

“Justice: Not Just a Political Virtue”
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At the age of 23, Giovanni Bernadone, the son of a wealthy merchant, went on a pilgrimage to Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome. While there, he was struck by the contrast between the lavishness inside and the utter poverty of the beggars outside. Bernadone persuaded one of the beggars to exchange clothes with him for the day, and he spent the rest of the day begging for alms, experiencing what the life of a beggar in Rome was like. His experiment led to a greater empathy and understanding with the poor, but he knew he had to do something more.

Bernadone soon founded a religious order whose foundation was the idea that its members should give up all worldly goods and live in poverty while providing aid and comfort to the poor and other outcasts in society. They were determined to live like the people they served, and the order soon became one of the most famous in the western world. Bernadone gained a reputation for helping anyone who was in need, as he saw it as doing the work of the sacred, assuring that all of creation, from animals to the lowest classes of humans, were adequately cared for in the midst of a harsh, unjust world.

Giovanni Bernadone, better known to us as Saint Francis of Assisi, has become one of the best loved saints of the Catholic church, largely because he was so willing to make his own well-being secondary to the needs of others once he understood the depth of suffering so many were experiencing in the world. Francis once prayed to God, “Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love.” Francis had a deep need to be used as an instrument to create a better world, one where no one need go without the basic needs of life.

I thought of this story as I was writing this sermon, largely because we live in a day and time when the religious is either used as a tool of the state to oppress, or else it is something largely watered down to provide individual comfort for people who already have quite a bit of privilege. I thought of it because I realize so many of my religious heroes are people who gave up their own comfort in order to serve others: Jesus, Buddha, the Dalai Llama, Desmond Tutu, Thich Nhat Hanh. I have to question: if Jesus or Buddha were here, what would they think of the notion that religion was merely a personal exercise, one that had no relevance to the wider world, where enlightenment simply meant making yourself comfortable and Heaven is a place where we need not do anything special for other humans to reach.

Would they be satisfied with the New Age brand of self-help spirituality that's in vogue today which seems meant only to help part people of their money? I wonder, as I am of the opinion that feel-good sermons didn't go deep enough. If I leave church on Sunday morning without anything on my mind, I wonder if I really went deep enough, or if I need to go back and figure out what I need to learn.

I'm aware this is a constant tension within our congregations. A question that every Unitarian Universalist minister will be asked at some time in their career, probably many, many times, is why so many of our sermons are focused on what may seem like very political issues. I know there are people who find these sorts of topics less than spiritual, and would rather they be skipped altogether for topics they feel would feed them more in the moment. In fact, I know some would view bringing up these issues at all as being outside the realm of a religious community, especially in a faith that affirms the separation of church and state.

I know this is amplified even more by how often religion has been used as a tool of the state to oppress throughout western history. There are exceptions, as I'm going to discuss today,

but, more often than not, the banner of religion has been used as a way to consolidate the power of the ruling class and to provide an opiate for the masses, to use words from Karl Marx, that would keep them in check and make them believe their rulers had a direct mandate from God. We see this in nearly every part of the western world, from Jewish slaughters against foreigners to Christian crusades and Muslim incursions.

I still believe in religion as a force for change. If I didn't, I would have never become a minister. I may have become the head of a LGBT or diversity office or the executive director of a non-profit, not seeing my work as deeply religious work

What I believe people most often call political activities within churches are justice related. If a minister stands before a congregation and declares themselves in favor of a particular party or candidate, I would agree that is against the principle of separation of church and state. Such a minister has become a pawn for the political system. But when a minister stands before a congregation and declares the unjust nature of oppression in our world and condemns government policies used to support and justify such oppression, this is not political; this is justice.

I'm reminded of the rallying cry of second- and third-wave feminists: the personal is political. I would expand this: the religious is also political. Religion is not an abstract set of beliefs without relevance to the world; it is a way of seeing the world. To quote scholar Alvin Rapien, "If one is shaped by religion, then religion will shape how they interpret their world, and that includes their political views. To separate religious beliefs from their political applications and implications denies religion its public 'expression' and reduces it to private opinion."

