

BRIAN FERGUSON – 7/5/09
Sermon Is There A Religious Basis for Our Social Justice?

To everything Turn, Turn, Turn There is a season Turn, Turn, Turn

And a time for every purpose under heaven.

These words which we just sang many of us associate with Pete Seeger but most of the words are from the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Scriptures. They have the honor of being the oldest lyrics ever to be a number 1 hit when the band from the Byrds recorded the song in 1965. A number 1 hit is an impressive feat for lyrics written about 2400 years ago. Ecclesiastes is an interesting book of the bible since it has a tone of spiritual fatigue and the writer almost sounds fed-up with their own advice. I'm sure many of us can relate to that. I sense a similar fatigue in my five year old daughter's face every time I lecture her about the value of eating vegetables – and I am not very convincing with my own advice as someone whose favorite vegetable is the French fry.

The Book of Ecclesiastes almost has a tone of hopelessness as it discusses the difficulty and confusion of living in a seemingly meaningless world with so much suffering and seemingly no obvious purpose to life. At one point the author of Ecclesiastes says “**I undertook great works; I built myself houses and planted vineyards....nor did I deprive myself of any joy, but my heart rejoiced in the fruit of all my toil. Then I turned and reviewed all my handiwork, all my labor and toil, and I saw that everything was emptiness and chasing the wind, of no profit under the sun.**” Ecclesiastes 2:4, 2:10-11. A bleak outlook I think you would agree. As a Scottish person I thought I was good at doom and gloom but those Ancient Hebrew writers knew about suffering and make me look like an amateur.

The lyrics from Ecclesiastes which we just sang express there being a time for everything but the meaning of events may never be known to us. They discuss the theme of change and there being a time for the variety of emotions and events that make up our life. To many the author of Ecclesiastes reflects a giving up of understanding the ways of God and no possibility of finding meaning in life – except Pete Seeger added the last line “**A time of peace... I swear it's not too late**” as his statement for what he chooses to dedicate his life to. He is not willing to let life be meaningless and believes that human choice and action give life meaning. And for most of his life Pete Seeger has dedicated

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himself through his music and other activities to seek justice and peace. That is where he found meaning and he has inspired many others to travel a similar path.

It may come as little surprise that Pete Seeger identifies as a Unitarian Universalist and has been associated with our movement for many years. Like many people he was attracted to our movement by our Social Justice work. I remember my first day visiting a Unitarian Universalist church and seeing all the activities going on - especially the Social Justice work. There were programs helping the homeless, striving for economic justice, opposing the death penalty, caring for our planet, and an afterschool program for educating disadvantaged children. These were many of the issues I had been involved with therefore it seemed convenient to have them all in one place. I never thought about what the religious significance was. What I heard during worship was interesting and non-offensive therefore this was a church I could come back to. So begins the inspiring and passionate call of a future Unitarian Universalist minister.

It was about a year before I realized the religious meaning of our Social Justice work. I was exploring our history and how the Universalist tradition viewed the religious idea of Salvation. In the 18th and 19th Century, the traditional Christian Salvation story was that heaven and hell were otherworldly places. Due to sin all people were destined to hell in the afterlife and only because of the death of Jesus would a small elect few be saved and enter heaven. This is a difficult perspective for many of us to accept nowadays but this thinking was the dominant Christian view at the time.

Universalist Hosea Ballou at the end of the 18th century re-conceptualized heaven and hell saying they were experienced here and now in this world. He also said hell is created by the human capacity to harm one another and we obtain salvation through acts of kindness and justice in this world. Our Social Justice work is the Salvation story for Unitarian Universalists and takes place in **this** world at **this** time. Salvation is here and now not otherworldly and after death. This has been the perspective of Unitarian Universalists for much of the last two hundred years with social justice being the outward physical manifestation of our internal beliefs regarding salvation.

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The most influential 20th Century Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams, built upon this thinking and believes our ethical commitments are a clearer sign of authentic faith than any spoken affirmation of religious beliefs.¹ In the earlier reading he describes the work of social justice as the work of all of us not just a few. He calls this **“the Prophethood of All Believers”** referring to the Prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures who were selected to bring a message of social change to achieve God’s desire for a more just society. In keeping with our tradition James Luther Adams brings a very egalitarian, democratic perspective to being a prophet. His idea of the Prophethood of All Believers he describes:

“is not a church in which the prophetic function is assigned merely to the few.... The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to attempt to see the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it.”²

Our work for Justice is not just the task of the Social Justice committee or the ministerial leadership. It is the task of all members within our community and is a primary purpose for our church to exist. Our religious community is a provisional structure to serve a mission beyond its own existence. Social justice is perhaps our most public statement of our purpose for existence. James Luther Adams was influenced by the Christian Gospel of Matthew which distinguishes genuine prophets from false prophets by the results of their deeds. **“You will know them by their fruits”** Matthew 7.16. The consequences of our actions are what is important, not just good intentions but good actions with tangible beneficial results.

