UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

"**If You're Not at the Table, You May Be on the Menu":**
Principles of Social Justice
The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg
6 October 2019
frederickuu.org

Our logo here at UUCF emphasizes three core values: spirituality, community, justice. We chose a similar tagline at a congregation I served previously in northeast Louisiana: "Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly." That previous congregation was on the corner of a fairly busy intersection, and I remember the day that we put up a large sign with that newly chosen logo. A group of us were admiring the sign up close, and I was feeling good about the decision to proclaim our values publicly. "Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly"—what's not to like?

Then, a founding member of the congregation turned her head a little sideways, narrowed her eyes, and said in a skeptical voice: "You know, I'm not sure everyone who drives by this sign is going to understand our intent." She continued:

> I know what *we* mean when say, "Do justice." We mean feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, and visiting the sick and imprisoned. But this is northwest Louisiana. I've lived here my whole life. And when a lot of folks around these parts hear the word justice, they think of getting even or getting revenge—like a scene from a Clint Eastwood movie.

I took a step back from the sign, and said, "Hmmm. You may be right. Some people may take away that impression. But my hope is that the 'love mercy' and 'walk humbly' statements will help communicate to most folks the sort of justice we have in mind.
I think about that experience sometimes when I reflect on our goal here at UUCF to

"act for peace and justice"—or our larger UU Sixth Principle: "The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." Here's the thing about big words such as community, peace, liberty, and justice: they mean different things to different people. And I don't mean to be flippant or insensitive when I say that there's a lot of truth in the saying that, **"One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter."** So much depends on one's point of view.

When speaking of justice, philosophers have classically made a distinction between *distributive* justice (which tends to be concerned about distributing justice, or making sure everyone has at least their basic needs met for food, water, shelter, rest, safety, and security) and *retributive* justice (which focuses on retribution, or punishment for injustices) (Miller 2001:2-3).

Consider, for instance, the planned dueling rallies this afternoon in downtown Frederick. The rally at the Baker Park amphitheater wants *retributive justice:* revenge against any individuals who may want to take what isn't theirs, or who have broken current immigration regulations. The rally at the Carroll Creek Amphitheater wants distributive and *redistributive justice*: to change the system that creates undocumented workers in the first place. Based on that view, **"An unjust law is no law at all."**

But notice that this idea that justice is a higher law can cut both ways. It can also create vigilantes, who seek revenge against others who they believe are unjustly protected by corrupt rules or laws.

Relatedly, I want to invite us to reflect on what we mean when we say that we are for justice. I want to invite us to consider what people *deserve* and what they *need*. I want to invite us to ask, "What's fair? And *who* decides?"

It matters, for instance, who is in the room when decisions about justice are made. As a slogan from the disability rights movement emphasizes, "Nothing about us without us." Or as another aphorism reminds us, **"If you're not at the table, you may be on the menu."**

Along these lines, one of my touchstones for considering the questions of what's fair and who decides is a book by the American political philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002) titled A Theory of Justice. One of the biggest takeaways from his book is a

thought experiment that can be paradigm-shifting in how someone—especially someone raised with privilege—answers the question "What's fair? And who decides?"

Rawls invites us to imagine that we are behind what he calls a "veil of ignorance." From behind this veil, you do not know which advantages or disadvantages you would have in the imagined society under consideration—such as your gender, class, race, sexual orientation, ability, or religion. From this "original position," you must choose "the principles of justice" that would structure the future society you would live in.

Now, perhaps you are a gambler, and want to play the odds. Maybe you are willing to design an unequal society in hopes that you will be lucky enough to come out on top when the veil is lifted and it is revealed which privileges and social advantages you will be assigned.

But **Rawls assumes that the rational choice in your position would be to structure society in such a way that *even the most vulnerable among us* would have at least their basic needs met.** Rawls's theory of justice challenges us to fight for the same accommodations and dignity for others that we would want if we or our closest loved ones were in that situation (81).

And as significant and helpful as I find this perspective, it's worth considering that some of the contemporary ways we approach justice, at least the ways we have come to refer to them, are relatively recent in origin. It was only in the year 1900—barely more than a century ago—that the first book was published that included the term *social justice* in its title (4). And it is far more recent still—not until the last decades of the twentieth-century—that the term "*global* justice" became widespread (Miller 2013: 165). It is not only the word justice that we must wrestle with, but also the *scale* at which we seek to do justice in our globalized, pluralistic, postmodern world of 7.6 billion people--and climbing.

So, at the risk of oversimplifying, when we talk about social justice or global justice, one crude definition of what we mean is **"how the good and bad things in life should be distributed"** (Miller 2001: 1). "Who gets the *advantages* and who bears the *burdens*?" What's fair? Who decides?

To start with a negative example, I'm aware that there's both much to be proud of in our UU heritage and times when the elite social position of some of our forebears impacted their work for justice. For example, there is a passage from the essay "Self-Reliance" by our admired Unitarian ancestor Ralph Waldo Emerson that makes me cringe when I go back to it, even as there are many other aspects of that essay to admire. Emerson writes:

> Do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong…. [And there follows a list of charitable causes in relation to which, Emerson, says,] though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar, which by and large I shall have the manhood to withhold. (Miller 2013: 183-184)

Whew. Makes me want to say, "Dude, Emerson, that is not a good look. Methinks your privilege is showing. And by "privilege," I mean something at the intersection of the words privilege, advantage, and entitlement—something that inhibits someone from understanding the lived reality of another person in a different position, often one that society disadvantages.

