

“Living 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.

What is it, exactly, that breaks your heart?

What is it in your world—in our world—
that tugs hardest at your heart-strings,
that causes you to sit up and take notice?

What is it that troubles your conscience and disturbs your sleep?

What is it that stirs you to say, “something has to change”?
And to know that that something may well involve you?

These are questions that confront us daily, if we’re listening.

And they’re questions that pop up everywhere at this time of year—
as we hear constant appeals for help on both radio and TV,
as we see Salvation Army volunteers dutifully ringing their bells,
and as we sort through inboxes and mailboxes
flooded with requests for December donations
for every good cause under the sun.

And, of course, that’s just the seasonal stuff.

The daily headlines steadily remind us of growing inequality, global conflict,
climate change, domestic violence, modern slavery, and so much more.

Leaving us overwhelmed by the news cycles that flood our minds
with horrific images of suffering, injustice, and intentional acts of violence
against the most vulnerable people on the planet.

Sometimes it’s too much to take, and too much to take in.

The crushing litany of it all
can render us hopeless, and seemingly helpless,
as our hearts are pulled in countless directions by the world's problems.

The hard truth is, that if our hearts are open to the world around us,
there's plenty that will break them.

But the follow-up question to what breaks your heart
is the equally pressing question: "what will you do about it?"

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Martin Luther King, Jr. made famous words first spoken
by Unitarian minister Theodore Parker in the 19th century.

Words of reassurance that though the moral arc of the universe is long,
it bends, ultimately, toward justice.

I know that image is an important one for many of us.
And, yet, I understand, too, why so many of us may question it.

Why we have our doubts that the arc is bending, indeed, toward justice
and not merely toward ever greater futility and frustration.

Most days, I trust that we're actually building a more just and loving world.

But I am simply astonished, at times,
by how remarkably slow the pace of progress can be.

And at how impatient my restless, broken heart grows
with our plodding speed.

The older I get, the more important the Season of Advent becomes to me,
as I understand more and more what it means to live in anticipation,
in hope, of something you can't be sure you'll ever live long enough to see.

In the Christian tradition, Advent is a time of waiting and preparation.
The carols about a babe born in a manger will come in their due time.

But the weeks leading up to the celebration of Christmas—
in churches, at least, if not in shopping malls—

are a more reflective time to reconnect with that deep, ancient longing that, for Christians, was satisfied in the arrival of a messiah.

Advent is a time for looking out at the world and looking within one's self, to give thought to just why a messiah might've been needed in the first place.

It's an introspective time to prepare one's heart anew for the in-breaking possibility of meaningful, lasting change, for the powerful hope of transformation.

And, it's a time that returns year after year, showing up the painful gap between the world as it is and the world as we hope it might someday be.

For those who long for a more just and loving world, it feels that this year more than **most** we are yearning for some glimmer of hope, some real reassurance that the renewal we so desperately need will come at last.

Maybe it's just me, but it seems there's a rising tide of despair that we humans may be unable, or worse, unwilling, to turn the world from our destructive ways.

When I sit with that despair, and truly feel it in my gut, I can deeply appreciate how one might be stirred to seek out a saviour.

I can see the very broad appeal—
be it among people today or people two millennia ago—
of looking to the heavens for some prophet
to guide us to another, better path.

For most of us as Unitarians, of course,
we look not to a humble, ancient manger for the salvation of the world.

(Though, it should be said, that the Jewish teacher who would, eventually, be given that miraculous and mythic birth story, did offer some very vital lessons about how a more just and loving world could come about.)

Still, as Unitarians, we know that building a just and loving world has quite a bit to do with us and what we do or don't do—
regardless of whether we draw our inspiration from the Christian story,

or are guided by the prophets of science, or Buddhism,
or any other system of belief.

We know, on some level, that the prospect of a just and loving world
requires that we, ourselves, be both loving and just.

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As we take up December's theme question of what it means
"to seek a life of embodiment," I challenge us all to a deeper appreciation
of what it means to truly embody the values that we profess.

To consider how we live out the commitment we have
to our highest ideals, not on some lofty, theoretical level,
but in the day to day activities of our lives—
in how we treat stranger, friend, and foe.

In how we treat our neighbours, be they next door or half a world away.

In who we are and in what we do—
with our time, our money, and the energy of our lives.

Our congregation's mission statement begins with the phrase,
"committed to love and justice..."

In this introspective season, let us ask ourselves,
both as a congregation and as individuals, to what degree that is true.

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It's striking how many phrases the English language
has developed over time to gauge genuine commitment to something.

And, it's telling just how many of them speak of the body.

When it comes to commitment, do we walk our talk?
We might ask, "Is our heart in it?
Do we have any skin in the game?
Are we willing to put our noses to the grindstone,
our shoulders to the wheel, and our necks on the line?"

