

Where Faith and Justice Meet

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 9, 2022

The book of James in the Christian New Testament says, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.” In the Christian faith, the body without the soul would cease to exist, one feeding and sustaining the other. While we as Unitarian Universalists may not believe in this concept of a soul, there is a mind-body continuum inherent in each of us that connects fact with creativity, an intersection that sustains us as individuals and connects us together in society at large. Whether body and spirit or body and mind, one cannot exist without the other. So, too, is it with faith and justice. Faith without service is to know a connection with something greater, whether society or the divine, and yet to remain complacent about all of those we are connected to who are suffering. Works, without a faith true to oneself, are unsustainable, a commitment without firm grounding, without that connection that interlocks humanity and keeps us as one.

Justice does not just happen, it takes intention – individual intention and the intentions of groups or communities joining together for a common cause. It is easy to be complacent, especially for those among us occupying multiple privileged identities. Yet the world will not heal with love that is not simultaneously connected with action, just as our body cannot be at peace with an injured soul or mind.

We find ourselves throughout our lifetimes faced with crossroads, decisions on how to navigate our connection to our faith with the trajectory of our lives. Deepak Chopra lifts up that, at each crossroads, we have an option as to where to focus our intentions. At each crossroads, that which we choose will grow and thrive while that which we let go of will “wither, disintegrate, and disappear.”¹ If our faith is our roadmap, choosing that path which betters humanity becomes inherent, and our deeds and actions will multiply and ripple throughout our interdependent web. Psychologist Abraham Maslow writes, “In any given moment we have

¹ *Soul Matters Worship Packet January 2022*

two options, to step forward in growth or to step back into safety.”² Justice work does often not feel safe, and yet to ignore this option is to regress. By choosing justice whenever it arises, we grow, and the world heals.

What I have found to be inherent in justice work grounded in faith is the interconnectedness of all humanity. Society is akin to towering trees occupying great forests. While each tree appears to be an individual entity, through roots buried beneath the ground each tree is connected and shares with each other that which is needed to survive. So, too, are we connected in sacred and often hidden ways. We are connected through faith.

Throughout this morning’s reflection, I use the terms “God” and “Goddess,” because these are the terms used by the theologians and religions we will explore. I invite you to use any name for the sacred that is true to you – your own understanding of a God of many names and a God of no names.

It is difficult to know what may come first – theologies or established religions. Like body and mind, they are intimately connected, theology a study and religion a practice. And for each one of us they dictate how we engage with the world. After numerous studies in seminary, I came to identify with process theology. In process theology, the understanding is that the sacred, sometimes understood as God and sometimes as Goddess, is not all-powerful and is not all-knowing. Instead, God is an interactive piece of each living thing, connected intimately to each one of us through divine love. When we suffer, God feels this and suffers with us. When we rejoice, God rejoices as well. Instead of serving as a being with dictatorship over humanity, God has the power of persuasion. God urges each of us to choose good in the world; to choose love and justice and faith. It is up to each and every one of us whether or not to receive God’s persuasion or to act in the opposite. How we respond to this persuasion – this is where we set our intentions.

² *Soul Matters Worship Packet January 2022*

All injustice in the world is created by us – by human beings. Process theologian Carol P. Christ writes that each one of us has work to do to transform those systems of injustice that those alongside us and those who came before us have created – created through greed, warfare, and a lack of concern about the environment. God shares in our “outrage of injustice.” This suffering experienced by the downtrodden and the marginalized is likewise felt by God, and in this shared suffering God urges us to choose healing, love, and peace.³ Whether or not we identify with process theology and this particular belief in the sacred as a loving God, we can still be led to justice with our own understanding of our personal connection with our own holy, whatever that may be.

Through a different lens, liberation theologians understand God as being one with the poor of the earth; of being one with the downtrodden and the marginalized; God’s presence residing with “broken humanity.” Wherever the marginalized cry out in pain, whenever the suffering find pleasure in “forging a new self,” God is there. God is there with those trying to “make a way out of no way;” the sacred and the holy revealed whenever the voiceless work to survive and heal and thrive.⁴ In this theology, God is not with each of us, but resides with the least of these. When we are called to justice, that justice serves to heal God, to heal those who are intimately connected with the sacred. With liberation, the marginalized reveal their connection with God. How can faith not be tied to justice if God is found only within those who are suffering? Let us explore that partner of theology – religion.

