

When Religion Gets Justice
By Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe

Invocation

First, I would like to offer an invocation of personal responsibility for this presentation.

“I would like to thank the communities to which I am accountable. My words shoulder respect for my family and friends and spread a commitment of love not just to the communities of which I am presumed or choose to be a part, but also the larger world of living and sacred essence. May I remember that words have power and are actions in and of themselves. May these words be action towards liberation and wholeness. May I remember that these words are not perfect and that they are enough and are part of the constant process of becoming of our world.”

Introduction

I find the title of this presentation a little confusing. “When Justice-Making Gets Religion.” For surely, justice making is religion and religion is justice-making. You can’t take one from the other. They have, since the first person prayed for rain or food or survival, been completely tied to one another. Justice and religion are interdependent pieces of a communal system of survival. We need to recognize the interdependence of these two in order to become affective agents in the public square.

I do not think that we can be affective agents for change in the public square if we are not willing to recognize the importance of religion and justice as partners for change. The people who need justice in their lives often turn to religion for hope. Now, Unitarian

Universalism is not necessarily a religion that recognizes the need for justice within the message it provides. However, we have a great capacity for offering just that.

We as Unitarian Universalists have a great capacity for affecting change in the public square, but we are seemingly afraid of what that power might mean. The great vision of our principles implies community without ever actually saying it. We talk about the “inherent worth and dignity of every person”, “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth”, and “the interdependent web of which we are all a part.” All of these imply justice and community without naming community.

We do have one principle that names community- “the goal of a global community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” It even names justice as a goal of that community. However, I would note that it is the “goal” of global community. The question for this discussion is how do we live in community now? Not just a Unitarian Universalist community, but a larger United States community or global community in which we are but one voice among many?

Common Values

Ultimately, we as a denomination need to clarify our communal values and need for communal action. We each, as interdependent individuals, need to recognize that for justice to rain down like water we have to be in communal engagement with our siblings across the world. Speaking of lofty goals won’t get the job done. We need particulars.

We need to do more as congregations and as a denomination to affect change in the public square. Individual action and the work of social justice committees are important, but they have less of an impact in speaking in the public square. When a congregation or a denomination speak out for justice, then it becomes harder to ignore the

cacophony of voices. Besides, for long-term change to happen in the world, we need to be working together as communities. We need to develop modalities of interaction that support justice rather than creating rifts that become insurmountable. This means developing theology and language that helps connect us. This brings the question, what does it mean to engage in communal efforts for spiritually and theologically grounded justice?

To have a theologically and spiritually grounded justice, we need to know the answer to the question, “what do we believe?” In 2005, The Commission on Appraisal published the report engaging our theological diversity in which they discuss many of the core beliefs of Unitarian Universalists from many different backgrounds. These beliefs include, love, service, truth, freedom, diversity, human worth, goodness, inner harmony, beauty and the natural world, and harmony with the divine. These were taken from surveys of Unitarian Universalist across our denomination. It is clear, that while we may not have a core belief system as a denomination, we have values that we share in common as a community. Values that the greater communities of which we are a part need to help justice making possible.

For the purposes of this presentation, let us focus on one of the listed values: love. As a core belief, how would love look in the public square? Now, when I say love, I don’t mean the Notting Hill or Bridget Jones variety. I mean deep love that connects me to you. The love that says that my life is as valuable and meaningful as mine. Love that says my existence and your existence are tied to one another. It is harder to deny those who are a part of our communities when we recognize a radical love and concern for them.

When we think about public policy, what would it mean to ask that love be the ideal we hold our leaders up to. For example, if we are passing a bill on health care, what would it mean for the guiding principle of that bill to be loving care of those that the bill would serve? What argument can we make?

The reason for passing a health care bill for the poor, for example, is named as radical hospitality and care for all in our community because if my neighbor suffers, then I suffer. If it can happen to my neighbor, it can happen to me. Health for all in our community means a healthy community. We have many religious leaders over time that we can call upon who named love as a core to life and we can see the value of love for one another in our daily lives and in our communities.

