

## **Bringing Justice, Equity, and Compassion to Life**

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“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association (we, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Centre County), covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.” That is the second of seven principles espoused by Unitarian Universalism, and is the theme of today’s service. This is the second in a series of seven sermons on those principles scattered through this fall and winter. For those of you who were not here two weeks ago, that service considered the first principle, which asserts the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Copies of that sermon are available in the Social Room, as well as on the Fellowship website.

One point I made in that first sermon was that the principles are not just a random assortment of unrelated statements. They do fit together in a meaningful, coherent way. As one example, it is the conviction that every person possesses inherent worth and dignity that provides the foundation for – that motivates – our feelings of compassion, and our efforts to be equitable and just in our relations with everyone.

More about that in a few moments. But first I would like to expand a little bit on the notion of the principles as an integrated whole. The Rev. Lex Crane has given a lot of thought and reflection to this topic, which has led him to discover what he calls “a remarkable thematic symmetry and resonance.” From his own reflections, and through conversations with others, Crane believes he has uncovered some of the basic assumptions underlying the seven principles; that is, some of their philosophical underpinnings. They are as follows:

- A tacit assumption that the principles . . . provide a working hypothesis for promoting the creative cultural evolution of humanity; indeed, for ensuring the survival of the species.
- A philosophical assumption, which we share with science, that there is a vast entity, a unified reality outside us and within us in which we live and move, a reality that has an intelligible nature. “The interdependent web of all existence” is the metaphor we use for this reality.
- An additional assumption that we know some of this reality and that the remainder is still beyond our grasp.
- A faith in the power and potential of humanity and, along with it, a trust that if, in community, we open ourselves to the nature of things and pool our inherently limited individual perspectives, awareness will emerge within each of us – also in community. In short, we need each other to find our way.
- A commitment to the search for truth and meaning, and underlying this a tacit commitment . . . to enlarging our understanding of reality. . . The truth that matters above all, transformative truth, we find not in ancient revelation but in each living person’s search for truth and meaning.
- A comprehensive love: caring about the quality of life of all human beings and of the interdependent web. . . The principles carry the essential spirit of the Judeo-Christian tradition – not the letter, not the doctrines, but the spirit.

That last one – caring about the quality of life of all human beings – is perhaps the most directly relevant to today’s topic of justice, equity, and compassion. I’d like to begin my discussion of this principle with a quote from the Rev. Richard Gilbert:

Justice, equity, and compassion are lived values of a free faith, suggesting that the spiritual life must express itself ethically. . .

Indicative of this emphasis is a 1981 story that appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* about Mother Theresa and then president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Eugene Pickett. During a visit to Chicago she was asked the question of life’s final meaning. Her answer was, “To become holy, and to go to Heaven.” Eugene Pickett’s response to the same question was a significant variant of that theme, “The purpose of life is to become whole, and to create a Heaven on earth.”

And I would note that that Heaven would feature, among other qualities, justice, equity, and compassion.

Let’s think a little bit about those two terms, justice and equity. The two are often treated as synonyms, but then why include them both? Well, I think there are some subtle differences and, while I don’t want to get carried away in detailed nitpicking, I will try to tease out some of the distinctions that warrant including both terms.

Justice and equity are both, at their root, about fairness. To receive justice is to be treated fairly. To experience the appropriate consequences of our actions. To reap what we sow, whether for good or ill. When I think about justice, or its converse, injustice, I think about it as a measuring stick for whether a person gets what he or she deserves in a given situation.

Equity, on the other hand, is more of a comparative notion. That is, does one person receive the same treatment as another in similar circumstances? Or does one seem to get preferential treatment? Perhaps an example will help to see the distinction here. You may consider it unjust to conscript citizens to fight in an unjust war. That is a case of injustice. But if, on top of that, the conscription is applied unevenly across socio-economic or ethnic or gender lines, then not only is that injustice, but it is also inequity.

And so, justice is essentially fair treatment in any given situation, and equity is equally fair treatment for everyone in comparable situations. Through the second principle, we’re on record in favor of both. To show how the two often go hand in hand, let me share the following little story:

At a party, a doctor who was chatting with a lawyer was interrupted by a woman who insisted on telling the doctor about a pain in her leg and asking him what to do about it. The doctor advised her, then, after she went away, he asked the lawyer: “Do I have a right to send that woman a bill for my professional services?” The attorney replied, “Certainly.” The next day the doctor sent the woman a bill. He also received a bill – from the lawyer.

That’s justice *and* equity.

