

Bending Toward Justice?

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading **“Holy family” by Nancy McDonald Ladd**

The text for this reading can be found at: <http://www.uuworld.org/spirit/articles/151709.shtml>

Sermon: “Bending Toward Justice?”

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson once went on a camping trip. After a good meal and a bottle of wine, they lay down for the night, and went to sleep.

Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend awake.

“Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.”

Watson said, “I see millions and millions of stars.”

“What does that tell you?” Holmes asked.

Watson pondered for a minute.

“Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets.

“Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo.

“Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three.

Theologically, I can see that God is all-powerful
and that we are small and insignificant.

Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow.”

“What does it tell you?”

Holmes was silent for a very long minute, and then said,
“Watson, you idiot. Someone has stolen our tent!”

There are many ways to read the reality all around us.
It’s easy to get lost in the details and miss the big picture.

It’s possible to miss the obvious, because we are
not reading the right clues,
ignoring what we don’t want to see,
or simply oblivious—by distraction or design—to the truth of a situation.

So it is, I believe, too often with questions of justice,
or rather with questions of injustice.

So often, in our society,
we simply fail to see the hard truths of reality,
out of ignorance or intention.

To be fair, we find ourselves overwhelmed with the demands of daily life,
let alone the flood of news reports and emails in our inbox
calling on us to save the world by clicking here,
by signing this petition or that.

Many of us dutifully follow those directions.
We volunteer.
We petition and we protest.
We write letters and we write cheques.

We try in our own way to change the world around us—for good.

And, yet, we also grow tired—and sometimes we grow impatient—

with the state of the world and, if we're honest, with each other.

We, Unitarians, are not immune to crankiness.
In fact, it sometimes seems to be our spiritual practice!

You've probably heard the term "compassion fatigue,"
which describes the burnout that plagues many people
who've given of themselves and their resources
until they can give no more.

It's not that they're without compassion,
it's just that they've spent what they had and wiped out their reserves.

Indeed, I think that's one of the most important reasons why this community exists—
that we might be
renewed and replenished in one another's company
to go forth from this place to meet the problems of this world
with new insight, with greater courage, and with our flagging spirits
charged up with an ever-growing appreciation
for the ways our lives are tied up with everything else on this planet.

And, yet, even that's not always enough to fight the fatigue,
to overcome the exhaustion of always overcoming.

There is a weariness that sets in that paves a jaded path
toward ambivalence and inaction.

We become wary. We lose our edge, and we lose our will—
to do what needs to be done to make an enduring difference.
We leave it to someone else, or we simply leave it behind.

It was this very issue—this needling concern—
to which the great Unitarian minister Theodore Parker responded
in the middle of the 19th century when he asked:

"Shall justice fail and perish out of the world?
Shall wrong continually endure?"

"Injustice," he said, "cannot stand."

No armies, no alliance, can hold it up.
I do not pretend to understand the moral universe [he said];
[but] the arc is a long one...
And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”

This notion was made famous a century later by Martin Luther King, Jr.
in a speech to a trade union convention in 1961, where he proclaimed:
“I’m convinced that we shall overcome
because the arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

I stand here today wondering if you think that to be true?

Is humanity on a track toward justice?
Are we bending toward a world
that is made more fair and safe and peace-filled for all?

There are days when I have my doubts.
I can look around and see encouraging signs of progress everywhere,
and then I get another email from Human Rights Watch or Avaaz
and I’m convinced that it’s an endless march
of so many steps forward and so many back.

It’s in such moments that I’m reminded
that the moral arc of the universe is, indeed,
longer than I imagined, and often, longer than I can stand.

While I’ve lived long enough to see meaningful change
on a variety of social justice issues,
with each year I’m coming to the awareness
that there’s little chance I’ll live long enough
to see all the change I had hoped to witness.

Which begs the question for me—and for us—
of what direction the arc of history is bending.

It’s a question of faith,
because it’s not something you or I can know for sure.

Different religions regard this question in differing ways.

Eastern religions tend to accept that what is, is.

For Hindus, our “middle world” according to Huston Smith,
“will always contain the same amount of good and evil, pleasure and pain, right and wrong....
All thought of cleaning it up is in principle misguided.”

In the *Tao Te Ching*, the central text of Taoism, and an important influence
in Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism, Lao Tzu wrote:

Do you want to improve the world? I don't think it can be done.
The world is sacred. It can't be improved.
If you tamper with it, you'll ruin it.
If you treat it like an object, you'll lose it.

At times some force themselves ahead and some are left behind.
At times some make a great noise and some are held silent.
At times some are puffed fat and some are kept hungry.
At times some push aboard and some are tipped out.
The Master sees things as they are without trying to control them.
The Master lets them go and resides at the center of the circle.¹

That thought system is at odds with the notion that emerged
from the relentless prophetic voice found in the Jewish tradition
and that was later inherited by Christianity and Islam.

“What does the LORD require of you,” the Prophet Micah asked,
“but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Given the Jewish and Christian heritage from which we emerged,
Unitarian Universalism has long championed the conviction
that not only is it possible to create a better world,
but that it is incumbent upon us to strive to do so—
to work for justice and peace.

