

# MOVING FROM CHARITY TO JUSTICE

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First Unitarian Church  
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## CALL TO WORSHIP

May this light we kindle this morning  
Inspire us to use our powers  
To heal and not to harm,  
To help and not to hinder,  
To bless and not to curse,  
To serve you, Spirit of Life.

Sometimes we read a story in the paper, and only the scant details are there. We know there is more—but after all, analysis may not be possible in one brief story. But there is always a story behind the story, as any journalist will tell you. Let me begin by telling you a story that chills to the bone. It happened on a school day, a day like any other day. But it was not to be an ordinary day. A little six-year-old boy, a first grader, went to school with a handgun and shot and killed one of his classmates, a beautiful little six-year-old girl.

How could this happen, we ask ourselves? Michael Moore, in his film *Bowling for Columbine*, gives us the story behind the story. It seems that the little boy who did the shooting was living temporarily with his uncle, and it was his uncle's gun that he took to school that day. But why was he living with his uncle, and why was he so disturbed? It seems that the boy's mother was a single mom on the "Welfare to Work" program, a program designed to get welfare recipients off the dole and working, like good responsible citizens.

And what was the mother's day like? Well, she worked. She got up early in the morning to catch a bus that took her to an affluent suburb, where she made and sold flidge all day. Then she caught another bus for a long commute back home. But though she was working full-time, she couldn't make enough to pay her rent, and so she and her son were evicted. She sent her son to her brother, because there was no place else for him to stay. Who knows what was in that child's head? Did he feel deserted by his mom, as well as his dad? Did he want to strike out in some way, and just didn't understand the power of what he was doing? We'll never know. We just know what happened that fateful day.

The "Welfare to Work" program is certainly effective, by one measure-we now have the lowest level of people on welfare than we have had in 20 years. But the latest study shows that instead of these families being at 70% of the poverty level, they now are at 75% of the poverty level. Then we have to consider the costs of clothing, transportation, and childcare. Some states help with these expenses, and some don't. Childcare in Portland, for example, averages \$4,723 a year, more than college tuition. And what does it really cost to live just a decent life? Well, about double what we call the "poverty line." Nearly 1/3 of our citizens do not have a minimal standard of comfort. And why would this be so? According to the Congressional Budget Office, from 1979 to 1997, the average after-tax income of the bottom 20% of our people went down \$100, or 1%, whereas the average after-tax income of the top 1% increased \$414,200, or 157%. Clearly, Americans have not shared fairly in the growth of our economy over the past 20 years.

Back to the little boy with his uncle's gun-many wanted to prosecute him. He must have been evil to do such a thing, a bad seed, they said. But who is the real villain here? The uncle? Well, he certainly should not have made the gun so accessible. But what about an economic system and government policies that ask a mother to leave her child, catch a bus to the suburbs, and make £'idge for rich people? A woman who worked hard, but still couldn't pay her rent.

Now let's look at something closer to home-hunger in Oregon. You've all read in the newspaper or heard on the radio that Oregon has the most hunger in the nation. Our good citizens give to the Food Bank and other charities providing food for hungry people, but still the number of people going to the Food Bank has gone up 20% from last year. There has been an increase of 30% since 1996. We call this a situation where you can't win for losing. Now who gets all this free food from the Food Bank? You may be surprised. Forty-three percent of households needing emergency food have at least one working adult. Fifty-three percent are households with children. Sixty thousand children need emergency food in an average month.

I know these statistics can make listeners "zone out," but think of it this way. Here's a real story about real people. A mother has no food left in the house except some spaghetti. She goes to the grocery and with her last bit of money purchases some neck bones. She comes home and cooks the neck bones and the spaghetti and serves this food to her children, They eat ravenously, and there is no food left for her. She goes to bed with pangs of hunger. This is what it means to be hungry. But does this mother tell her co-workers the next day that she is hungry? No, she is too ashamed to mention it. Hunger is the silent companion of so many.

On the other hand, some have more money than they can spend. Hanukkah comes early this year, and Santa will come soon. In the *New York Times*, under the "Personal Shopper" section, some gifts are suggested. One is a yoga bag-a bag for carrying your yoga mat. It sells for only \$350. The woman feeding neck bones to her children doesn't take yoga. She really doesn't need the bag. Then there is a giant ceramic piggy bank, suggested to provide savings for college. It is a mere \$145. Somehow I think that a family that could afford this piggy bank will probably have no real problem with college tuition.

Now one might ask at this point, why are we talking about these issues at church? I have congregants who come to me and say, "I think the church should concern itself with spiritual matters and leave the problems of the world alone." We simply can't do that and still be true to who we are. Let me cite two of the Seven Principles of our Association-the first seems to me the most comprehensive, and therefore the most significant-"We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Not "every person who

has money." Not "every person who is healthy in mind and body." Not "every person who is free of addiction." Not "every person who has 2.3 children at home with a mommy and daddy." No, it reads "every person." And then think about the second principle: "We believe in justice, equity and compassion in human relations." This statement is echoed in our Mission Statement: "We covenant together to act for social justice." This is who we are as a people. We are a justice-seeking people. We find that as we work towards spiritual maturity, then the compassion and love that we develop must of necessity spill over into the world. If it doesn't, then I have to ask, what is spiritual maturity, anyway?

But then that puts us in the position of dealing with very real problems with complex solutions. Let's go back to the problem of hunger. I started thinking about children going hungry. I became so sad. I said to myself, "We have to do something about this!" But then, what? Unfortunately, there is no simple answer. Charity does help feed hungry people. I myself give one of my largest community donations to the Food Bank. In the Christmas letter I just sent all of you, you will be asked to provide emergency food for hungry people. But we cannot stop there. The problem is systemic, and charity alone will not solve it: that is a short-term solution, as we have seen. Let's take a closer look. What are the root causes of hunger in Oregon?