These various phrases, these peculiar English idioms,
all measure our engagement, our involvement,
the literal embodiment of our commitment.

They ask whether our commitment is made manifest
in how we live our lives.

In an outward way, the work of increasing the sum total of love and justice
in this world can take many different forms.

Some people protest, disturb the peace, make a ruckus.
They sometimes use civil disobedience
and sometimes not-so-civil disobedience.

Others write cheques, sign petitions,
send letters to the editor or to the powers that be.
They lobby. They call. They lodge complaints.

All of these actions are done in the hope that things will change,
that progress will be made.

All in the hope that by doing something,
something will make a difference.

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You may have seen last weekend a piece in *The Star* that asked,
“What kind of Torontonians are you?”¹

The article described eight basic political ideologies found in our city
that go far beyond the basic choice between Left and Right.

On the Left part of the spectrum were people who identified as
Post-material, Anti-establishment, Social Democratic or Laissez-faire.

On the Right part of the spectrum were people who were in categories
called Steadfast, Libertarian, Faith & Family, and Heritage.

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http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/11/29/what_kind_of_torontonian_are_you.html

The article links to a survey you can take to find the group that best describes you.

I will say that I think the survey is a bit flawed.

I answered the religious questions honestly, indicating that I “strongly agree” religion is important and that I attend worship services at least once a week.

I think the survey, though, associates religion with conservatism, because my results skewed closer to the centre than I actually am.

Still, I found the survey worthwhile because of the point it underlines about how these different groupings of people approach social change in such differing ways.

While it’s obvious that there is always a tension between those who want revolution and those who want reform—between those who’ve given up on the systems of government and commerce we have in place and those who seek to work through those same systems to bring about change—it was interesting to ponder how this tension plays out among people in our own congregation and beyond, among people who struggle with strategy when they’re seeking to respond to what they find most heart-breaking in our world.

The perennial question, when trying to bend the arc of history toward justice, is do we storm the gates and demand radical change, or do we work for steady, incremental **progress**?

What’s important to take in is that this isn’t an either/or choice, but a matter of both/and.

Meaningful social change requires both radicals and moderates.

Revolutionaries to push the envelope, to be at the leading edge, and moderates who keep relationship with a broader swath of people, and can help move an issue to a different place.

In the *Handbook of Social Movements Across Disciplines*, one scholar puts it this way:

Radicals and moderates form a symbiotic relationship, creating a positive radical flank effect that allows moderates to “maintain good relations with outside supporters by distancing themselves from radicals while at the same time profiting from the crises the radicals create.”²

In other words, while the radicals push the boundaries, the moderates have more room to maneuver and bring about change.

So much infighting happens among those working for social justice that it’s a shame there’s not a deeper recognition of how important and useful this symbiotic relationship can be.

I’m pretty sure the arc would bend a lot faster if we could figure this out.

Several years ago, at the General Assembly in Quebec City, I heard Bill Schulz, the former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and at that time, the Executive Director of Amnesty International USA, make a very compelling point about sailboats.

To be more precise, he was actually talking about rudders.

And to get even more detailed, he mentioned this thing called a trim tab.

The rudder of a boat, of course, hangs off the back down into the water, and the trim tab is a little surface that’s attached to the rudder.

It’s usually a small piece of wood that’s hinged to the rudder and swings back and forth to counter balance minor movements of the rudder.

It makes the boat more stable and the steering more precise.

But the trim tab has an outsized impact on where the boat is heading. If it sticks in one direction or the other, it can completely change the course that the boat is on.

² Quoted in “Assessing the Politics of Protest” in *Handbook of Social Movements Across Disciplines*, p. 125. Edited by Bert Klandermans, Conny Roggeband.

Bill's point is that Unitarian Universalists can be like that trim tab.

Friends, we are small, but have more potential than we realize,
especially when we're willing to take collective action.

When we throw our weight against the trim tab
we can change not only the course of the boat,
but we can change the course of history.

Edward Everett Hale, yet another Unitarian minister from the 19th century said:

I am only one,
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything,
But still I can do something;
And because I cannot do everything,
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.³

As we respond to help and heal what breaks our hearts,
to bend the moral arc of the universe toward more love and justice,
let us not overestimate our power,
but neither let us underestimate our influence.

Let us live lives of love and justice,
that with each day, we might change this world for good. Amen.

Closing Words

Our benediction is from the poet Mark Nepo.

When the sweet ache of being alive,
lodged between who you are
and who you will be,
is awakened,
befriend this moment.
It will guide you.
Its sweetness is what holds you.

³ *The Book of Good Cheer: A Little Bundle of Cheery Thoughts*, (1909) by Edwin Osgood Grover, p. 28.

Its ache is what moves you on.

With each day, with every step, may we keep moving on.