

Second Principle

Justice, Equity and Compassion for All

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Margaret and I have been alternating months in discussing the seven principles that guide our denomination. These principles are as close as we get to having a creed, but the crucial difference is that agreement with these principles is not required for anyone to join our movement or remain in our movement. A person can disagree with every one of them and still remain a member in good standing, if he or she so desires. The question might be, why would anyone want to? Perhaps for the coffee. Perhaps out of sheer cussedness. Perhaps because of the love of discussion. If so, that person might find they are in the right group after all. I have heard that Jews say where there are two Jews there are five opinions and Baptists say when two Baptists meet there's a schism. I think we have them beat. However, in an attempt to find a common ground, or perhaps have something to say if someone asks what we believe, we have the seven principles.

I think these principles build on each other. The first principle, which Margaret addressed, the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, sets the stage for the second, justice, equity and compassion for all. The principle says that all persons have inherent worth, worth as part of their very fabric, not worth that is conferred upon them by chance or birth or wealth or intelligence or institutions. Indeed, it goes farther and says that all persons,

no matter what their standing in life, are entitled to dignity, to respect due the fact that they are persons. That's all they need to be. This is very difficult. Think of the person you most despise. Now accord that person both worth and dignity. Yes, that means Hitler. Yes, that means serial killers. Yes, that means the homeless alcoholic under the bridge.

Now, if all people have inherent worth and dignity, it would follow, would it not, that all people are required to be treated with justice, equity and compassion. Sounds easy? How could this be hard? Aren't we all people of good will who always strive to treat others with justice, equity and compassion? However, as with most things, when we get right down to doing it, when it's not just an abstraction, it's trickier than it looks.

Now, as a card carrying only child, one might think I was not very qualified to speak about clashing relationships, but since my childhood, I have been the mother of two children and so I have seen sibling rivalry in all its fabled glory. I have also supervised people, as well as being supervised by others, and taught in classrooms, as well as being taught, so I know about favoritism and accusations of favoritism. It is in light of the various roles we play that I would like to read the following very familiar story, the parable of the prodigal son.

In this story, the father's compassion is evident, as it often is where children are concerned. Indeed, it is the role of loving father and/or loving mother that is often an aspect of deity in most religions. In many Christian churches, this was also true. If a person sincerely repented, God always offered the possibility of forgiveness. This is the aspect of God that was emphasized historically in both the Unitarian and Universalist churches. God, the all-loving father will forgive all of us. There will be a room prepared for us.

But there are other aspects of God evident throughout the Bible. The God of the Bible is often a God of wrath and judgment, often a God of justice as well, and this is true in both the Old and New Testaments. God is the ultimate judge in Revelations and he is also the God of both justice and mercy in Deuteronomy, the law which sets out the obligations to the poor, in passages such as that which says "You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge, but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this". Western civilization, our court system, our ethics, the way we treat our families, our neighbors, how we set national policy, all these ways of thinking have much of their origins in response to the Bible. Whether we see it literally or not, it

has been the foundation of much of our thought, determining the range of our responses to others, the way in which we think about justice, equity and compassion.

By the way, the Bible also consistently has sympathy with the younger son. Jacob, who tricks Esau out of his birthright, Joseph who triumphs over his older brothers and saves the family, all are younger sons. The reason for this sympathy was that of the two nations, Israel and Judah, Judah was the smaller, poorer country, but it was the perspective of Judah which was responsible for the editing of the books of the Bible. It is the perspective of the younger son which wrote the history. To this we can perhaps attribute the perspective of the compassion for the poorer, the weaker, the one without the inheritance. This is even evident in later, European folk tales in which it is much better to be the younger son. He gets the gold and the princess.

So what does happen to the eldest son? Is his anger with his younger brother justified? Does his father's compassion to his younger brother, a compassion he does not share, deny him justice? Where is his equity? If we are all the children of God, how do we deal with our many, many siblings?

What I like about this parable is, like all the parables, there are no easy answers. Like the best art, various endings are left to our imaginations.

What happens when the prodigal son has been home a few years? What happens if the sons marry, and have interfering in-laws and children? What happens when the father dies?

Much of the way we hear this story has to do with our identification with the characters. Identification with the weak is built into Deuteronomy. Many of the commands to help the poor end with the phrase “you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt.” The ability to see another’s viewpoint, to identify with someone other than ourselves is where compassion begins. Who do we sympathize with? Who do we not understand?

