

THE COST OF GROWING INEQUALITY

The Second Sermon in a Series on
“The Signs of the Times”

First Parish in Needham

Sunday, November 18, 2007

The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Readings

Deuteronomy 8:12-17

“When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting . . . who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the terrible wilderness. Do not say to yourself, ‘My power & might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember. . . who gives you power to get wealth. . .”

And from a document issued by the Vatican’s **Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace**:

“The principle of solidarity requires that men and women of our day cultivate a greater awareness that they are debtors of the society of which they have become a part. They are debtors because of those conditions that make human existence livable, and because of the indivisible and indispensable legacy constituted by culture, scientific and technical knowledge, material and immaterial goods and by all that the human condition has produced. A similar debt must be recognized in the various forms of social interaction, so that humanity’s journey will not be interrupted but remain open to present and future generations, all of them called together to share in the same gift of solidarity.”

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Most of the time I don't feel terribly envious. Neither do most Americans. Where other countries have been torn apart by envy of the rich and privileged, Americans tend to believe if someone else's wealth was honestly earned, well, maybe I too can get ahead. Most often I simply feel gratitude; so much that I'm sometimes overwhelmed by it. Thanksgiving is both America's most characteristic holiday, and a good name for the taproot of human spirituality, across all differences of religion, ethnicity, and class.

Yet lately I *have* been feeling twinges of envy—not for the wealth of Bill Gates, or the toys of a Donald Trump, but for my successor at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York, Galen Guengerich. Not for his job there; I like mine here just fine, thanks! But rather for some particularly eloquent things he's said lately about the faith we share.

“In my view,” says Galen, “religion is constituted by two distinct but related impulses: a sense of awe and a sense of obligation. The feeling of awe emerges from our experience of the grandeur of life and [its] mystery . . . and becomes religious when a sense of obligation lays claim to us, and we feel a duty to the larger life that we share. In theological terms, [it] begins as transcendence . . . and then leads to . . . [a] discipline of faith.”

When asked about what we Unitarian Universalists believe about transcendence, Galen replies, “As Unitarians we believe all names for [the divine] point to the same mystery. As Universalists, we believe all creation shares the same destiny. One divine spirit within and around us, and one destiny before us.”

But faith is not merely a matter of intellectual formulae. It's also a matter of real practice. And for Galen, the defining discipline of our faith should be a *daily* practice of gratitude. If for Jews the defining discipline is obedience to the commandments; and for Christians,

it's love to God and love to your neighbor as yourself; for Muslims, submission to the will of Allah; for Gandhian Hindus, detachment from the fruits of action; for Buddhists, the eight-fold path—then our UU spirituality should be one that is arguably at the root of all of these: a practice of gratitude; and its fruit, an ethic of gratitude, used in daily living.

It is one of the signs of the times in America today that gratitude is in some difficulty. Growing inequality is both a cause and a symptom. Our culture is becoming envious. And envy—the desire to have what some else has—is ultimately the enemy of gratitude, just as fear is the enemy of authentic faith. Moreover, the problem is not just confined to ours, the wealthiest economy in the world. It's being globalized. And just when we're talking more and more about democratic human rights, something akin to economic apartheid threatens to make a mockery of our modern ideal of equal opportunity.

Last year the bottom 50% of all Americans had only 12.8% of all personal income, a record low. Meanwhile the top 1% took home more than 21% of all income. When I was working my way through college—making good wages at a union job summers, enough to pay all my tuition at Harvard for the year—CEOs typically made 20 times what the average worker made. Now they make over 400 times an average workers wage. So a typical worker knows that her boss now makes in one day what she makes all year.

Concern about this crosses ideological and political lines. Republicans like Kevin Phillips worry that our New Gilded Age will be followed by an angry populism that will make the Progressive Era and the New Deal look mild. Or so he says in *Wealth and Democracy*. Publications like *The Economist* and *The Wall Street Journal* talk as much about growing inequality as do candidates like John Edwards, with his speeches about “Two Americas”—one for the rich, and one for the rest of us. Why? Because there *is* a cost to growing inequality, politically, spiritually, and economically. Even Chambers of Commerce worry about our collective failures to invest in affordable housing for workers, infrastructure, or education and social supports that will produce the kind of workers needed for the future.

Even the wisest of the wealthy also worry. Bill Gates and Warren Buffett both actively oppose ending the estate tax, lest “people who are born on third base go through life thinking they’ve hit a triple,” as Barry Switzer puts it. But more of the rich seem to have decided that, since they themselves don’t much use public services any more, they shouldn’t have to pay for any, forgetting the role such things played in setting the framework in which they could become successful.