Religious belief shapes how we see the world and, if we focus only on individualistic feel good topics, we won't recognize its application to the public sphere. For those from oppressed

backgrounds, then, religion becomes the lens through which the world and their persecution are seen. The story of Moses and the Israelites became a metaphor for Black slaves of the end of their bondage. A loving Jesus was hope to LGBTQ people that one day society would accept them on their own terms. For Thich Nhat Hanh and the followers of his school of Engaged Buddhism, religion became a way to peacefully counter the oppressive forces of both the Vietnamese Communist government as well as the colonialist occupiers.

Like Francis, how we interpret our religious beliefs will determine how we act upon them, and how we live our lives is much more of a testimony to our spiritual lives than anything else we could offer. All of this is justice work, religious work. To paraphrase a recent meme a colleague forwarded, “Religion divorced from politics is irrelevant.” Religion has to be connected to the larger world or it becomes an opiate of the masses as Marx believed. If I don’t see my religious beliefs as being intimately tied to the way I move through the world, I have to ask why I bother to have them?

In other words, like Francis discovered, justice work is directly tied to the religious. I suspect Francis realized this when he declared, “I am the herald of the Great King.” In other words, Francis’s work with the poor and outcasts was his religious work, work that was making a direct difference in the lives of so many. But here’s the paradox: Francis’s work started with an opening of his heart, a realization that all was not right in the world and needed to change. He recognized the need for more empathy and love in the world and acted upon his realization. His quiet revolution started in him and proceeded outward to the rest of the universe.

Given all of this, I want to make a modest proposal: what if justice, rather than being merely a political virtue as many see it, starts in the individual heart?

What if the way to create more justice in the world is by transforming our hearts, like Saint Francis? Would this make justice a personal religious virtue? What if we need to be reminded that, though we may be comfortable and relatively privileged, not all have it so? What if the way to growth, both in our own lives and in the larger world, is by learning to recognize that our own liberation is tied up in that of every other being on this planet, and the fate of our souls is tied up in the state of our neighbor?

Justice becomes a personal virtue when we recognize that our spiritual development, even our liberation, is directly tied up with how we respond to the world. Until all have freedom, we are always at risk. Seeing others as tied to our own needs allows us to see through a lens of both justice and compassion.

Francis's conviction that a loving God does not will suffering led him to a lifetime of service to others, and this is how he lived out his religious beliefs. Today, Unitarian Universalists around the world live out their religious beliefs in a similar manner. Because we believe all people have inherent worth and dignity and all things are interconnected, people within our faith are led to live this out every day around the world.

This is why I was originally attracted to Unitarian Universalism. We have always been a faith for justice seekers, going all the way back to Michael Servetus's attempted reformation of the church, the Transylvanian church's position on religious tolerance, and the early American Unitarians being so active in abolition, suffrage, and inclusion efforts. Today, wherever there is a justice cause to be found, you can be sure there will be Unitarian Universalists at the fore, ready to work for a world of less oppression and more understanding. As a faith, we recognize that the liberation of one is tied up in the liberation of all.

Make no mistake: I will criticize injustice wherever I see it, in whatever party engages in it, and no matter what politician supports it. This is because my deeply-held religious beliefs, rooted in our second principle, demand that I work for justice in human relations, and I take that charge very seriously.

At General Assembly this year, a delegate, distressed at how much attention was being paid to Black Lives of UU and the cause of anti-racism. “Why can’t we get back to the spiritual?” he asked.

A second person responded to him quite clearly: if you can separate justice work from spiritual development, you are extremely privileged. We can’t separate it because we can’t take off our oppression.

The point is clear: the dichotomy between justice work and spiritual work is non-existent. If a person is able to make such a distinction, they would be advised to check their privilege about why they consider more feel-good spiritual topics to be the most important of the day. Unitarian Universalism is not a religion where one can comfortably sit back, eating, drinking, and being merry in a world of our own minds, but it asks us to transform ourselves, to make justice a personal virtue through our realization that the work is not done until we are all have enough food, drink, and laughter.

More pastoral sermons certainly have their place, but I’m proud to be a part of a faith that wrestles with the hard issues, even when it’s unpopular, even when it risks upsetting some people. Every time I see a Standing on the Side of Love t-shirt at a rally, I know that I am home, because my people are there. For each of us, it starts with a revolution of the heart, taking in the poor and the outcasts of the world, and being able to see our liberation as being tied so intimately to theirs.

May we ever be a religion that nurtures the heart to transform the world.