build the capacity of local organizations to create long term solutions to human rights challenges in their communities by supporting their ideas and strategies rather than imposing external solutions. Another important thing that the UU Service Committee does is educate citizens about human rights issue, and we'll talk about that in a minute, so that they can make a difference in their own communities and around the world.

This year, the focus for this Justice Sunday is about the Burmese people. I don't know how many people are familiar with this issue, but for over fifty years they've endured isolation, totalitarian rule, and civil war. The brunt of this tyranny has been borne by women and children. This oppressed ethnic community – one example are the Karen people – the UU Service Committee has worked with members of Congress, the executive branch, and other government officials to press for domestic and foreign policies that respect, promote and protect the human rights of the Burmese people. Since 1995, they have worked to build grass-roots support for sanctions. Today we are asking that the crisis in Burma be addressed by the UN Security Council and that the Bush Administration become an advocate of the Burmese people on the international stage. Some concrete things that you can do today – we'll have some information outside in the foyer – is you can consider signing the Alien Tort Claims Act. So for all of the people in here that are attorneys, you obviously would know a lot more about this than I would, but the information that I've found says that this is a law that allows foreign victims of serious human rights abuse abroad, to sue the perpetrators in US courts. This ATCA, or the Alien Tort Claims Act, is being used in a federal case on behalf of eleven rural Burmese military. This act is under attack by multinational corporations, lobbying interests, and the Department of Justice, which seeks to repel this act, so that multinational corporations can maintain impunity and be free of human rights lawsuits. That's one concrete action that you could take regarding this issue.

Second, and as the appointed person for the UU Service Committee, I would encourage you to become a member. There are membership brochures out there. There are already many people who have become members and I thank you for that. Third, you could write to the President and ask him to bring this crisis in Burma to the

attention of the UN Security Council. Lastly, you can see on the brochure that you have, there is a URL for the service committee. You can check out that website and there's an opportunity to sign up for the monthly legislative alerts, if you are interested.

In closing, as UUs, we can choose to be part of an organization that is grounded in UU principles, that affirm the worth, dignity, and human rights of every person and the interdependence of all life.

Martin: Last night, after I left here, following Jarl Tremail's memorial service, I thought of Jarl and a quote came to mind, a quote by Emmanuel Kant. Kant wrote: "Two things fill the mind with delight: the stars above and the moral law within." I believe that the moral law within is something which is universal, both through all individuals and communities that we call humankind. I think that all people do yearn for a better world and do struggle with what they can do to make this a better world. We look at the news, we read the papers, we reflect and it occurs to us that this is, in the words of a poet, a bruised and hurting world. We ask ourselves, what difference can we make, what difference can I make. I believe that we can all work together and that our common efforts will, in the end, make more of an impact on this bruised and hurting world. We cannot eradicate all the ills in the world; it will never happen. But perhaps we can make it a better world.

I'll close with a story I heard some years ago: an individual dies. He goes and he meets God. He confronts God and says, "How could you allow all the suffering? The wars? The poverty? The illnesses?" He continues on and on, and his tirade grows, his anger grows and he's pointing at God and saying, "How could you allow this!" God is very patient and listens. When the man is finished, God says, "I've heard you. My question to you is: why did *you* allow it?"

We have a mission. Our mission is to save the world. As individuals, we can contribute something. As a congregation, we can contribute more. As an association and in participation with other like-minded communities, we can achieve much. This is our mission. I hope we will prove worthy.