But just as a fish is said to rot from the head, when the privileged are no longer grateful, ingratitude spreads like a weed, sown by privilege, watered by envy, fertilized by greed. How else do you explain how many working-class Americans now go to church to hear not that something is *asked* of them in return for life’s blessings, but a prosperity gospel: God has a plan for you: to get rich! Just make a down payment in the evangelist’s pocket! Financing government through legalized gambling. Buying what they really can’t afford. Thank you sub-prime lenders, credit card pushers, and home equity loans!

I believe in credit—surely a very present help in time of trouble. And in “The Market”—though it’s now treated as though alone omniscient and omnipotent, its judgments always true and righteous altogether. But I also know I’m not alone in seeing the idolatry in this. Do we remember any longer that the great religions themselves came into existence alongside cross-cultural markets—to remind traders there to treat one another as they themselves would want to be treated? And to set some rules—grounded in gratitude?

Economist Robert Kuttner, in his new book, *The Squandering of America: How the Failure of our Politics Undermines Our Prosperity*, points out that after the great stock market crash of 1929 our government realized that markets need what my friend Jim Sherblom calls “adult supervision”—lest the cheaters and the bullies win out. Regulators demanded transparency, and banned insider deals. But for the last thirty years the trend has been only toward de-regulation. It has privileged lower marginal taxes on capital, and has shifted the burden, and the risks, toward those less able to absorb the costs.

Moneyed interests increasingly dominated our politics, promoting markets where the well off can make a killing, but where a level playing field is increasingly a joke. I'm with my friend Chuck Collins, founder of United for a Fair Economy: I don't care if the privileged purchase palaces. But I *do* care if they buy my Senator or Representative. And I do care if the lack of "adult supervision" and transparency in markets causes my pension fund or savings to get swallowed by an Enron, or an investment bank playing both sides of a deal. And today it is almost impossible to run for public office in America without, if not exactly selling your soul, at least renting it out to those who have money.

Believe me, I'm VERY grateful for the generosity of the successful. Shucks, I live by it! And I never cease to remind them of the Biblical adage, "From those to whom much is given, more is expected!" But charity alone cannot make for the structural changes in the distributions of power that are the real measure of justice. For that we need investments in empowering people, currently excluded from opportunity, to claim their human rights. The way our UU Service Committee goes about it. Not just handing a poor person a fish, nor being satisfied with just teaching her how to fish, but rather making sure that she and her children are guaranteed the human right just to get down to the river!

Which is why our UU Service Committee takes a human rights approach to humanitarian work, both here and overseas. Helping people in places like New Orleans, where our teens will go this winter, to overcome class and race bias is rebuilding their lives in the wake of disaster. Helping all of us promote authentic democracy and civil liberties. Supporting living wage campaigns, and economic justice. Defending environmental justice and access to clean water as a basic human right.

Yesterday, when the UN group of environmental scientists again said global warming threatens the very life of our species on this planet, I thought, "Lack of gratitude. That's the problem. Are there ears to hear, or eyes to see how beautiful this planet is around us?" I'm proud that when we return to our building next fall its "carbon footprint" will be reduced, despite expansion, to 30% of what it was. But I have a challenge: let's try to make our church, like many colleges today, "carbon neutral," by funding offsets.

People sometimes ask me why I won't stop talking about issues that touch on politics, and controversy. Why I can't just stick to some more disembodied form of "spirituality"? My response has become clearer and clearer: because the problems of our politics are a reflection of problems in our culture, and our culture still reflects our moral and spiritual problems. Most of them rooted in how our very success as a nation seems to have eroded our practice of a discipline of gratitude, of an ethic of gratitude. So I will gladly stop talking about politics as soon as our politics no longer reflects our spiritual problems! For the cost of growing inequality is, above all, a danger to our very souls. And what shall it profit any of us to have gained even the greatest of material blessings, if we lose those?

In the meantime, if you want to teach your soul the discipline of gratitude, if you want to teach it to your children, you could do worse than, before you start your day, or eat your evening meal, to stop and give thanks for the unmerited beauty of being itself. For all that is our life. And then to pray quietly, in phrases like those we used to begin our worship, "May we never be satisfied to enjoy plenty so long as any are in want. May we express our gratitude for life's gifts not in words alone, but also in the purposes for which we live and in the kindness of our deeds." So may it be. Amen.

*Hymn 128

For All That is Our Life

Findlow/Rickey

Benediction

Give thanks, my friends. The signs of our times are not all good or encouraging.
The way ahead may be hard, the path unclear, the stakes high,
and road seem lonely. But let us live out of gratitude nonetheless.
Grateful for the unmerited beauty of being itself, and assured of this:
We are not alone, even when we are apart. So let us be grateful for that.
And, until we meet again, let us go in peace. Amen