Why is it that we find the ideas of justice and equity so compelling? I would assert that it is in large part because of our innate sense of compassion. Richard Gilbert calls compassion the “spiritual value that undergirds Unitarian Universalist ethics.” Compassion, at its root, means to

suffer together. That is, seeing the suffering of another causes suffering in me. And why is that? It's because of a sense of identification with the other. Our occasional selfish tendency to cry out "I am me" is met by the resounding response of the Cosmos, "No, you are we." But even that occasional selfishness can contribute to our sense of compassion when we recognize that "there, but by the grace of God or fate or whatever, go I." Our compassion is enhanced by our ability to put ourselves in another's place.

The fact is that we are, by nature, social beings. We are not simply isolated individuals. It is largely through relationship – through identification and interaction with others – that we find meaning and fulfillment in life. Such relationship and identification fuels our sense of compassion, our caring for other people. I guess that's the simplest way to describe compassion: caring.

It is our compassion – our caring – that makes us yearn for justice and equity for all. And that leads us to act in support of global, national, and local efforts for justice. That's why we support Amnesty International in its efforts to end torture and other violations of human rights. That's why we send goods and money to assist rebuilding efforts after natural disasters in Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, Pakistan, Indonesia, or wherever they strike. That's why we support fair treatment for immigrants, documented or not. That's why we oppose wars that bring death and destruction to multitudes of innocents. All of those caught up in all of these tragic circumstances are people, just like us, as deserving as we are of being treated with fairness and justice.

To whatever extent our principle of justice, equity, and compassion leads us to participate in the struggle for justice in the world around us, I think it serves us well. But that's not enough. Another point I made two weeks ago was that, in looking at our principles, I want us to focus also on how they can guide our life and our behavior closer to home. In this case, that means thinking about how justice, equity, and compassion can be brought to life in our relationships closer to home. For instance, right here within this Fellowship.

Human relations, when it comes right down to it, is a one-on-one phenomenon. It's about the nature of my experience with one other person, or a small number of people, often face-to-face. The truth is that if I seek justice and equity in the world around me, I must cultivate it exactly where I am. Mark Erelli expressed it well in the song he sang a little while ago: "if I can't change the world / I'll change the world within my reach. / What better place to start than here and now with me and you."

In fact, we all have many opportunities to practice the principle of justice, equity, and compassion right here in our religious community – in this Fellowship. I'll mention a few specific ideas of how to do that, as well as a few general guidelines. But that will just be a start. I invite everyone who is interested to meet back here at around noon, after you've had a chance to grab a little refreshment. There will be an opportunity at that time for all of you to think about and talk about ways of bringing this principle to life in our community. This is a responsibility that belongs to all of us, and your participation will be much appreciated.

I think the first step is to visualize what it would be like for all of our interactions here to be characterized as just, equitable, and compassionate. And the next step is to come to a common agreement about what that should look like. To get very specific, subgroups within the congregation can create covenants for themselves; that is, sets of behavioral promises about how they agree to be with each other. Many groups have already done that: Small Group Ministry groups, the Adult Choir, the Sunday Services Committee, the Board of Trustees, the Lifespan Religious Education Committee, to name a few.

We have a tendency to think that such explicit agreements should be unnecessary, but in practice, having those shared expectations continually before us serves as a good reminder to pay attention to how we act toward one another. That reminder is particularly helpful when we find ourselves in situations of disagreement or misunderstanding. When our natural impulse is to react sharply, it behooves us to take a deep breath and consider the appropriateness of what we are about to say or do. Will it improve the situation, or just make it worse? Will it serve the cause of justice and equity, or simply the cause of our own pride or ego?

Another point about covenants, or policies, or any kind of rules or regulations designed to guide our interactions: the system of justice in our nation is set up essentially as an adversarial system. And that is not a model we should emulate. That system has the goals of justice and equity, but doesn't necessarily include compassion as a guiding value. That's where we can be different, and seek not a system of justice, but rather a just system, guided always by compassion.

That extra component can make all the difference. Our goal should not be to win, but to reach understanding and consensus. Even if you find yourself in a situation where you feel you must call someone else to account for their failure to uphold the principle of justice and equity, try very hard to do so in the spirit of love and compassion, and not out of a sense of vengeance or judgment.

Finally, the thing about compassion is that it cannot really be built into the system from the outside. It must enter the system from the inside – from deep inside every one of us. And each of us must cultivate the quality of compassion within our own depths, and practice it at every opportunity. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama says: “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.” Mother Theresa made a similar point about justice at the societal level. Someone once asked her, “Don't you ever become angry at the causes of social injustice that you see in India or in any of the places in which you work?” Her response was, “Why should I expend energy in anger that I can expend in love?”

The Rev. Kenneth Collier suggests that “Justice, equity, and compassion are different names for the same thing, and that thing is love.” And so the advice that I leave you with this morning is: Be kind. Be fair. And live out of your love and your compassion in a way that you can always feel good about. You *can* change the world with your love.

So may it be.