I’m curious what would happen if I were to ask for a show of hands from all those who identify with the elder son. Who here would identify with the younger son? Who identifies with the father? I’m also curious what would happen if I had asked this same group for a showing of hands twenty, thirty, forty years ago and what would change if we were to ask the same question some years later. Our ideas of what is worthy of compassion and what constitutes justice often changes as we take on more responsibility, as we ourselves are called on to fill different roles.

Unitarian-Universalism is a tough religion. It promises us freedom, but then asks us to exercise responsibility. It does not give “thou shalt” and

“thou shalt nots” as much as we sometimes would like. It notices that human life does not come with an instructional manual. Even the principles are not as helpful as we might hope. They are easy when they apply only to superficial relationships, to people we don’t really know, to situations that are unambiguous. But they are much harder to follow when they apply to the people and situation with which we are truly involved. Unitarian-Universalism is hard because it asks us to reach within ourselves for the answers. In each situation we are called upon to ask, where is justice in this?

Prodigal means “wasteful” “spendthrift”, but because of this story it has come to mean any one who has gone astray. We all know families who have spent much of their resources on a child with problems, desperate to have the child returned to them whole and well and we know that other members of the family may resent this terribly. We know families who have divided up their estates so one child who has never done well will receive more of an inheritance, or perhaps some place to live, while children who are prosperous may be seen not to need so much. This, too, is sometimes all right with the siblings, sometimes not.

What about in school? Both our children are learning disabled, and we used to hear a lot of grumbling about learning disabled children being given too much help. If my children had not been learning disabled, would I have

grumbled as well? What about work situations. Is it wise to send employees to rehabilitation or counseling, or should they simply pay the price when they are not performing well?

Of course, because of my work, I'm sensitive to the actions of the Justice System. Are people who have always been poor more justified in turning to crime than a millionaire? If they are, what of the poor people who have never taken that route? Is there something wrong with a system which punishes white collar crime differently than other crime? On what should justice be based? The background of the criminal, the amount of money involved the amount of violence? If so, does driving people to suicide by taking their savings count as violence?

The current bailouts from the federal government have certainly stirred up all these questions and more as have the interventions in the housing crisis. If someone is in arrears with their mortgage because they have been prodigal with their resources, does that person deserve help? Is that equitable when some people have paid their mortgage through good times and bad? Do we know who has been profligate? Do we know why? Where does compassion come into this? Where does justice?

Then, once we've solved all these domestic problems, we could go abroad. Who should be in Gaza? Do the Iranians have the right to develop nuclear capability? If not, does Israel? Do we?

Who will pay for what? Who is to be helped? Who is to be punished? These questions form part of our thinking every day. As you have noticed, I haven't answered them. I haven't answered them, not because I don't have opinions. I have far too many opinions and many of them are not as well grounded as I might wish. Like everyone else, my opinions are based on my upbringing, my experiences, my reading, my loyalties. They are limited and partial and prejudiced. Like everyone else, I find it hard to break out of my own box and consider points of view that are not my own. I find it hard to take off my own blinders. I want the world to be as I want it to be, or as a friend of mine recently said, "I'm behind Obama all the way. I want change. I want everything to change everywhere else and for everyone else to change. But not me."

In the parable, it is the father, filled with joy at seeing his son, who tries to reconcile the claims of justice, equity and compassion. He not only rejoices for his lost son, as we would all, but is concerned to show his love to his older son as well. He tries to teach him the compassion he himself feels. In this story, a story in which we have all participated at some time,

the joy at reunification, where boundaries between people are dissolved, is the final word. Indeed, the father says, his son has been dead and is now come back to life. The circle is unbroken.

We are all only human. We can only see with one set of eyes, feel with one heart. What compassion does is to let us attempt the understanding of another life. Justice and equity are important, but often limited. Compassion enables us to find the true measure of justice and equity, not the grudging careful balancing of accounts that is too often our limit. Compassion multiplies our resources. When we expand, we often find there is more than we thought. Somehow, there is enough to go around. Justice, equity and compassion are no longer separate, competing claims. They become the natural outflowing of one into another. When we step into each other's lives, we see how all these can be possible. Let us pray for the strength to do so.