Adam’s thinking was influenced by his visit to Nazi Germany in the 1930’s. He met many of the leading German religious thinkers and at great risk to himself met with German resistance leaders even smuggling information out of the country for them. He was interrogated by the German secret police, the Gestapo, for two hours on one occasion. Adams was shocked at the oppression and persecution he witnessed in Nazi Germany and how many of the Christian churches collaborated or put up little resistance. He

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recalls attending Protestant churches with pictures of Adolf Hitler on the chancel beside sacred Christian symbols such as the crucifix.

Adams realized that liberal institutions be they church, state, or educational did not resist effectively due to a crisis of integrity and courage.³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German religious leader who did resist the Nazi government and was executed by them, said “**the most common source of our moral failing is not our wickedness but our weakness –being unwilling to pay a price for our supposed commitments undermines our good intentions.**”⁴

The more strident resistance to the Nazis came from the religiously Conservative Christian churches since they were clear about serving God and the Bible not the state of Germany or the Nazi party. Religiously Liberal churches like us are more open to influence by the secular culture therefore we should always be vigilant to the causes we serve. We need to serve a higher purpose than the Democratic party or just being a blessing on the status quo.

Adams as a result of his experience of totalitarian repression in Germany dedicated his ministry and teaching to resisting oppression and serving the cause of justice. He believed that voluntary associations such as churches and other civic institutions were the most effective organizations in bringing greater justice in our society and resisting the excessive power of the state. Power is at the heart of social justice work and how we use our power as individuals and groups is important in helping those most vulnerable in our society. Caring for the weakest amongst us is an act of great strength. Adams used his power as a Unitarian Universalist minister and respected academic to protect free speech, to seek civil rights for African Americans, equal rights for women, and was an early advocate for AIDS patients late on his life while in his 80's.

His experience and study led him to believe that **through voluntary participation in groups humanity may respond to "the community-forming power" of God's love, present in and available to every human heart and mind.**⁵ This was fundamental to his religious perspective and he even described “**God as the divine community forming power for justice.**”⁶ Despite his concerns about liberal churches he believed

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they had the greatest potential as justice-seeking communities. Our openness to people of differing ages, race, and social status allows us to have a broader range of human concerns than many secular voluntary associations. While tolerance of differing opinions has been an important part of our movement we are also aware of the need for tolerance with equality for minority or persecuted groups. True justice within our religious community and in our society requires both our embracing of differences and working for equality for all people.

Last Sunday marked the 40th Anniversary of the Stonewall riots in New York City where the homosexual community reacted to repeated police harassment. This event is considered the beginning of the gay liberation movement in the United States. Our country has improved its attitudes and laws toward gays and lesbians but just yesterday a colleague informed me about a police raid last Saturday on a gay bar in Fort Worth where the police are accused of using excessive force. The mayor has called for an investigation.

Looking at our movement today I see the most effective social action is our activities addressing discrimination against gays and lesbians. For example, the difference between civil union and marriage equality for gays I feel is a religious issue for us. Civil Union may show tolerance for homosexuals, marriage equality shows both greater tolerance and a desire for equality. Our Universalist tradition with its central principle of radical equality of all people gives us a religious grounding for seeking marriage equality for all people.

Where many religious movements have internal struggles about gay marriage, our movement seems united in its support. Unusually united for Unitarian Universalists some might say. I often feel that when you have a bunch of Unitarian Universalists in a room, we often seem to have more opinions than people. Our support of gay rights has been strong over the last forty years. I know many of my friends who are gay reminisce about how they first became aware of Unitarian Universalism in the late 1970's and 1980's when we were the only religious organization which marched in the Gay Pride parades.

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Faith for me is not what we profess to believe but how our beliefs shape our actions. I see how my own attitude and actions regarding equality for gays and lesbians has been transformed by my experience within Unitarian Universalism. I used to passively believe in gay rights and hesitantly support gay marriage but through my experiences in our religion I have become a passionate ally. I attempt, through actions and speech in my everyday life, to oppose discrimination towards homosexuals and work toward the justice of marriage equality for all.

