

11/20/2016

### **Freedom from Want/Income Inequality**

We are going into the holiday season, with Thanksgiving this week and Christmas just around the corner. Many of us anticipate a joyous season, full of planning meals and gift wrapping and decorating, maybe parties or travel. Some of us will get together with extended family. Some of us may gather with like-minded friends. Some will find rest and support among people who love and support us. For those in this situation, I encourage you to drink it in, recharge and refresh, and find strength in community.

I am aware that some of us may find, in this holiday season, a mixed blessing. This has been a divisive year, and while talking politics – and religion – has often been touchy in the past, this year bringing up those topics may feel like lighting a match to a powder keg. For those of us with family members with vehemently opposing views, it may be a delicate dance to honor friendships and family ties while still feeling appalled at – or even afraid of – some of the stances our loved ones may take. For those who find such scenarios to be part of this holiday season, I urge you to remember to take good care of your own physical and emotional health, and to be unafraid to set reasonable boundaries for your own emotional safety and well-being; while intentionally being appreciative of the bonds of love and connection that still remain intact.

I am also aware that for many, the holidays can be a painful time. The emphasis on friends, family, fun and frivolity can underscore losses and loneliness. We may be missing family members or dear friends. We may feel burned out and unable or unwilling to walk into a potentially unsafe space. We may not now have, or never have had, a family that lives up to the ideal that we see in Norman Rockwell's famous painting of three generations gathered around a table piled with good things to eat, reproduced on the cover of our Order of Service.

In fact, if we are being honest, maybe none of our families live up to our hopes and expectations, and especially at holidays. And for sure, the effort of making a holiday live up to expectations can be exhausting. It's too easy to think that everyone else is just as happy as they appear, and only we are lonely, or stretched too thin, or sad during the holidays.

The truth is, that family in the picture, that oh so happy family, is a dream. A vision of what we wish we could have: loving, supportive community, with plenty for all. And sometimes we come closer to the dream, sometimes it may seem unreachable. But still, we dream. I want to lift up the difficulty of the struggle, and remind us all to take extra care of ourselves at this time of year.

Why is it that the dream of Freedom from Want seems a pipe dream to all too many in this world, including far too many in our own country? I mean, haven't we been fighting a War on Poverty? Aren't we a generous people? Here in Massachusetts we have the FITT program, which supports Families In Transition with housing and decent meals and help finding employment. Every Wednesday we have a free community meal here in Northborough.

The fact is that these things are band-aids. Feeding and housing people, even helping them find employment, does not get to the root of the problem. Millions of hard-working people are

working full-time, sometimes at more than one job, and yet are what is termed “food insecure.” One illness, the breakdown of a car, an extra-cold winter driving up heating bills, the rising cost of prescriptions – any of these things can make the difference between just making it and having to choose between medicine and food, or heat and food, or getting the car repaired so they can get to work and feeding their family.

Upward mobility—the American Dream—has become a myth. Concentration of wealth and power has skyrocketed. Dr. King’s dream of justice and equality has fractured. Half of all Americans are impoverished or struggling, as the middle class shrinks and billionaires take the profits. Where’s our commitment to the Common Good?

Our Unitarian Universalist (UU) tradition places its faith in people to create a more loving community for all, guided by “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.” Challenging extreme inequality has now become a moral imperative, just as prior generations have led movements from abolition to civil rights and marriage equality.

The issue of escalating income inequality is a complex one, one that cannot be covered in one sermon, class or workshop. We will be exploring the subject of escalating inequality in the next few months, because it is part of almost any discussion about social justice. There are many, many people all over this land, in fact, all over the world, many who are challenging the inequalities in a wide variety of ways. This gives me hope, and I don’t know about you, but hope is something I really need right now.

Perhaps, in some of the stories we’ll share in the next few months, some of us will see an opening in the gloom and confusion. Some of us may say, “I can do that!” and influence their company or their university or their local government or health care facility to utilize more equitable hiring practices, pay scales, and benefits. Others may realize that they are not in a position right now to make big changes in the systems we live in and engage with; but, maybe, just knowing that some people are doing these things will give you hope, as it does me.