Growing Edges

To present our values in the public square, however, means dealing with some of the baggage us as a denomination carry. We cannot deal with all of the baggage. Still, naming our own weaknesses and then moving from a place of radical care for ourselves can offer a model for our greater community to do the same. So, what kind of baggage are we talking about in terms of speaking in the public square?

First, as much as we would like to, we cannot be all inclusive. We live in a diverse world and that means that never will any one person or group in that world agree with the ideal presented by any other person or group in that system. This is part of the divine beauty of the world and, perhaps, even some of the frustration. We need to be willing to say things that someone will not like and take responsibility for that.

As a result of this desire for inclusivity, we have created an ethic of niceness. We want to be nice to one another. This is a reasonable desire and not a very realistic one.

The result of trying to be nice is that we can become fake. We do not present the entirety of who we are to one another which means disjointedness. This feeds into a culture of separateness that can prevent us from being in community together. There is a difference between being nice and being in relationship.

Relationship means that I will share my life with you and you with me. We need to be prepared to disagree with one another and even to offend or hurt one another. Not intentionally- that is not a healthy relationship. A healthy relationship means that we need to be prepared to “get it wrong.” One of my close friends told me once, “Sunshine, if you aren’t making a mistake at least 25% of the time, then you aren’t doing enough to grow.” We learn from our growing edges- from those things that we are inexperienced with or continuing to grow into. We cannot always get it right and we need to learn to develop relationships within and between communities that allows for the inevitable imperfections of our beingness so that we may see the beauty of our variety of knowledge, wisdom, and growth.

One of my colleagues, Cile Beaty says that to create healthy relationships, we need to look beyond intention to impact. So, often we hide behind what we intended and thus fail to see the impact. For example, if I say something that offends another person, I can promise you it isn’t because I intended to. However, the impact of what I have said still remains. If I hide behind, “but I didn’t mean to.” That prevents me from engaging in a conversation of responsibility and care. Instead, I can say, “I didn’t realize that would offend you, could we sit down and talk about this so that I may understand better?”

Then, we can take action from there. Hopefully, I become aware of the impact of what I

have said and I grow from it so that the world heals each time anyone in my community takes that responsibility.

Ultimately, we need to move away from a concept of perfection and “doing it right” to a concept of “being enough.” You and I and all of us are “enough.” We are not perfect, but we have the skills, ability, and capacity to create healthy relationships...not *perfect* relationships, but healthy ones. When we mean to take the best action we can and recognize that it is *enough*, then we can be prepared to take responsibility for our actions when our best is not perfect. In other words, we become accountable to one another for what we do and say.

Accountability

Accountability allows us to bring justice into our faith and into our culture. Accountability means being in relationship with those who need justice and those who can provide it. For many, they embody both of these things. We need to first be accountable to justice in our own churches. Are we offering a fair wage to all of our employees? Are we addressing systemic and internalized oppression that weaves through our culture? Are we in relationship with the communities where our churches are located? Are we in relationship with the communities affected by these questions?

As an activist, I have seen so many people say that they are helping people without ever knowing what the people they say they are helping think, feel, and do, let alone need. It is one thing to decide that you are going to help the homeless by starting a soup kitchen in an area that already has twenty soup kitchens. It is another thing entirely to invite homeless people into your church and start a dialogue about what is needed and

then develop a program from that dialogue with homeless folks working with you to develop and implement the program.

Recently, I attended the Poverty Truth Commission at Union Theological Seminary in New York. The scholar-in-residence for the Poverty Initiative there, Willie Baptist, noted that the only people who can lead the charge in eliminating poverty are the people experiencing poverty themselves. If we let the people affected lead the way and offer the support needed to make that happen in relationship with the people who need help, then we are being accountable.

It is much harder to deny marriage rights to someone when you are in a relationship with them. Anti-discrimination laws that address violence become more apparent when you are in relationship with the people affected by that violence. However, we need to develop our relationships in our own church communities if we are going to speak to justice in the public square. What we say in the public square should be grounded in the work of accountability that we hold in our own denomination and churches.

