

Daring Generosity, Daring Faith

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Let us begin this morning with a poem titled *The Fountain* by Denise Levertov and an excerpt from the book titled *Just Mercy*. First the poem:

Don't say, don't say there is no water

to solace the dryness at our hearts.

I have seen the fountain springing out of the rock wall and you drinking there.

And I too before your eyes found footholds and climbed to drink the cool water.

The woman of that place, shading her eyes, frowned as she watched — but not because she grudged the water, only because she was waiting to see we drank our fill and were refreshed.

Don't say, don't say there is no water.

That fountain is there among its scalloped green and gray stones, it is still there and always there with its quiet song and strange power to spring in us, up and out through the rock.

And now an excerpt from *Just Mercy* by Brian Stevenson:

“It took me a while to sort it out, but I realized something sitting there while Jimmy Dill was being killed at Holman prison. After working for more than 25 years, I understood that I don't do what I do because it's required or necessary or important. I don't do it because I have no choice. I do what I do because I'm broken, too. . . . “Being close to suffering, death, executions, and cruel punishments didn't just illuminate the brokenness of others. In a moment of anguish and heartbreak, it also exposed my own brokenness. You can't effectively fight abusive power, poverty, illness, oppression and injustice and not be broken by it. “We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent. . . . “Sometimes we're fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we're shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis of our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing.”

It was probably more than a half century ago amid the tumult of social protest that the Rev. Harry Meserve, a Unitarian Universalist minister, posted a sermon topic that went viral, or at least as viral as things could go in that pre-Internet era. The sermon topic was, “If you were arrested for being a Unitarian Universalist, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” It

was a clever turn of phrase that resonated at the time because social activists in our movement were being arrested for such things as protesting the Vietnam War or joining Civil Rights campaigns. And we were aware of people overseas in places like the then-Soviet Union or eastern Europe who were being swept up by police simply for witnessing their faith. But it was also a phrase offered tongue in cheek: A dramatic way of challenging his hearers to reflect on just how seriously they took their faith and what each of them was doing to live the values they proclaim.

This is what our UU Second Principle asks of us. Our first principle calls us to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But just proclaiming that doesn't take us very far. The second principle points to the consequences of that commitment. We covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. The writer and philosopher Cornel West may have put it most succinctly: "Justice," he said, "is what love looks like in public." We agree. It's what we proclaimed by the yellow T-shirts that many of us wore at the march honoring the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

There are three things we build our life on. Those are integrity, humility, and generosity. Generosity is the giving of time, energy, faith, and talent. Like Cornel West tells us, I believe generosity is love in action. We can tell what people believe by watching them in action. We can give without loving, but we can't love without giving. Giving love through our actions. How and where we invest our time, energy, faith, and talent shows what is important to us. Your heart will be where your treasure is. The more generous we are the bigger our heart becomes.

In "The Healing Power of Doing Good", author Allan Luks reports that there's a phenomenon called the helper's high, which is described as a feeling of warmth and increased energy, as well as a feeling of euphoria, that people feel when they're being kind to others. In addition, a study from Hebrew University in Israel found a link between kindness and the release of dopamine, a feel-good neurotransmitter in the brain. All the great spiritual traditions and the field of positive psychology are emphatic on this point — that the best way to get rid of bitterness, anger, rage, jealousy [and so on] is to do unto others in a positive way. There are studies that show that when people act with generosity and compassion, there's a positive effect on their health and well-being. Evolution may have primed us to feel good from giving because groups that had a large number of people who were altruistic toward others were more likely to survive than groups that did not.

There are several other studies that show that being kind to others makes us happier. One such study was conducted a couple of years ago by the University of British Columbia. Students at the university were given an amount of money ranging from \$5.00 to \$20.00. They were given the following instructions:

Some of the students were told to spend the money on themselves.

Some of the students were told to spend the money on others.

At the end of the day, the students who had spent the money on others—whether giving the money to a charity or buying a gift for someone else—were subjectively happier than those who had spent the money on themselves.

In yet another study, researchers scanned the brains of volunteers as they were asked to think about a scenario involving either donating a sum of money to charity or keeping it for themselves. The results showed that when the volunteers placed the interests of others before their own, this activated a primitive part of the brain that usually lights up in response to food or sex.

All of the above suggests that altruism is not a superior moral faculty that suppresses basic selfish urges, but rather is basic to the brain, hard-wired, and pleasurable.

Entering the narratives of lives of people suffering from injustice will affect us. Being so close to the horrific stories of his clients, Stevenson in *Just Mercy* tells us, “exposed my own brokenness.” He goes on: “We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness.” How are you broken? It’s an uncomfortable question. We present ourselves to one another as capable, competent people, and, well, frankly, we’d rather not dwell on those wounds that we carry. There may be wells of shame surrounding them, or histories we’d rather not revisit, and we’d prefer to just put them behind us. And yet, consider, as Stevenson puts it, that “our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis of our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing.” In the tenderness that we touch by recalling our own wounds we are given an opportunity to open our hearts in a deep way to truly feeling with: compassion in its most elemental form.

If we act out of our second principle from a position of perceived privilege, where we place ourselves above those we are serving, we might as well not bother. Because as important as the work itself may be, even more important is how this work changes us. For that is how it changes the world, how person by person we build the beloved community, where justice, equity and compassion are a matter of course.

Generosity demonstrates our Unitarian Universalist faith. Time and again, love calls us to action that we may be agents of justice. And central to the notion of justice are the principles of equity – that each person shall be treated fairly and equally – and compassion – that we are not neutral observers to all this pain. The pain touches us. We cannot always fix the ills we find, but we can open our hearts to those savaged by injustice. Ours is a daring faith. Daring faith requires taking risk. It requires the courage to step up and face the giants and to face the unknown. It might be easier to stay in your comfort zone, but when you bravely step out to where our faith calls us to be, history is made and lives are changed forever. “I don’t want your sympathy for the needs of humanity,” writes my colleague the Rev. Robert Fulghum in his book *It Was On Fire When I Lay On It*, “I want your muscle. I do not want to talk about what you understand about this world. I want to know what you will do about it. I do not want to know what you hope. I want to know what you will work for.”

“Don’t say, don’t say there is no water to solace the dryness at our hearts,” Denise Levertov tells us. “I have seen the fountain springing out of the rock and you drinking there.” Each of you.

Even with our wounds and flaws we have, each of us, touched the living water of love and compassion. Let it be our work to help it flow.

May it be so.