

Our Daily Bread

Sermon by **Rev. Carolyn L. Price**
Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula
© 2005

There is a story about the legendary mayor of New York, Fiorello La Guardia, who served that city from 1933 – 1945, that illustrates the topic of today’s sermon. It seems that Mayor La Guardia was presiding over the police court, when one icy mid-winter day they brought a trembling old man before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. His family, he said, was starving.

“I’ve got to punish you,” declared La Guardia. “The law makes no exception. I can do nothing but sentence you to a fine of ten dollars.”

But the Little Flower (as he was called) was reaching into his own pocket as he added, “Well, here’s the ten dollars to pay your fine. And now I remit the fine.”

He tossed a ten dollar bill into his famous sombrero. “Furthermore”, he declared, “I’m going to fine everybody in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a man has to steal bread in order to eat. Mr. Bailiff,” he said “collect the fines and give them to this defendant!”

The hat was passed and an amazed old man, with a completely unexpected new lease on life, left that courtroom with forty-seven dollars and fifty cents in his pocket.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way:

There is nothing but a lack of social vision to prevent us from paying an adequate wage to every American (worker) whether he is a hospital worker, laundry worker, maid, or day laborer... So often (he said) we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, of those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But (he continued) let me say to you tonight that whenever you

are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity and it has worth.

Dignity and worth are the starting place of our Unitarian Universalist guiding principles. We declare that we affirm and promote the “inherent worth and dignity of every human being.” And so I say to you this morning that this issue – the living wage issue, or decent compensation for the lower working class – is a UU issue. It is an issue of justice, or righteousness, as the great Hebrew prophet Amos put it when he said, as we will sing later this morning in one of our most loved hymns, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Dr. King said that “there is nothing but a lack of social vision” to prevent us from paying people enough to live on. That, really, is the subject of this morning’s sermon, to ask what kind of social vision we have, individually and together, as a community of faith - and in particular how this vision encompasses the lower working class. It touches on all sides of poverty, including the larger issue that has my daughter and about 50 of our UU youth marching in Los Angeles today on behalf of immigrant rights. It is no simple issue we take up this morning, and we will but touch the sides of it in our short hour together. We will take time following the service, after we’ve had a break for coffee and conversation, so that those who wish to talk more about this can return to the sanctuary for a congregational response.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee has designated this day, Sunday March 26, 2006 as “Justice Sunday”. Today we join with hundreds of other UU congregations to explore the issue of the living wage from a religious vantage point, as a community of

faith and justice. I want to suggest this morning that this type of work is *not* optional for those of us who would call ourselves Unitarian Universalists. It has forever been a part of the fabric of our free faith.

We have taken to heart the cry of the Universalists from whom we – especially here in this church of Universalist beginnings – descend, who dared to tell a Puritan world that God’s love was not judgmental or confined to an elect few, but was great and good, and included all of humanity. And early on, those liberal spiritual ancestors of ours fought for fair wages, declaring that even the poorest of the poor, the lowest of the workers, the people who handled garbage and human waste, were children of this God, made in God’s image, and thus without exception also deserving of a decent life, a decent wage.

This, in a world where to be religious was the norm, was expected and encouraged, our liberal forebears were devoted to working for a better world. It was part and parcel of their faith, as critical as going to church on Sunday morning. And by studying the history of our U and U forebears, you will see a level of involvement in the issues of the times: slavery, treatment for the mentally ill, rights of women, war, worker’s rights and more – that is disproportionately high for the size of our movement. This is still true today.

Times have changed since the days when it was normal to be religious, though, arguably, this is to our own detriment. Listen to these words of Rabbi Michael Lerner, whose new book “the Left Hand of God” is being bought up by spiritual progressives – Jews and Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Humanists and Unitarian Universalists – all over the country. He says

We live in a world in which a technocratic rationality has replaced an awareness of spirit, flattening the way we experience nature and each other. Social theorists from Max Weber to Zygmunt Bauman have described the disorientation and desperation that this has caused to people in the modern world. In the United States this process has reached its fullest development in the form of a bottom-line mentality that judges every activity, every institution, every social practice as rational, productive, or efficient only to the extent that it produces money or power.¹

Something is good, our country seems to be saying, only to the extent that it offers a profit of money or power.

Unitarian Universalism is a unique movement, because here, you can be an atheist and still be spiritual. Here, you can be a humanist, and still be in touch with a spirit that science cannot fully explain; you can learn to live in the space between sensing and certainty. Here, you can be a “rational mystic” or a “mystical humanist” and belong, side by side with those who are grounded in Buddhism, or who see the mystery of nature as holy, or the creative power of the universe as the source of all life. But no matter how you see the sacred, you must, I believe, if you are to be true to our living tradition, see also the reality of the world around us and see how it affects not just those like us, but all people, in all places, at all times. To be centered only in the self, or only in the parish, is to deny the fullness of the glory of life; to step away from the long arc of justice to which our forebears devoted their lives and times, and to turn from the responsibility that comes along with the privilege of place and power that most of us are blessed with.

¹ Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 2.

Poverty kills. We know this from bearing witness to the atrocities of starvation, treatable diseases left un-treated, and tainted water supplies that bring death in the third world. But here, in our own country poverty kills more people than the combined deaths from war, natural disasters and homicide put together. We used to believe, and certainly Dr. King did when he advocated for a national minimum wage in the March on Washington, that a person who worked a full time job at minimum wage would be able to climb slowly but steadily out of poverty, to make a decent life for his or her family. But this is no longer true. In fact, the minimum wage is now far below what it was when it was first implemented, when adjusted for inflation.

