

October 15, 2006

“Making History Instead of Being Pushed Around By It”

Rev. James E. Grant

I'll begin this sermon with a pop quiz. There are three questions on the quiz:

Question #1: On what topic do both *Fortune Magazine* and Bill Moyers agree?

Question #2: Which of our UU Principles could well be the basis for an article in Business Week?

Question #3: In the quotation from James Luther Adams used as the Centering thought of this Service, why is a distinction made between individual and institutional social responsibility?

Hopefully the answers to these questions will be revealed by the end of this sermon.

As you might expect the sermon for this Social Justice Sunday is about social justice. Sharing in the leadership of worship today are Sue Haskin, Jackie Statman, and Dale Douglas, who are currently providing leadership for the Social Justice Ministry Team.

Social Justice is one way we care. Tom Owen-Towle, former Minister of this Congregation, tells the story of a little girl who came home from an errand. Her Mother asked what had taken her so long. The little girl replied that her friend had broken his bicycle and she had stopped to help. “But,” the Mother said, “you don’t know anything about fixing bicycles.” “I know,” the little girl replied, “I stopped to help him cry.” (Tom Owen-Towle, *Freethinking Mystics with Hands*, p.34)

I believe the social justice program of a local congregation should be grounded in compassion and caring, even when immediate cure is beyond our ability. However one of the “besetting sins” of too many people who care is that we are overwhelmed by all the issues needing care so that we settle for what Forrest Church in the First Reading called “sophisticated resignation.” We “feel strongly...without being prompted to do anything.” (Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith*, p.50)

We can be effective, provided...provided we are aware of four realities. The first reality is that social justice needs to have roots or it will wilt like cut flowers in the heat of opposition. These roots are found in all the religions of the world. Caring for and sustaining “the least of these,” the people who are victims of injustice, is a message of all world religions.

Social justice which bears fruit will have strong roots, and at least one major root, perhaps the tap root, is the religious impulse. A stranger once attended a Quaker meeting. He sat for as long as possible in the silent meeting and finally turned to the person next to him and asked, “When does the service begin?” The response was, “As soon as the meeting is over.” Precisely. One purpose of meeting for Sunday worship is to empower our caring.

The second reality for an effective social justice ministry is that social justice is best accomplished NOT by working harder but by working smarter. Here’s a story to illustrate what I mean.

Once there was a small town in the mountains which was noted for its outstanding emergency medical assistance. The town had the best ambulance, with the best equipment, and the most highly trained personnel of any town of comparable size. A reporter was sent from a large city

to write a story about this remarkable town. On the way there he drove along a curving mountain road, which included a “hairpin” turn which had no guard rails.

When he arrived at the town he learned that the emergency equipment was used primarily to rescue people who while driving in the fog or at night or too fast had crashed their cars at that “hairpin” turn. He suggested that all the money being spent on ambulances and equipment could well be spent on providing guard-rails at the offending corner. A congregation which cares to do social justice will do well to spend at least as much time preventing social injustice—proactive social justice—as on reacting to social injustice.

A third reality is to remember that people who may have similar social concerns may also have different ideas about solutions. Among other things that means that people who are engaged in social justice need first of all to be engaged in practicing civility. I know of other congregations where some of the people most active in social justice were also most active in complaining and gossip and generally living in the “kickative mood, contrary tense.” Perhaps that is because they spend so much energy swimming against the currents of contemporary culture.

The fourth reality is so obvious as to be often neglected. It is that there are more social problems than there are people, so we have to be selective. One of the continuing dangers we face is jumping on the “social justice horse and riding off in all directions at once.” I believe this is particularly true where social justice is more individualized than institutionalized. That may well be the case in this Congregation.

Remember the centering thought: James Luther Adams, distinguishes individual responsibility from institutional responsibility. When social justice ministry is highly individualized, people end up talking to themselves. Here’s what I mean. Last Wednesday evening our Peace and Democracy Task Force showed a deeply moving, poignant film about what the Iraq war is doing to military personnel. Anyone truly concerned about supporting our troops will want to view this film to see just how badly our military personnel are being treated. The film was excellent, the problem was that attendance was limited to a relatively small group of people most of whom are active in issues of peace. We were talking to ourselves.

On an insert in today’s Order of Service you see a list of the variety of social justice ministries in this Congregation. I believe each one of these is an important way to exercise our social justice responsibility. I also believe we may need a focus which will help our entire congregation exercise institutional responsibility.

I am not suggesting replacing but supplementing all of these more individualistic social justice ministries with an institutional social justice emphasis.