At the same time, I will readily grant that what social justice and global justice call for today is far beyond what any individual can individually accomplish. We are all called to change the societal system, structures, and institutions to help ensure that everyone has at least their basic needs met.

Let me say more about what I mean, using the set of four cartoons in your Order of Service. Setting aside the unfortunate choice to make the situation about watching a baseball game at which the spectators have a high likelihood of being hit by a baseball —I have found this set of cartoons to be a clarifying visual aid for thinking about justice

Panel 1 ("equality") shows why treating everyone the same is inadequate because people are not all the same. Giving everyone a box to stand on works out perfectly for the person in the middle, but the person on the left doesn't need a box. And the person on the right, even when standing on the box, is still staring at the fence.

Panel 2 (“equity") is a strategy of giving everyone what they need. In Marx’s language, “*From* each according to their ability (or resources); *to* each according to their socially recognized needs” (Gilbert 24). Note that in this second panel there are still three boxes total, but the tall person’s box on the left has been *redistributed*—Go social justice!—to the now joyous person on the right who can finally see over the fence!

Panel 3 (“reality") is a sad reminder of our current state of extreme wealth inequality, in which the person on the left has absurdly too many boxes such that they are standing dangerously high up—and the person on the right is demoralizingly sitting in a hole. I have previously addressed wealth inequality at length, so I will limit myself to one data point for now. In the United States today,

> The bottom 90%—a group of almost 145 *million* families who possess approximately $94,000 on average—collectively own about as much of the total household wealth (22%) as the 161,000 families who are included in the top 0.1%, whose average wealth is approximately $82 million, 845 times larger than the bottom 90%…. The top 0.1% is about as large as the income share of the top 1%.

Having more than others can arguably be considered fair, but some people having 845 times more than others corrupts any chance of a fair playing field.

Panel 4 (“liberation”) challenges us to *take down the fence*: to change the institution, the system, the structure that is holding people back in the first place. So although this cartoon isn’t perfect (and of course, nothing is), I invite you to use it as a tool to reflect on the ways you too may shift reality—within your spheres of influence—toward more equity or even toward collective liberation.

I’ll give you a personal example. This summer, while we were in Scotland, my wife broke her arm. We happened to be on the isolated Island on Iona at the time—so after a six hour journey including taking a short ferry ride to the Island of Mull, a longer bus ride across Mull, another ferry to the mainland of Scotland, and an even longer train ride to Edinburgh, we were able to get a cab to an emergency room. But all that is another story.

My point for now is that when we walked into the A&E ("Accidents and Emergency) Department, we were asked only a few simple questions. (There were not pages of paperwork as there typically are here in the U.S.) And after waiting a while, they did x-rays, and put Magin's arm in a cast. As we prepared to leave, I asked how much we owed them, and they said nothing. It was covered under their publicly funded, socialized healthcare system. That's one version of liberation: removing the fence that keeps people in need from getting treated. If your arm is broken, we fix it.

I have also been heartened recently to hear more interest in Certified B Corporations, which are legally required to

> consider the impact of their decisions on their workers, customers, suppliers, community and the environment…. B Corp companies must undergo a rigorous measurement of a company's full environmental, social and governance (E.S.G.) commitment, which measures a company's commitment to reducing environmental impact and supporting social justice as well as governance and engagement within their communities.

This stance is in contrast to the traditional understanding that corporations only exist to increase shareholder value. And while I celebrate an increase in the number of B Corporations, the deeper question for me is whether *all* corporations should be required to consider the impact of their decisions on other people and on this planet. Maybe we've been doing this wrong for quite a while now?! Sometimes we need to take down those walls that are keeping us from creating a world of peace, liberty, and justice—not merely for some, not merely for shareholders—but for *all*. For now, perhaps a greater awareness of Certified B Corporations can remind us that a better world is possible.

For justice's sake, we must demand a better world not only for ourselves, but for the generations to come. Last week, I shared with you Martin Buber's powerful words when Hitler came to power in Germany: "The world has become unreliable…. It is up to us to make the world reliable again for children." And sometimes that shift may be as simple as remembering the core lessons that we teach children.

Recently I had the opportunity to officiate at a wedding in which the couple chose an unusual reading that was more powerful than I anticipated. I sometimes encourage couples during the ceremony to not underestimate the intuitive wisdom behind the decisions they make, such as the choice of readings at their wedding, and that they may want to revisit those readings on occasions such as their wedding anniversaries, to remind themselves of the intentions and aspirations they set on that important day.

In this case they chose a reading by the author Robert Fulghum, who incidentally is a Unitarian Universalist minister. (He graduated in 1961 from Starr King School for the Ministry, our UU identity seminary in the Bay Area, and is the Minister Emeritus of the UU congregation in Edmonds, Washington.) The couple chose Fulghum's most famous essay, "All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten," which some might dismiss as childish—but which actually has some profound reminders for cultivating a life well-lived, a healthy marriage, and a more socially just world. Consider if there is one or more of these lessons that particularly resonate with you—either for your own life, someone you know, or perhaps you can think of a politician or two who could benefit from a reminder about them as they vote on upcoming legislation:

> Share everything.
> Play fair.
> Don't hit people.
> Put things back where you found them.
> Clean up your own mess.
> Don't take things that aren't yours.
> Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
> Wash your hands before you eat.
> Flush.
> Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
> Live a balanced life —
> Learn some and think some
> And draw and paint and sing and dance

And play and work everyday some.
Take a nap every afternoon.
When you go out into the world,
Watch out for traffic,
Hold hands and stick together.
Be aware of wonder.

I'm grateful to be with so many of you on our journey to create such a world. Together, may we turn our dreams into deeds.