Today, in order to have the same purchasing power that it had when the minimum wage became law, and more importantly, to be set at a level whereby it is possible for a person to live a decent life, with shelter, food, education and basic health needs met, the minimum hourly wage today would need to be at least \$9.16 an hour. Instead, minimum wage employees working full time, year round, earn \$5.15 per hour, which equals less than \$11,000 a year, and is a full \$5000 below the official poverty level for a family of three.

Even those who work for the retail giants like Wal-Mart, who, as their top brass like to proclaim, tends to pay at a higher level than the bare minimum wage, cannot possibly survive long or well. When journalist Barbara Ehrenreich went undercover in 1999 and 2000 to see how the people in this country with the lowest paying jobs experience life, she worked as a waitress, maid, house-cleaner, nursing home aide, and – yes, Wal-Mart worker, this is what she had to say at the end, that “... even the “lowliest” occupations require exhausting mental and physical efforts. And one job is not enough;

(she learned, and wrote about in a book entitled *Nickeled and Dimed*. Even as a single person, with no children, she realized) you need at least two (jobs) if you intend to live indoors.”

There are people who criticize the working poor, who, in the aftermath of welfare reform, are unable to survive on a full time job. Capitalism, these critics declare, is the magical answer. It is the way out. You get a job, they say, low on that totem pole, and you pay your dues there for a while, but then you get another one, that pays better, and so on and on. But, as Ehrenreich discovered, it is hard to climb out of poverty once it has become a way of life. Simple things, like being able to quit one job when you hear of another across town that is paying \$1.00 more an hour, which might mean the difference between eating and not eating for that last week of the month, are not possible. If you are truly the working poor, she learned, you cannot just take another job across town, even if it pays better. You probably do not have a car, and the bus may not get you to that other job from where you live. Or you have a small child, and your care-giver, who is a relative, is close to your old work, the one paying less, but which – if you stay there – at least makes it possible for you to leave your child somewhere that is free or cheap, so that you can have a job.

Upward mobility, Ehrenreich learned, is not as easy as it sounds, when you are tied to the grim weight of working 50 – 70 hours a week and barely, if that, getting by. Health insurance is usually a luxury, something that most of the people she worked with simply did without, going to work if they were sick, and because if they did not work, they did not get paid. No wonder the death rate for the working poor is so high, and the age level so low.

The City of Santa Fe, New Mexico, spent years in a process that finally culminated in a Living Wage Ordinance – an agreement that, for all the businesses over a certain size, who do business with the City of Santa Fe, they must pay their workers at least 9.50 per hour. Many business owners, struggling to get by sometimes in a small tourist town, fought vigorously to oppose this living wage. Economists were brought in who predicted doom if the measure passed. Others said it would not, to any significant degree, impact the bottom line. It was a heated and lengthy debate. But in the end, after all the divisiveness, the various stakeholders came to agree that it was not, ultimately, an economic issue after all. It was, they concluded, a moral issue, a matter of ethics and of doing right by one’s fellow human beings. It came down to deciding that holding down a job, even a so-called menial job, should allow people to stay out of poverty, not be designed to keep them trapped in it.

A similar process in Santa Barbara, which I have been involved with since its inception, along with a group called “CLUE” – Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice – that process also culminated, just three weeks ago, after more than six years of hard work, in the City Council passing a Living Wage Ordinance. Level 1 is \$14/hour wage. However, if they pay for a health plan and 12 days off per year, they can pay \$12/hour. More benefits and better health coverage and they can pay \$11/hour. Ventura has begun such a process as well.² They are suggesting that the lowest living Wage Level be set at \$ 9.75 with medical benefits, or \$12.50 without medical benefits.

You will hear this again from me, but I stand with the spiritual progressives who are calling for a new “bottom line” – who are calling for one built not on power and profit

² <http://www.livingwagecampaign.org/index.php?id=2066>;
http://www.coastalalliance.com/area_wage_dev/wage_dev_goals_eng.html

for the individual, but on the common good. The footsteps they follow in cover sanctified ground. As the great Hindu leader, Mahatma Gandhi, declared “I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified with the whole of humanity, and that I could not do unless I took part in politics. The whole gamut of human activities today constitutes an indivisible whole. You cannot divide social, economic, political and purely religious work into watertight compartments.”

As Universalists and Unitarians, and only much more recently, as Unitarian Universalists we have long known this. Our individual lives are connected, in a living web of history and hope, with all other lives, across time and space and the distance between the ages. We do not stand alone in this sanctuary, but stand with the men and women who for the past 117 years, here in this place, have dared to speak up when the rights of others to live a decent life – with enough food, shelter, health care and education – are denied. Many of you here took stands as employers, choosing to pay your farm workers and employees more than the lowest they would take, at the risk of alienating you from your fellow employers.

This issue of the living wage is but a manifestation of the hour at hand, the hour when somehow, someday, as a spiritual and religious people, we must again rise up for common humanity, and most of all for those who cannot stand for themselves. We are free, as Unitarian Universalists, to think about this and to understand it this as we will, and - always – to act as we choose. But we must think, and we must understand, and we cannot ever, ever choose not to act. Whether it be in a small way, as a private employer, or in a big way, as our youth are doing today, marching for the rights of people who, like

so many of us, come to this country seeking a better life, we must act. The only question is how.