Here is what is key to our justice work in the public square. ANY work that we engage in through the public square needs to be grounded both in a common ethic of understanding and based in the communities of which we are a part through our congregations, denomination, and physical location of our churches. Through this grounding we not only begin to have capacity to speak in the public square, but we begin to have an ethical impact within the public square. So, once we enter into the public square, what common ethical language do we have to be come effective?

Language

Much of the effectiveness of more conservative religions in the public square comes from their capacity to say what they believe and back that up. They have a language of ethics that they use in the public square that people understand. We may not agree with it, but we understand what they are saying and the reasons for validating that view. We need to have a language as well. Most importantly, we need a language for what we believe rather than against what we do not believe. By having a language of ethics, we give people something to hold onto; something to rap their brains around. We have the language already begun in the list of values reported by the Commission on Appraisal. This language fits well with our principles and with justice overall.

We need to be careful about becoming politically engaged in language. Language can have the power taken away from it by phrases like, “politically correct.” When we become mired in “political correctness,” we forget what the real reason for care in language is important. Language is divinity living in the world. It is a sacred act of accountability that helps guide us toward liberation and wholeness. So often I have heard the phrase, “actions speak louder than words.” Words are actions. When we accept language as a sacred act, then we can move towards sacred, soulful, and holistic relationships with one another.

Conclusion

So, where do we go from here? What practical actions can we take to move into accountable and sacred justice making in the public square? Can these actions stay true to our plethora of Unitarian Universalist values?

First, we need tools that are good enough to support our work in the public square. For example, we should support spiritual practices and liturgies that provide

shared language and capacity for the public square. For example, the call and response that you find in your handout called Because Our Lives Depend On It. This call and response was created by the input of seven people in shared dialogue. This is a fine example of accountability and community put into words. Many of us know the prayer, “love is the doctrine of this church, the quest for truth it’s sacrament, and service it’s prayer.” There are many prayers, songs, and reading that help create a container for religion inherent in social justice and public engagement.

Another tool is grounded reflection on social justice and action within our churches and our local communities. Let’s take the work beyond our churches. If we are having a conversation in our congregation, then let us become a part of conversations in our communities or host them ourselves. If we decide to take an action, let’s invite people who will be affected by that action. If we have taken an action, let us host sacred reflection meetings that includes all involved in and affected by the action. How was the action sacred? If we were to do the action differently, what might we do? What religious values were implied and explicit in the action?

We need to participate in the public square as churches. We should be both leaders and participants, depending on what is happening in the public square. Individuals and committees have some power. However, when a church comes out to speak, then we have a different kind of power in the public square. Not everyone in the congregation needs to participate, but actions within the church should be connected to the work of the entire church, not just a few members. This is healthy relationship carried forward into public action.

We can provide literature that not only offers questions, but provides a variety of possible answers and conclusions. We should not be afraid to express an opinion. In fact, we should not be afraid to express many perspectives on a given action, statement, or policy in the public square. We can provide key ethical statements that help those who are reading it to find the ethical reasons for certain actions. For example, a brochure on marriage equality could include many perspectives and some reflection on the moral and ethical reasoning for supporting marriage equality.

With tools in hand, we need to speak more to the great message that our denomination can offer to the public square- that of our diverse interaction that the religious multiplicity our faith implies. We are not perfect in sharing our community of hybridity. However, we have a message to offer of what has helped people grow and heal in our community and what has not. We have diversity in some areas and not others.

Yet, we continue to work on being welcoming in many areas including people of differing classes, races, ethnicities, genders, sexual preferences, and beyond. We can provide a religious and spiritual model for ethical engagement in community that creates justice and allows for us to grow in sacred trust. We will not always get it right and we will need to model how to grow from challenges and imperfections. We can offer an ethic of community that helps an increasingly broken and scattered global community consider how we can engage in sacred action towards healing, wholeness, liberation, and ultimately- justice.