

**DO JUSTICE, LOVE MERCY, WALK HUMBLY:  
THE SPIRITUAL GROUND OF SOCIAL ACTION**

**Sermon by Rev. Hilary Landau Krivchenia  
Preached at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist  
On September 28, 2008**

Earlier this summer a contingent of this congregation put our standing as a welcoming congregation to work by participating in the Chicago Pride March.

Two weeks ago, this congregation raised over 5000 dollars for Heifer International – an organization that helps people in many countries, become more self-sufficient by providing some basic survival resources – like chickens for eggs, sheep for wool, bees for honey. I feel certain that every person enjoyed the delicious corn even more for knowing that our feast would be shared by others hungrier than we.

Yesterday, I and others remembered Leslie Evans for her many labors for social justice within and outside this congregation – most notably her work with the deaf community, which is a social justice issue that summons us to be truly inclusive so that when we open our doors all people are able to fully participate.

As a congregation and as individuals we want to see the world made more fair and all her people living in peace and plenty. We're drawn to work on matters of social justice. Just between you and me, ever since I held out my first UNICEF box on Halloween, I've believed that it's every person's central task in life to vigorously work toward that more fair world.

It's a task we are called to, though in different ways at different times.

Religious voices have called us to this work from the time of the prophets. Isaiah declared, "cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow."

It's tempting to see the prophets as lone voices rising above the errant and lawless rabble, desperately hoping that someone will live a virtuous life – for Lord's sake – or for the sake of an orderly society. But the prophets, like Jesus after them, were not lone voices. They were focal points, the collected voice of the people speaking of higher aspirations than mere survival in hard-scrabble times: of abundance over scarcity, of generosity over grasping, of mutual care over self-interest, of humility over arrogance. The prophet's voice rises because there are people who hear, heed, and remember – people who recognize the vision and the urgency of the vision.

Jesus, Confucius, the prophets, the Buddha, Muhammad -- the great religious leaders were addressing times of chaos in the midst of the clashes of fiefdoms and tribes in which life was too often held cheaply. These teachers were in and of their times, seeking answers for their times, and they were also part of a larger conversation about basic and timeless values – amnesty for debts, care of the vulnerable, hospitality to the stranger, protection of orphans, provision for the poor.

Basic to almost every religion is a version of what we tend to call The Golden Rule: In the Torah it was written : "...thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

In Christian scripture: "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise." The Muslim Sufis say: "If you haven't the will to gladden someone's heart, then at least beware lest you hurt someone's heart, for on our path, no sin exists but this."

In Bahá'í: "Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself." Confucius said: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" Buddhism offers: "...a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?" The Hindu maxim is: This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you. A Native American Pima proverb says: "Do not wrong or hate your neighbor. For it is not he who you wrong, but yourself." A Shinto teaching says: "The heart of the person before you is a mirror. See there your own form" Wiccans say routinely: "An it harm no one, do what thou wilt"

And our Unitarian Universalist principles point to: "Justice, equity and compassion in human relations... "The inherent worth and dignity of every person." "The interdependent web of all existence"

It seems simple enough, repeated around the world in one religious tradition after another – and yet – there is a chasm between the aspiration and the reality.

The Golden Rule and the summons of the prophets and the teachers is not a shrill call to arms – it's an invitation to thoughtful action. It's a corresponding task of the spiritual life to give the people ground upon which to stand, a touchstone by which to live so that our action is for the good, and our work is a blessing.

There is a ground out of which our work on behalf of this world comes – our call to justice arises from the sense of kinship with all things. It can't come from your shoulds and oughts – it can't just be a list of to dos that you tick off as time ticks on. It can't come from the latest panic in the headlines or the most hysterical command on the radio, television or from the pulpit. It has to come from that sense of the kinship of all things and your hearts desire to honor and tend that kinship. But there is also a ground from which any good work is really done. Ultimately – it matters not only what we want to do but how we do it.