Meanwhile, never doubt that our efforts to cook and serve free meals, donate to Families in Transition, and collect food and clothing for those in need are helpful. Sometimes, even life-saving – and as someone who has been there, I can assure you that this is not an exaggeration.

Right here we have baskets of food collected for the Northborough Food Bank. These food baskets warm my heart. They speak of generosity and true caring. But I also can’t get my friend’s story out of my head.

This friend is someone who was in seminary with me, and I share it with their permission:

For one semester in grade ten, I was "making do"... which in practical terms meant starving very slowly. I cobbled together food from what friends could offer, and a subsidy from my parents (even though I'd left home and was being a bit of a jerk about it, frankly) but it wasn't enough. And although I never got so thin as to look like a starving person, I felt like one. And you never forget that feeling once you've experienced it. You remember it every time someone asks you if you can spare a dollar.

This is what it is like: You are constantly thinking about food. All the way through every single class, test, and conversation, you are thinking about food. When the boy you used

to think was cute starts a conversation, you are just thinking about food. When you see a sunrise of the type that used to inspire you to write pages of poetry, you are just thinking about food. When you try to walk, you get tired and need to sit on the grass. When you try to sing, you give up on it, and just sit and think about food.

You cry a lot. You make lists of groceries. You are constantly shivering with cold as your body tries to adjust to having less insulation. You wonder what is wrong with you that you can't make the slightest effort to improve your situation. One time, at the height of my hunger, I came across some people who needed extra help with construction, and they offered to hire me for minimum wage for a whole Saturday's work. I agreed, then went home and listed all the groceries I would buy with the money. I still remember the list.

Then I became inexplicably filled with terror and exhaustion and the next day, I didn't show up. Being hungry makes everything hard. Everything.

I didn't go to the food bank, or the soup kitchen. Partly because I didn't understand those things were available, partly because I didn't think I was "the type" who should use them, and partly because I was just so bone through exhausted.

People who need help don't always know how to access it in the way that the system feels they should.

Which is why we need to offer help in a LOT of ways. Fill in practical solutions like soup kitchens and food banks. Long term solutions like poverty reduction partnerships and housing first initiatives. And local, community, grassroots things like these baskets. Which do more than feed people. They send a powerful message.

They say, "We see you. We see that you are hungry while we have so much, and we are not okay with that. Know that you matter--you are not just for the system to fix or the government to cope with. You are not a problem to be solved. You are my neighbor. And when you are hungry, I will share from my table."

Sometimes I think we get hung up on trying to decide: what is the "right thing to do" In real life, things get messy, and sometimes there is no "right thing." Sometimes we can't even tell what the better thing is. But still, we need to do SOMETHING, in humility and with prayerful hearts and with the most love we can find within us.

Because you and I have an important part to play in bringing justice into visible form. In countless small ways we can feed the hungers of our fellow beings. *Every time* we return a kind word when someone says something that sounds snarky; *Every time* we put a can of soup in the food pantry donation box; *Every time* we put on a safety pin to let others know we are committed to their safety from physical or emotional bullying; *Every time* we put on a rainbow pin to show a GLBT person that we see their struggles - every time we act out of love rather than fear, we pull on that long arc of history and bend it a bit more toward true equality and justice for all. We must keep on dreaming of a world free from want and fear, a world that supports freedom of religion and freedom of speech for ALL.

As we go about our business this coming week, whether cooking or eating a special meal, whether seeing friends and family, whether just going about our ordinary routine; let's remember all the ways that we and others we know participate ways large and small to reach out in kindness and love. Let us spiritually put on *our* sturdy work clothes and boots, and build righteousness and faithfulness, right where we are. Let us be aware of the hunger around us, and seek to work small miracles of generosity and love. Let us lift up our Thanks for goodness living in and among us and through us, as we strive to be people of hope, grounded in thanksgiving. May we keep the light of hope burning in large ways and small, and may we always dream.

Amen and Blessed Be