- First of all, housing costs have soared, but incomes have stagnated. There is a dire need for low-income housing.
- The gap between the rich and the poor grew four times faster in Oregon than in other states so there is a shortage of well-paying jobs. Many jobs available now are low-paying service jobs rather than industrial jobs, which paid a living wage.
- In rural Oregon, much of the employment is seasonal.
- We have an ailing education system that does not prepare many students to get decent jobs.
- And then of course there is job loss because of the recession.

As a religious people, we must respond and respond in a way that will be effective, that will be more *radical-radical*, meaning to get at the root of things. And how are we to do that? In the first place, I would suggest actually being among some poor' people, to see them as human beings, not just statistics. Sometimes charitable activities take us there~some of you make sandwiches for homeless people or tutor homeless children. Because you have actually seen the face of suffering, you may be moved to do more. The next step may be advocacy, in which we stand with those who are suffering injustice, as when we stood with gays and lesbians as they fought for their civil rights. Or the farm workers, as they asked for decent wages for the food, our food, that they harvest.

But then the next step is the scary one, the move from charity to justice, working to change the system that makes so many people poor in this country. The social justice groups in our church work for a living wage. We work for tax reform. We have individuals who have learned how to lobby, and they have been in the offices of our highest officials and have been heard. We push for campaign finance reform~the new laws, as you may know, have been gutted by national policies, and their very validity will probably go to the Supreme Court for review. When enough states make such reforms, perhaps the national laws will have some teeth.

We have task forces in our church which are working on all these systemic issues, and more, and if you are led to join them, there will be tables in Fuller Hall, just downstairs, during coffee hour, where you can sign up. If you feel you cannot join a task force at this time, then donate to those organizations that

are working for systemic change, like the progressive McKenzie River Gathering Foundation, here in Portland. Or write an e-mail or call your Congress people-they do respond to pressure from citizens.

Charity is more comfortable, yes. But as an institution, the church cannot stop there. You see, charity can make us feel good enough to go our way, and let the systemic problems, the root causes, remain. It is easy to become "Lady Bountiful," bestowing a bit of our largess on the poor and congratulating ourselves for our generosity. That way we are able to be in absolute control of our resources and dole them out where we wish-but justice takes us to a different place. Justice gives power to those in need, because it gets at the unregulated, unbalanced economic system that put them there in the first place.

Yes, that is scary, and with fear comes anger, and with anger comes resistance. Brazilian Archbishop Com Helder Camara, died recently at the age of 90-his campaigns against social inequality and human-rights abuses won him international recognition. Branded by some of his opponents as "the red bishop," he said, "If I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. If I ask why the poor do not have food, they call me a communist."

Many of you know of Archbishop Oscar Romero, of El Salvador. When he was appointed, he was predicable, orthodox, and known to criticize the liberation theology of some of the priests who aligned themselves with impoverished farmers. But he was changed, never to be the same again, when one of his priests was ambushed and killed for defending the peasants' right to organize farm co-operatives. He said that the dogs of the big landowners ate better food than the *campesino* children whose fathers worked their fields. Moments before a sharpshooter felled him, Archbishop Romero said, "One must not love oneself so much, as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us, and those that fend off danger will lose their lives." He meant their spiritual lives, their souls.

face of suffering, you may be moved to do more. The next step may be advocacy, in which we stand with those who are suffering injustice, as when we stood with gays and lesbians as they fought for their civil rights. Or the farm workers, as they asked for decent wages for the food, our food, that they harvest.

In our reading this morning, Martin Luther King, Jr., asks us a questions that we must answer. Why are so many good people silent? Why did good German people support Hitler, vote for Hitler, as he rose to power? Why are so many of our Congress people silent when we are about to attack a country that has not attacked us? Why are we silent when we see civil liberties being taken away in the name of patriotism? Why are we silent when people, some of them our citizens, are being held without charges, without our even being able to know their names?

As reprehensible as the terrorist attacks were, I can tell you that personally my fear is not of terrorists. I am afraid of a government that cuts back on environmental protection. I'm afraid of a government that says it wants to punish Al Qaeda, but doesn't investigate Saudi Arabia, though 19 of the 9/11 terrorists were Saudis. After all, Saudi Arabia is our ally, and we need the oil. I'm afraid of a President who calls himself the education president while our education systems fall apart.

I'm afraid of lies and the consequences of lies, and I'm afraid for the spiritual impact these lies have on our young people. Adolescents are idealistic-they need to believe that their parents and the leaders of their country are acting with integrity. They need this more than they need the right tennis shoes or a car for graduation. They need to believe that there is something to believe in.

We cannot afford to be silent. We must speak. And speak again and again and again. And march. And write e-mails to our congress people. And lobby. We cannot do it all, and we may not see the results, even in our own life times. But we cannot afford to be silent. We must speak for our children. And we must speak for the very salvation of our own souls.

So be it. Amen.

#### PRAYER

Spirit of Life, we humbly ask for forgiveness when we mouth words and then do not live up to the principles we say we stand for. We get caught up in the business of our lives, in the trivia of our days, and we forget that the only hands you have are our hands. We ask that you help us open to compassion, and in whatever way we are led, contribute to the healing of our world. Amen.

#### BENEDICTION

Go now in hope, for where there is love, there is always hope. Go in love and go in peace.