

March 4, 2018 -- Readings and Sermon
Rev. Gabi Parks

Invocation

To hear one another, by Annie Foerster

The ringing of a bell calls us to worship
The pounding of a drum calls us to war.
The popping of a cork calls us to celebration.
What is the sound that calls us to hear one another?

Listen . . . listen carefully . . .
It is here, in the silence . . . Listen deeply . . .
The beating of our own hearts calls us to ourselves;
Calls us to be our true selves;
Calls us to be our best selves;
Calls us to be what we might become.

Listen . . . there is another sound . . .
The breath of our neighbor calls us outside of ourselves;
Calls us to be companions;
Calls us to be allies;
Calls us to be partners.

Listen . . . we must heed the call of our own hearts,
Where love and truth, caring and justice, are born.

Listen . . . we must heed the call of others,
To gather together for some great purpose,
Where passion and fidelity, compassion and equity,
Are nourished.

The hammering silence calls us together
That we may do the work we cannot do alone.

Let us heed the calls that come in the silence,
That we may be well,
And do good,
In this world together.

Amen

Chalice Lighting

Invocation, by the Rev. Angela Herrera

Don't leave your broken heart at the door;
bring it to the altar of life.

Don't leave your anger behind;
it has high standards
and the world needs a vision.

Bring them with you,
and your joy
and your passion.

Bring your loving,
and your courage
and your conviction.

Bring your need for healing,
and your power to heal.

There is work to do
and you have all that you need to do it
right here in this room.

“Please Listen” *used during the UUCY worship service on Toxic Charity, 3/4/18*

When I ask you to listen to me
and you start giving me advice,
you have not done what I asked.
When I ask you to listen to me
and you begin to tell me why
I shouldn't feel that way,
you are trampling on my feelings.
When I ask you to listen to me
and you feel you have to do something
to solve my problem,
you have failed me,
strange as that may seem.
Listen! All I ask is that you listen.
Don't talk or do - just hear me.
Advice is cheap; 20 cents will get
you both Dear Abby and Billy Graham
in the same newspaper.
And I can do for myself; I am not helpless.
Maybe discouraged and faltering,
but not helpless.
When you do something for me that I can
and need to do for myself,
you contribute to my fear and
inadequacy.
But when you accept as a simple fact
that I feel what I feel,
no matter how irrational,
then I can stop trying to convince
you and get about this business
of understanding what's behind
this irrational feeling.
And when that's clear, the answers are
obvious and I don't need advice.
Irrational feelings make sense when
we understand what's behind them.
Perhaps that's why prayer works, sometimes,
for some people - because God is mute,
and God doesn't give advice or try
to fix things.
God just listens and lets you work
it out for yourself.
So please listen, and just hear me.
And if you want to talk, wait a minute
for your turn - and I will listen to you. *-author unknown*

Sermon

The first two principles of Unitarian Universalism are “The inherent worth and dignity of every person;” and “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.” Because we believe this to be true - and important, many of us devote time and resources to helping people in need. For many UUs this kind of engagement is deeply spiritual. It can help us find meaning in life, or, as many Eastern religions put it, it will help us to accumulate “good karma.”

Our congregation shares the offertory with different social services agencies or institutions, every Sunday, like many other UU congregations. This particular kind of charitable giving is defined as “emergency” help. It is help for people who have an immediate need - like a place to sleep on a cold night, or help with the rent to avoid eviction. Outside of the U.S., UUCY members will always support relief efforts in areas where disasters have hit; often in cooperation with other churches, another example of emergency help. I am sure that you can name many other projects here at UUCY, from the past or the present time, that fit in this category

A few years ago, at a UU ministers’ collegial meeting, we talking about all our efforts to help the people in our community. Many of my colleagues expressed the never-ending concern about the potential abuse of our compassion. Kevin, one of my colleagues, brought up a different aspect by talking about “Toxic Charity.” He told us about the book with the same title by Robert Lupton, and gave us a brief description of the attempt of several churches and organizations to get away from traditional models of “doing for” the poor, and moving toward a model of “doing with.”

Lupton, an urban activist in Atlanta, who holds a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Georgia, has worked for decades with churches, government agencies, entrepreneurs, and armies of volunteers. He knows from firsthand experience the many ways “good intentions” can translate into ineffective care or even harm. He writes: “When we do for those in need what they have the capacity to do for themselves, we dis-empower them. Many of our programs, our charities, have succeeded only in creating a permanent underclass, dismantling their family structures, and eroding their ethic of work.”