I've shared with you some of my history – I'm sure some of you identify from your lives – children of parents involved in the social issues of the times. As I pushed my sister's stroller around Rochester, New York in support of the Farmworker's Union or sat suitably far enough away from my parents on a bus to Washington DC to protest the war in Vietnam, I believed that working for social justice was a form of spiritual practice. Many years, bus rides and different strollers later I've come to realize that the spiritual practice of action has to be grounded in two different and spiritual places. And for those of you itching over the vagueness of the word spiritual there are a thousand definitions – but for this time let me define it as the ground beneath words – the core – the fulcrum in the center of each person that balances the inner and outer forces, the mind and the body, the heart and the reason, the self and the other, and the individual and the world. Because we speak in words all these things sound separate and distinct – one thing after another. And, I suppose they are – and they aren't. Let's dedicate sermons and conversations to exploring what the spiritual is – certainly a worthy calling in this house of religious community. But for now bear with me. Beyond dogma, beyond religious form, beyond the monkey mind that chatters shoulds and oughts and spews judgments about the world

and every detail in it, there is a place of clarity, balance, and peace. You know when you meet someone who lives there or spends time there – they have a way of speaking – at least most of the time, in care and thoughtfulness. They have a way of acting out of their center and not out of the reaction of the moment. It is not easy to live that way – it takes practice and groundedness.

It's not easy to live in that grounded way because you can wake up every morning and think to yourself – how come it's getting so hot and what am I doing in this handbasket and rush out to fix everything at once or stay in bed blanketed by despair. It's not easy to live that way because you wake up each morning with a score of things to do, errands to run, a job to attend to, people to tend to and chauffeur, meals to make, meetings to attend and the world going to hell in a handbasket at breakneck speeds, choices to make, and action to take. And the temptations are many – particularly the temptation to clear away extraneous things and focus on the big stuff – which sounds good – but which is the big stuff?

Through my husband, Mark, I encountered this passage of Brother Thomas Merton's – the peace activist, Cistercian monk, and prolific writer:

“The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation with violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys her own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.”

In part, we need to sit still and contemplate in order to set priorities. The people that we admire most – chose a path of work and stayed on it – not obsessively but coherently. Can you imagine the alternative? I mean – first you'd have to have nothing but time: Monday – peace in the Middle East, Tuesday – eliminating racism, Wednesday – health care rights, Thursday – correcting the correctional system, Friday – women's rights, Saturday – Darfur, Sunday – Myanmar – oh my god – what about the environment, rights of indigenous people's, child abuse. Even if we had all week every week there wouldn't be enough time.

The first spiritual task is to learn by looking inward where your own gifts and talents are and where, as the Rev. Beuchner said: the world's deep hunger and your own deep gladness meet. Thus everything you do – or as close to everything as we can come in a world of erratic email, traffic that gets snarled, machines that break, and so forth – that within that world your work for a fairer world rises from your real devotion. One of the best examples I have of this is in the world of conservation work where I've met people who loved every little tree and rivulet and were dedicated to retrieving and preserving humble and precious places in their regions. Sometimes the words of Wendell Berry or Mary Oliver remind me of the deep attention that we can bring to the natural world so that we are not working for the idea of nature – but for these living trees, these living rivers, these living prairies. I remember the joyful and focused work of Jacques Cousteau who made the oceans come alive for so many people because he so loved them.

That your own deep joy – the task for which you’ve been shaped by life and your times meets the world’s deep hunger prevents the tyranny of ideologies. By which I mean ideas that are idolized so that they are permitted to devour people. Like believing in and condemning the sin of homosexuality rather than seeing the real lives of people who love people of the same sex. Or condemning all people of a certain race because of the past actions of some people of that race. If you act from your deep joy and the world’s need you’ll see people as each precious and deserving of respect even when they disagree with you – awful as that is.

