

Rev. Stephan Papa
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SERMON: "Is Caring Enough?"

It gives me pride to be of the same religious affiliation as Joseph Priestley, Theodore Parker, Henry David Thoreau, Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, and Whitney Young. I imagine "confronting powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love," as our second source exhorts us to, but I don't do it very often. I try to make ours a more caring community; I serve on the Colorado Religious Coalition for Reproductive Rights Board, volunteer for candidates, and contribute to causes, but I don't really do that much. It is commendable to offer a sanctuary, to model inclusiveness, nurture relationships and the spirit, but it doesn't seem to radically change society; it doesn't even let many people know you care; and, I do care, but that's about all I do.

Preaching about social justice, serving on a board, sending some emails and checks, is about all the confronting of "principalities and powers" I've done lately. There is more I could do. As Forrester Church wrote in the reading this morning, we are immured in "the sin of sophisticated resignation": we feel impotent, so we do nothing. The best you can say is that we care, but that is not enough. Our angst is not efficacious; our sympathy is insufficient.

What prevents us from taking bold, direct action? "Sophisticated resignation" with its antecedents: fear (not having enough courage), despair (not having enough hope and clarity), and self-centeredness (not having enough compassion and the feeling of connection). Let's consider each.

Being the first to take action takes courage. Mike Morran, our minister at First Unitarian in Denver, wrote "A Meditation on Leadership": "Someone must take the lead, point the direction, / Give a purpose to love and work. / Someone must begin, / plant the seeds, / bring fresh water from the well. / Someone must keep a long view, / balancing the secular and the sacred, / mind and spirit, body and soul. / Someone must pay attention. / Someone must sense when to push, / and when to back off. / Someone must respond, / take the risk of transcendence, / reach out the hand. / Someone must create the space, / honor the depths, / and encourage greatness. / You first."

Rosalie Bertell writes that in Jewish tradition when Moses fleeing Egypt with his people came to the Red Sea he stood on the shore waved his wand and told his people to go first, to proceed and the water would part. "A man named Nachshon...was the first to plunge in.... When the waters did not part Nachshon continued...forward.... Nachshon did not wait.... He put his foot in the water with no assurance that this small act would have such a magnificent effect." That takes courage and faith.

When I think of courage in "confronting powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love," the first person who comes to my mind is Jesus of Nazareth, a preeminent example of courage and compassion, an exemplar for me. More recent models for me are Ghandi, Dr. Martin Luther King, and Rosa Parks.

Paul Rogat Loeb [in *The Impossible Will Take A Little While; A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*] points out that though it took real courage for her to refuse to "go to the back of the bus," her heroic act was but one part of a larger organizing plan in which many other people participated. He quotes a young African American

activist...named Sonya Tinsley, who says, “I think it does us all a disservice when people who work for social change are presented as saints—so much more noble than the rest of us. We get a false sense that from the moment they were born they were called to act, never had doubts, were bathed in a circle of light. But I’m much more inspired learning how people succeeded despite their failings and uncertainties. It’s a much less intimidating image. It makes me feel like I have a shot at changing things too.”

The point to take from Sonya Tinsley’s statement and the story of Rosa Parks is that we don’t all have to be heroic, the first ones out front, leaders, even being good followers of those leading social change would help, but the fact is we don’t do much following either.

There is no way around it even for those like me who believe the justice creating power of the universe works through us, we have to follow its lead, we have to do something if ever the world is to be more equal, peaceful. And as Danusha Veronica Goska wrote, “The problem is not that we have so little power. The problem is that we don’t use the power that we have.” (p. 49.)

In my view, the problem is not that people don’t care; most do. The tragedy is that most of us hardly try to change ourselves, or society. It’s tragic, but as that great activist, Mother Jones, proclaimed, “Don’t mourn, organize!” A nineteenth-century critic said [according to Forrester Church], the Unitarians “...are sensible, plausible, candid, subtle, and original in discussing any social evil or abuse. But somehow they don’t get at it.” There is an old Universalist saying that, “You will never plow a field by turning it over in your mind.”

We talk, we care, but we seldom act. And yet we know that action is necessary. We are moving closer to marriage equality because of the bold actions of some brave people, who were out front on this issue. Caring moves us beyond antipathy and apathy, but there are additional challenges such as fear, despair, and that form of cynicism called “sophisticated resignation.” In my opinion our resignation is not primarily due to our knowledge of the complexities of social problems as Forrester writes, but from our fear, our lack of faith, and our self-centeredness.

Maybe our intellectual conceit is really a deceit; maybe it’s not complexity that stops us from following, leading, trying to do something to make our world better, maybe it’s not humility, but fear of change and what it might bring. It has been said that “There are only two kinds of people who tell you that you cannot change the world: those who are afraid to try themselves, and more importantly, those who are afraid that you may succeed.”

I think we are both: afraid to try, afraid of what would happen to us if we actually did something, stood up to the system, and afraid of what the change would mean to our lifestyle if we were successful. To change society we need to acknowledge the particular challenge inherent in our privileged place in our social-economic order. We care, but that’s not enough; we also need to have the courage, and faith to free ourselves from bondage to the system, and leverage our power to make a difference.

Caring is necessary, at times it may be all we can do, but in terms of social change, caring is not enough. Social change calls for more; it requires transformation. As Forrester Church wrote in the reading this morning, “For many of us, self-improvement (both physical and spiritual) has displaced the transformation of society as

our principal moral concern.” I think he is right; however, I do not think spiritual and societal change are necessarily in opposition; some people focusing on their own spiritual transformation say we won’t change society until we change ourselves; others say that waiting for spiritual transformation is a delaying tactic used to avoid changes that might affect our privileged place in society. I think spiritual and societal transformation go hand in hand; social action can transform us, as when we help others and find spiritual fulfillment in it; and working on our spiritual transformation can inspire us to be brave social activists.

A letter writer to the editor in our UU World magazine proclaimed: “Our religious movement isn’t in solidarity with the oppressed, only in sympathy with them,” meaning we don’t see our fate tied up with theirs. Affirming our connection is a faith statement that can transform ourselves and our world.

The transformation we need is to get beyond our self-centeredness, whether through spiritual development such as meditation or through social action, somehow moving beyond apathy, beyond impotence, beyond “sophisticated resignation,” beyond caring to compassion, seeing, believing that our fate is tied up with that of others and doing something more for our greater good.

I think most Unitarian Universalists do care about social injustice; however, caring is not enough. That’s the bad news; we need to find within ourselves more courage and clarity to do something to help create a more just and peaceful world. The good news is we don’t have to act alone, and there are plenty of things we can do—each act, like a pebble dropped in a pool, creates waves of hope, each helps others, each act changes society for the better, and each act changes us for the better too. It doesn’t have to be big and onerous; we don’t have to be leaders, heroes, being followers would be helpful and transformative.

So, do something. For example, attend the No on Amendment 67 training event today at noon or on October 5th and teach others about how this Amendment would abridge religious freedom and women’s rights. Join the TRUU Social Action Committee. Join other TRUU members in feeding the hungry at the Extended Table on September 29th. Work on a Habitat for Humanity House or with Food Forward. Participate in the political process. Work to save the Thompson Divide; work for equal education, for immigrant rights; work on the issue of violence; work for justice and peace.

Alice Walker writes, “This is the tragedy of our world. For we can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet, a destructive one, without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile.”

As we approach the Jewish High Holy Days, Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, we can atone and go forward to find the faith and power inside us and in our community. Our stones may be imperfect, but there is strength in them, the strength of love. Love leads to transformation; we know that in our personal relationships; one day we will affirm the connection and transform our world too. Amen.