His words mirror Gandhi’s concept of “compassionate sharing.” Here is what Gandhi had to say: “The kind of concern that we show to the needy and the poor is motivated more by pity than by compassion. When we act out of pity, we give the poor what they need on a platter. Such actions are motivated by a desire to do good. It is easy, and requires no commitment, just write out a check and mail it. The result is - the poor become dependent on charity, whether from the government or from individuals. Consequently, a population already oppressed by circumstances is further oppressed by the charity we give. When people are forced to live in any form of oppression, the two things that they sacrifice are self-respect and self-confidence. The poor buy into the stereotypes that society creates – that they are lazy, that they are incapable of doing anything and that they will forever remain dependent on society.”

Jumping across a whole continent, and fast-forwarding a century, the Latin American journalist Eduardo Galeano said something similar: “I don't believe in charity. I believe in

solidarity. Charity is vertical, so it's humiliating. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other and learns from the other. I have a lot to learn from other people."

Of course, not all charity is toxic.

Of course it is very important that we respond immediately to desperate circumstances such as natural disasters, a house burning down, or financial emergencies due to unforeseen circumstances.

Of course, it is important that we support single parents who earn minimum wages!

Of course we need to replace a tire for a homeless family living in their car!

Of course, we need to assist folks with addiction or criminal issues to reenter society, give them a chance to break the cycle they've been in. Or writing a check in support of a half-way house.

No reason to cut established and much-needed public assistance programs!

It's just that we seem to operate much better in "crisis relief mode" than with the more complex work of long-term development. And often what we interpret as crisis, particularly in the U.S., is in reality a different matter.

Many volunteers who are running food pantries and clothes closets, might feel they are meeting a crisis need of unemployed families. Robert Lupton, however, contends that there are chronic poverty issues behind the lack of food and other resources, issues that need a development strategy.

Let me tell you a story Lupton shares in his book: *His church's mission group has been bringing Christmas gifts to the children of poor families for several years. Sometimes he accompanied the families who each had "adopted" a needy family when they brought their presents to the inner city. On this particular day, he observed how the mother invited in the visitors, how the children excitedly unwrapped the many gifts – and how the father silently slipped out the back door.*

Lupton writes: "I was witnessing a side of charity I had never noticed before: how a father is emasculated in his own home, in front of his family, for not being able to provide presents; how children get the message that the "good stuff" comes from rich people out there, and that it is free. Our well-meant charity exacted an unintended toll on a parent's dignity."

One small, but bitter example of toxic charity.

You can observe the effects easily yourself: whether you volunteer in a soup kitchen, or hand out boots and shirts to local migrant workers, take a close look at their faces, at their whole body language. You will undoubtedly see head and shoulders bent forward slightly, self-effacing smiles, meek "thank-yous" and little to no eye-contact.

One seemingly small step to minimize some of the "toxicity" is to establish parity between people of unequal power. Let me tell you a story:

Maria Chavez used to get baby clothes and work boots for her husband in the basement of the local church. She always felt like a beggar, and eventually became resentful towards the "church ladies" who kept track of how many items she took – there was a limit per person and year. But now things are different: Maria goes shopping in the same location: the church now runs a thrift store, a legitimate business that needs customers to pay for the overhead. The prices are very affordable. For Maria and her

family, there is no limit on the number of visits. They are greeted as valued customers, which affirms their self-esteem. One of Maria's girlfriends even works part-time as a cashier at this thrift shop. Sounds to me like a good example for parity - a system of genuine exchange, and a win-win situation for all!

The physician Norman Bethune, dedicated his life to helping people in rural China in the early 20th century, wrote: "Charity should be abolished; and be replaced by justice." Yes, easier said than done – but it can be as easy as converting a clothing donation program into a thrift store.

This part was in the sermon at UUCY because of time limitations:

Toxic charity is also found far away from home. My friend Obed, whom I met in seminary, hails from Ghana. He was at Lancaster Theological Seminary studying to become a minister on a full scholarship from the Lutheran Church of America. In exchange for this financial support, Obed became a pastor in his home country, now helping tirelessly with education, and social and spiritual development programs. He shared with his fellow seminarians how grateful he was for this, and how much more sense this kind of financial help made than the costly mission trips and service projects that many churches pay for. Churches in the US actually spend more than \$5 billion annually on such trips! Obed gave us examples about groups coming to Ghana to help, often youth groups, who were given the task to paint the local church. In one summer, the same church was painted three times by three different groups! Not only was that a completely ridiculous waste of time and energy, the locals could easily have painted the church themselves, making some money and taking pride in their community. A great example for the "charity instead of solidarity" quote. Obed told us that much of the help that is offered from well-meaning people in the U.S. does not empower those being served, nor does it engender healthy cross-cultural relationships. Poverty is only relieved short term, and the local quality of life is usually not improved. Much too often this kind of charity erodes the work ethic of the recipients, and deepens their dependency on others.