We heard earlier from the Book of James that faith without works is dead, the sentiment of which serves as a cornerstone for justice found within our own faith as well as an understanding held by myriad religions. When exploring Christianity, we see this in the works of Jesus, a savior to Christians who dedicated his life to the least of these, whose legacy of love and healing lifts him up as a divine figure millennia later. From the teachings of Jesus, it is apparent that justice and faith are one in the same. Other Biblical texts lift up this intersection

³ *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World* Carol P. Christ pgs. 112-119

⁴ *The Ties that Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/a Theologies in Dialogue* “Black Theology on God: The Divine in Black Popular Religion” by Dwight N. Hopkins

as well. Corinthians speaks of the intersection of all humanity as a body created by God, each member of the body deserving care until each is equally whole, as one has equal concern for another. The sacred text elaborates, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”⁵ We are part of an interconnected whole, the fate of one effecting us all. Or the divine instruction as written in Isaiah, where God has sent us to “bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to comfort all who mourn.”⁶

Cheryl Cook from the Jewish Theological School writes of a prominent teaching from the Torah that instructs those of the Jewish faith to “love the stranger.” This obligation to love is mentioned numerous times in this sacred text, more than the instructions to keep Kosher and observe Shabbat. The obligation to love a stranger— no matter who that person may be – is a teaching crucial to this faith. Again, we are reminded of the interdependent web of which we are all a part, for, as written in the Mishnah, a work of Jewish rabbinic literature, “anyone who destroys a single life is considered . . . to have destroyed a world, and anyone who saves a life is considered to have saved an entire world”⁷ In this faith we all derive from Adam – one person, from whom our entire society arose. In this sense, we are intimately connected. The rich and the poor, the abled and the disabled, those of any color. Our actions towards each individual effect the entirety of humankind.⁸

Saadi Shirazi of the Muslim faith writes, “All peoples are members of the same body, created from one essence. If fate brings suffering to one member, the others cannot stay at rest.” Furthermore, Shirazi writes, “To worship God is nothing other than to serve the people. It does not need rosaries, prayer carpets, or robes.” This understanding, to me, runs parallel to the theologies we reflected on earlier – we connect with God and do the works of our faith when we work for justice and serve the least of these. That is what matters in faith – not how you

⁵ Corinthians 12:24-25

⁶ Isaiah 61

⁷ Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

⁸ <https://www.jtsa.edu/hidden-page/expressing-our-judaism-through-social-justice/>

pray or whom you pray to; no matter how you dress or what sacred texts you read. Faith is service. Faith is works.

I think of the humanists among us as well, and the humanist teachings of being the change we want to see in the world. Humanist chaplain Greg Epstein shares his own reflections on the topic of fairness and justice alongside faith beliefs. What are the worldly repercussions derived from whether or not we believe in an afterlife? As a Humanist, Epstein understands life in this realm to be the only form of existence – and he reminds us that our life here and now is our “one shot,” and he sees this as a call to focus our minds and our hearts towards taking actions to heal an aching world. The beauty of life, to this chaplain, is the remarkable, “unplanned experiment” that each one of us is, a compilation of trillions of cells that billions of years ago were tiny pieces of stars – through us, the universe knows itself. And yet, we are aching, and in our hurt we have been passing injustices through the generations. We need this generation – all of us occupying this precious planet here and now – to be this change. Fairness and justice lie within the capabilities for each one of us. We need to live into it.⁹

All of this ties into our faith as Unitarian Universalists. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, humanism - these various sources shape and mold our Seven Principles, and our understanding of our faith. We are called to work towards a world in which everyone can live into their inherent worth and dignity. We are called to be grounded in love. As we heard earlier from Mother Teresa, “love has to be put into action, and that action is service.” In our midst, among those in our faith community, we have myriad opportunities to bring our love to the world through action. We are working on the 8th Principle, committing ourselves to actively dismantling oppression as a church, voting, soon, on whether this proposed Principle will have its own place alongside our current seven. Faith and justice overlapping. We have a new Afghan Resettlement Team working to resettle refugees from Afghanistan. You are invited to look on our website for ways you can help, and to attend their upcoming after-worship programming. Our Social Responsibility Team is now working to engage with the National Alliance on Mental Illness and

⁹ <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/22419487/religion-justice-fairness>

is bringing a speaker to us all next Sunday. Our ignite@ email list offers ample justice opportunities, including templates to send politicians for issues that are in alignment with our Unitarian Universalist values. Our Social Justice Team works regularly on immigrant rights. We are a community whose love shines through action – and there is still so much to do.

I want to end with words of love, attributed to ancient Chinese philosopher Mozi: “When all the people of the world love, then the strong will not overpower the weak. The many will not oppress the few. The wealthy will not mock the poor. The honored will not disdain the humble.” Let us all seek to live in a world of love; a world where the interdependence of all humanity calls us to acts of justice, where we love the stranger and listen to the persuasion of the Goddess. May our faith as Unitarian Universalists call us to action as we join together to save an aching world, faith and works coexisting in sacred harmony, living each day with an intention for justice, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.”

May it be so, and Amen.