I have been known as one who “rushes in where angels fear to tread,” so I’ll live up to my reputation and suggest an issue which might be a way to practice corporate social justice. Individuals and small groups might wish to continue their social justice concerns. However, we can join together in a corporate, or as James Luther Adams says an “institutional,” responsibility.

I suggest an issue which could draw us together is global warming. This is an issue which has raised increasing concern across a wide spectrum of economics, business and ethics as well as faith groups. Of course not all faith groups believe global warming is a problem. You may have seen the Bill Moyers special on Wednesday evening. However many faith groups, including our Unitarian Universalist Association have focused on this issue.

There is an article in this morning’s *New York Times*, with the headline, “Citing Heavenly Injunctions to Fight Earthly Warming.” The Article is about congregations in Michigan who are

part of the Interfaith Power and Light. “In 2005 and the first three quarters of 2006 combined, energy-saving efforts by the groups’s members have prevented the release into the atmosphere of 14,130 tons of carbon dioxide...” (Neela Banerjee, “Citing Heavenly Injunctions to Fight Earthly Warming,” *The New York Times*, Sunday, October 15, 2006, p.19)

Faith groups and Bill Moyers are not alone. In an article in *Fortune Magazine* entitled, “The Pentagon’s Weather Nightmare,” there is this line: “Global warming rather than causing gradual, centuries-spanning change, may be pushing the climate to a tipping point.” The author suggests a metaphor of a canoe that is “gradually tilted until suddenly it flips over.” (David Stipp, “The Pentagon’s Weather Nightmare,” *Fortune*, February 9, 2004, p.103)

6

The second reading for today is from the Statement of Conscience about global warming which was approved by the UU General Assembly in June. That

Statement of Conscience could well be the basis for an article in *Business Week* which appeared two years earlier, August, 2004 with these words “...the earth is warming, humans are probably the cause, and the threat is real enough to warrant an immediate response.” (John Carey, “Global Warming,” *Business Week*, August 16, 2004, p.60)

Perhaps many if not most of us have seen the film, “An Inconvenient Truth” which surprised many pundits that a documentary could draw that much box office attention. I think I need not “carry coals to Newcastle” about this topic. That is ironic that I used an expression about coal, one of the primary causes of atmospheric pollution.

The point just now is that I doubt I need to convince anyone in this Congregation about the dangers of global warming. However, how can this become a corporate social justice issue. This is such a huge issue that it almost begs us to “sophisticated resignation.” We are tempted to say, “What can I do, I don’t burn fossil fuel in a factory. I don’t engage in strip mining? How can I have any impact?” I will suggest a possibility. We can make a difference even on global warming. We, the congregation of First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego can provide an institutional witness in this significant social justice issue. We can supplement our highly individualized social justice ministries with this institutional emphasis. Here’s how.

7

The Earth Spirit team is inviting us to a congregation-wide emphasis called “The Green Sanctuary Program.” The Green Sanctuary program is a grand opportunity for our Congregation, as a Congregation, to be institutionally responsible to “...make history instead of merely being pushed around by it.”

The proposed Green Sanctuary program includes religious education, worship, facilities management, as well as our personal lives. As we engage in the Green Sanctuary Program we will have a direct impact on global warming. I understand the EarthSpirit team will work with the Earth Centered Spirituality Circle to engage all of us in these efforts to reduce global warming, increase earth consciousness and bring out actions into line with our values.

You realize, of course, that I am talking about support for the seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism, “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” That respect for the interdependent web is not only interdependence as we express our environmental concern, but it is also a human interdependence.

An individualistic social justice program can without intention sometime neglect the interdependent web as each one of us does our own thing. When an institution engages in social action we model the interconnectedness as we work together toward a common goal.

I conclude with a brief word to our New Members, and a reminder to all of us. New Members, you are becoming part of a Congregation which has a long, good history of social responsibility. This Congregation cares and expresses its caring in varieties of actions. One of the dangers of this history of caring is that we may dissipate our efforts through individualistic action or small groups. We may end up talking only to ourselves.

My challenge today is that we engage in corporate social ministry which will call us to work together as an interdependent organism thereby multiplying our power. When I began working on this sermon a couple of months ago I had a vague idea that global warming might be a good issue for corporate responsibility. By coincidence of the Spirit of Life, just a couple of weeks ago I learned that the Earth Spirit group is challenging us to a corporate action which will make a difference. You can learn more about this Green Sanctuary Program in an informational luncheon following the Sunday Services on November 5. I hope to see you there.