Our religious forebears rejected long ago
a belief in a fiery hell to be found in some afterlife.

¹ *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 29, various translations.

But they did recognize hell here in the every day—
in the injustices that were laid bare in poverty, inequality, and oppression.

And not being so sure about heaven either,
they took on the challenge of building up a bit of heaven
in the here and now, knowing it might be the best we could hope for.

Ultimately, they believed Parker's point to be true:
that the moral arc of the universe does, indeed, bend toward justice—
and that we have a part to play in the bending.

That point feels ever more important to me.
The world is making progress, but progress is not inevitable.
We humans are not, after all,
always driven by the best elements of our character.
There is a need for ongoing vigilance.
And there is a need for an ever-renewing dedication to the task.

If the arc is going to bend toward justice,
it will be by joining our hands with others to make it so.

That doesn't mean that each of us is entirely responsible
for solving the whole of such a daunting task,
but we are, I think, responsible for playing our part.

To do that requires that we pay attention,
that we be awake to the world around us,
that we see not only the stars, but the missing tent, too,
and that we demand to know where it's gone and why.

The work of justice in this world
begins with the sacred recognition that we are all in this together—
and it fundamentally involves looking after one another's welfare and well-being.

As Martin Luther King Jr. put it: "... all life is interrelated,
...we're caught in an inescapable network of mutuality
tied in a single garment of destiny.
Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.
For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be

until you are what you ought to be.
[And] You can never be what you ought to be
until I am what I ought to be.
This,” he said, “is the interrelated structure of reality.”²

And, I would add, it is central to our faith
and at the core of the seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism
that upholds the interdependent web of life of which we are a part.

Recognising that truth is the basis of justice,
which begins with the most basic notion of fairness—
a deep knowing that each of us—each and every life on this planet—
is worthy of the same fundamental human rights.

Knowing that “We’s all family now”—
that we’re all in this together, for better and for worse—
is what allows us to see, as MLK so memorably put it,
that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

A few weeks go, Bob and I were at the Johnson Space Centre in Houston.
(After dragging my rocket scientist husband for years through temples and mosques
and cathedrals, it was only fair that he took me to visit Mission Control.)

Proving that it’s possible to find a sermon illustration anywhere,
I stood in awe before a display of an ejection seat
that had flown on the first four Space Shuttle missions.

This seat was a means of escape should the unthinkable occur
and the crew needed to suddenly abort the mission, hopefulluy unharmed.

What was so moving to me about this metal and cloth contraption
was not the chair itself—one of two designed for each shuttle—
but what meaning it held.

After the initial two-men shuttle missions,
the astronauts demanded that the seats be removed,

² Warren, Mervyn A.; Taylor, Gardner C., *King Came Preaching: The Pulpit Power of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* InterVarsity Press., p. 174.

because as they crews grew larger—to five and six and seven—
the astronauts were unwilling for there to be
a means of escape for only two of them rather than all of them.

Either we all make it, they insisted, or none of us makes it.

And so it must be with us.

To bend the world toward justice means recognising
the truth of the human condition:
that we are locked into life together,
and that we share a common destiny,
whether we find ourselves on the subway or the space shuttle.

This is why our social justice work, and especially
our involvement with Amnesty International is so vitally important.

And it's why our commitment as a congregation to endorse
the UN's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples next month
is a crucial first step in our deepening commitment
to do what we can and do what we must
to pressure our leaders
to address and resolve, at last,
the lingering, festering wound of injustice
between Canada and her First Peoples.

To undertake this work as a congregation
will require us to stretch and grow.

It will require that we listen and learn and become accountable
to our Aboriginal friends and neighbours.

But, if we can do this, we will show through the living of our lives
that bending the arc of history toward justice
is nothing less than an act of faith.

In the 1950s, A. Powell Davies was one of the leading Unitarian voices of his day.
One morning, in a fiery sermon, he asked his congregation:

“Do you belong to a religion that says humankind is not divided—
except by ignorance and prejudice and hate;
[a] religion that sees humankind as naturally one
and waiting to be spiritually united;
[a] religion that proclaims an end to all exclusions—
and declares a brotherhood and sisterhood unbounded!

[A] religion that knows we shall never find the fullness of wonder
and the glory of life until we are ready to share it,
that we shall never have hearts big enough for the love of God
until we have made them big enough
for the worldwide love of one another.

As you have listened to me[,” he said,]”
have you thought perchance that this is your religion?

If so, [he then told them,] do not congratulate yourself.

Stop long enough to recollect the miseries of the world
in which you live; the fearful cruelties, the enmities,
the hate, the bitter prejudices,
the need of such a world for such a faith.

And if you can still say that this of which I have spoken is your faith,
then ask yourself this question: What are you going to do with it?”³

His question remains as pressing for us today
as it was for his congregation half a century ago.

So, what are we doing to do with it?

Let us choose to use our faith to bend this world toward justice.

Amen.

³ A. Powell Davies, *Without Apology: Collected Meditations on Liberal Religion*, ed. Forrest Church, 1998, p. 16.