I’ve sat at too many meetings of peace or justice groups where the sense of urgency coupled with a sense of absolute certainty of rightness lead people to treat one another in ways almost as harmful as the very things they were protesting and attempting to remedy. There was, not too long ago, a peace list serv that I withdrew from because the harsh judgments – about opponents and the constant frenzy of anger made the conversation too stressful for me. I wanted to make peace while making peace and I knew that I could support the work of the local peace community without the listserv. I was very careful as I withdrew because I didn’t want to mimic those people that Tom Lehrer satirized when he wrote: “I’m sure we all agree that we ought to love one another, and I know there are people in the world who do not love their fellow human beings, and I hate people like that!”

The life of action and the life of the spirit need to inform one another. When we think of the great saviours – the Gandhis, Kings and so forth – we find people who want to ensure that they do, in fact, have compassion for all those individuals and treat them with respect. Thus neither “side” is dehumanized in the process of working for justice.

Did you ever meet anyone whose mind was made up? Who knew, absolutely knew the solution – one state, two state, red state, blue state and who would look with gentle but annoying scorn at people who thought differently – and would discount their thoughts altogether? Do you ever run into them at the holidays over the turkey or the tofurkey dinner? To engage in the real work of social justice is to head out into uncharted territory and hope to make the path by walking. On that path we need one another’s insights, we need to do the deep work of hearing differences and being open to them – differences at least that are not simply the rantings of hate. We need that creative friction to ignite the fire of new vision.

When the Rev. Mark Morrison Reed wrote that “...alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen. Together, our vision widens and strength is renewed,” he was pointing at a living reality. But this is far from easy to do. It’s rough to hear radical differences. It can be upsetting. And, again, this is where a spiritual practice is needed. A practice – of breathing, of being centered, of remembering that you can hear an idea and remain whole and alive, of gathering with those who love you and whom you love and who will hold you accountable to your own hopes. It’s not easy – but if it were – the Golden Rule would have been mastered a long time ago and ethnic cleansing, war, and the list of evils would be vanishing.

Such a spiritual practice is needed so that we can be ready to be good partners in the work of tikkum olam – Hebrew for repairing the world.

Such a spiritual practice provides grounding so that we can derive clarity about our motives – are we working out of fear or love? Is this the right path for me or do I think that I will be seen as being on the right path? Do we want to save the world on its own behalf or on our own? – ooh – look she’s the one who saved the world! Nothing ---

A spiritual grounding for our work can protect us from burn out or running on automatic pilot – it provides renewal for our bodies and spirits in times of challenge. On September 11, 2001 I went home briefly during the day and meditated to gather myself for the nights special service and for the upcoming uncertainties. In the midst of fears and heartbreak I found peace.

When we engage in the work of social just are we hoping for immediate results or willing to stay in it, regardless of results because it is the good path – like work on women suffrage or work on eliminating racism. Lifetimes of work before results can be seen or any progress is made – we need faith – that despite the persistence of evil and cruelty, we will keep on walking forward. Spiritual grounding is a hedge against cynicism or despair.

Last year when the Dalai Lama came to West Lafayette he spoke about the death of Chairman Mao – the man who had ordered the takeover and ethnic cleansing of Tibet. He explained that when he heard the news he found himself crying – that Mao would not now have a chance to turn his heart around.

Let this be noted -- we’re not the Dalai Lama – with years of meditation under our belts to balance out our disappointments at the world. And yet, yesterday it was my sad honor to hear and speak of our own Leslie Evans – a spirit who seemed to embody resilience, who grounded herself in a spiritual life, who was energetic in her work for justice and who greeted every person with a loving and open heart.

Spirituality and social justice not two different things but different aspects of the same thing. Last week I spoke of a vision that is true -- that we are part of a whole — we’re completely connected – part of a cosmic vastness. And at the same time that we are, in fact, quite small -- we may be humbled in our complete and utter dependence upon this world for sustenance and survival. Spiritual practice and work for social justice are two aspects of the same thing – our learning and knowing of our embeddedness in all that is and that each thing we do is a choice we cast into all that is.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote these oft quoted words:

*Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?*

In Micah chapter 6 verse 8 the people kept this answer: Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly. I offer this sermon in honor of Leslie who showed us that yes – everything does die at last and too soon. But that in a life lived as Micah called out we will live both wildly and well and heal the world as we go.