I give speeches on it, argue with family and friends about it, I have marched for it, emailed and phoned government officials. I celebrated at the weddings of my friends who are gay, some of whom celebrated with me at my wedding before they were able to enjoy the same legal right. Having lived in California for the previous 22 years before moving to Texas, I shed a tear when California voters passed proposition 8 changing the state constitution to define marriage to being between a man and a woman. I commiserated with friends who were told their relationship was not of equal status to my own, and I recommitted myself to working to change this injustice throughout the nation.

My work on marriage equality has changed me as a person, I care passionately about the issue, my well-being is deeply connected to the well-being of others and this issue is central to my family's life. This is why I believe our Social Justice work is religious work. It transcends my own self-interest and I am changed in the process. I am connected to the people whose welfare I wish to improve therefore I am accountable to them. It is not just a check written for a worthy cause to benefit people I have no accountability to.

This week I read an interesting story about a middle school principal in Austin who made sandwiches for hungry people in her neighborhood. A journalist reported on this and made her something of a local celebrity. She started receiving checks from people who wanted to support her work. She sent the money back with a note saying "**Make your own damn sandwiches.**"⁷ Perhaps not the most gracious response but her point is important. There is a difference between being committed and acting on behalf of others and passively supporting others who do. It is said that with the egg, the chicken is supportive but with bacon, the pig is committed.

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I believe our religious movement has committed itself and acted forcefully on behalf of ending discrimination towards gays and lesbians. My desire now is to bring that same experience, focus, and commitment to other issues which our movement cares about – the environment, racism, violence in our society, economic fairness, justice for immigrants, and care for the homeless. Our movement cares about these issues but I feel we have struggled to engage them with the necessary commitment, focus, and sacrifice. Ultimately, to correct injustice we have to behave differently as individuals and as a community than we did before. The transition begins with ourselves and so often this step is often neglected. This recognition for our own need to change is why I believe religious social justice work is often more successful than secular justice work.

Think of the strong religious grounding of the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., or Gandhi's India Independence movement, or the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa or the abolitionist movement where many Unitarian and Universalists were leaders. Religion is about personal and societal transformation but I believe societal transformation is a consequence of our own and others personal transformation. Social justice is a commitment we make to a cause bigger than ourselves and we are changed in the work. James Luther Adams describes social justice work as a conversion - a word that makes many Unitarian Universalists uncomfortable - including this one standing before you.

Effective social justice work is not a hobby we participate in at our convenience but a commitment that affects all aspects of our life therefore is transformational. I am not proposing we exclude other activities that make up a healthy balanced life such as sleeping, eating, and drinking but to attempt to live fully to our highest ideals. I am talking about committing to making our justice work a part of our very being, a source of meaning in our lives, and a major mission of our religious community. This is why many Unitarian Universalists like Pete Seeger do not see our life without meaning. Our social justice work is a profound source of meaning in our lives as we dedicate ourselves to public causes bigger than our personal self-interest.

I believe through my own experience within our movement we are changed by what we commit our life to and what values we choose to serve. Our Unitarian Universalist

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tradition has a radical egalitarian belief that we all share a common destiny and our history is of greater inclusion within our movement and seeking greater inclusion and equality in our society at large. A key religious belief of ours is we have more in common with each other than our differences even our religious differences. Our religious ancestor Francis David said “**we do not need to think alike to love alike**”, I would add we do not need to think alike to seek justice alike. I will finish by paraphrasing the earlier words of Ecclesiastes and Pete Seeger:

For everyone (turn, turn, turn)

There is a cause (turn, turn, turn)

And a time for every cause here on earth

A time of commitment, a time of action,

A time of work, a time of transformation,

A time for equality, a time for love,

A time for justice...I believe the time is always now.

¹ Beach, George Kimmich. *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2005) p.xiv

² Beach, George Kimmich. *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2005) p.185

³ Beach, George Kimmich. *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2005) p.xviii

⁴ Beach, George Kimmich. *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2005) p.211

⁵ Fox, Van Eric and Alice Blair Wesley *Biography of James Luther Adams*
<http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/jameslutheradams.html> (accessed June 27th, 2009)

⁶ Beach, George Kimmich. *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2005) p.191

⁷ Wheatsville Coop. *The wheatsville breeze* July/August, 2009 p.3