Gandhi's concept of Compassionate Sharing, rooted in the Culture of Nonviolence, speaks of people acting out of "com-passion" - by getting involved in trying to rebuild the self-respect and self-confidence of the poor. It means launching "constructive programs" designed to help the poor stand on their own feet and do things for themselves. Gandhi called this "Trusteeship." In other words, we should consider ourselves "trustees" of the talent that we possess, we should be willing to use the talent, not so much the money, to help the poor realize their potential.

In his book, Lupton also talks a lot about community development, and about empowering people, as an alternative to toxic charity. However, we don't seem have enough good models of development. But actually, we have indeed many opportunities to help people to help themselves, to empower them to find their own solutions, to preserve their self-esteem by letting them be in charge of their own growth and development. One of the best-known examples of engagement in community development is *Habitat for Humanity*. I'm sure you know the basics: any individual who

want to be a homeowner has to work very hard to reach this goal. Yes, they do get an interest-free loan, and the house is sold to them at cost, but they have to have a minimum income, they must not have any debt, and they have to invest hundreds of hours of “sweat equity.” Being a Habitat volunteer, whether it is pounding nails or answering phones in their office, or sewing curtains, is a great way to help people in need, creating parity instead of creating dependency, helping without undermining self-esteem and self-worth. Oh, and it’s a lot of fun!

Let me give you a few more examples: You all know, I’m sure, about *Heifer International*. Initially, there is a gift – a goat, a llama, a water buffalo, a swarm of bees. However, the recipient needs to do all the day-to-day work to make sure that he or she can earn a living with the help of this animal. And – the recipient has to pass on the gift in the form of the first offspring from his animal. This way, the gift keeps giving. Another great example for empowering people is micro-lending. There is for example Kiva, whose tagline reads “To empower people around the world through a \$25 loan.” On their web-site they tell the story of Mindonio, who lives in Honduras. He needs \$1050 to buy fertilizer for his coffee plants. He will have 14 months to pay back the loan. The money goes back into the accounts of the hundreds of donors, and they can either donate it again for another recipient, or pull it out. And then there is *Opportunity International*. On their web-site, opportunity.org, it says: “We are working to end global poverty by creating 20 MILLION JOBS BY 2020, which will impact 100 million people. Because when people work their way out of poverty, they drive change for generations to come.” A combination of microfinance loans, insurance and training empower more than 10 million people who are trying to work their way out of poverty.

I invite you to take a closer look at how you, as individuals or as a congregation, help the needy people in your community. Please, become aware of the tendency to put a “band-aid” on a situation that might need a different kind of healing. And then maybe create a “think tank” that comes up with solutions for how to remove the disparity, the injustice behind the persistent poverty. And then - almost the most important part, become aware of the temptation to transform people’s lives according to your ideas, your imagination! Don’t be the “knight on a white horse,” rushing into to help the “damsel in distress” when all she needs is riding lessons - so that her horse doesn’t throw her off again . . .

Gandhi also addressed this tendency: “The problem is when we try to resolve the problems of the poor, we go with our own preconceived notions and try to fit the poor into this plan. Our approach usually is: “we know your problem and if you just listen to us we will solve it for you.”

Gandhi is right: The most important decision makers and change agents in all sustainable relief efforts will have to be the people who receive the support.

I encourage you to explore – on your own or together - different types of outreach. Maybe - instead of giving money, you can give of your talents and skills. Perhaps you could help a person to write a good resume, or you could help them to prepare for a job interview.

You could provide or organize child care for a single mother who needs to go to work or attend a class. Believe me, there are many examples. The possibilities are literally endless.

Let me close my part with another quote by Gandhi: “When we are working for and with the poor, we need a great deal more humility than we possess. We have absolutely no idea what poverty means, what it is to live in ignorance, what it means to be homeless and destitute. If we do not know what their life is like, how can we find solutions that will be helpful? The poor must become a part of the solution if they are the central part of the problem.”

Closing Words

By Bill Moyers

“Charity is commendable; everyone should be charitable. But justice aims to create a social order in which, if individuals choose not to be charitable, people still don’t go hungry, unschooled or sick without care. Charity depends on the vicissitudes of whim and personal wealth; justice depends on commitment instead of circumstance.”

Benediction

Matthew 5:1-12

“Blessed *are* the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed *are* those who mourn,
For they shall be comforted.

⁵ Blessed *are* the meek,
For they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed *are* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they shall be filled.

⁷ Blessed *are* the merciful,
For they shall obtain mercy.

⁸ Blessed *are* the pure in heart,
For they shall see God.

⁹ Blessed *are* the peacemakers,
For they shall be called children of God.