

## The Third Smooth Stone: Just and Loving Community

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein ©

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“Religious liberalism,” says James Luther Adams, “affirms the moral obligation to direct one’s effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community.” I am using his essay, *The Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism*, as the basis for a five-sermon series offered somewhat randomly through the spring and summer and into the fall. Recall that the title comes from the biblical story of David, the shepherd boy who armed himself with 5 smooth stones for his slingshot as he prepared to do battle with the giant Goliath. You might think of these 5 smooth stones – 5 foundational ideas at the heart of Unitarian Universalism – as the things we supply ourselves with as we prepare, every day, to live meaningfully and faithfully as religious liberals in an illiberal world.

The first stone was the concept that revelation is continuous. I think of this as an idea to which you give intellectual assent. “Yes, I believe that there is much still to be known, that truth is not finally captured, that creation reveals itself to us every day, in many different ways.” That makes sense to us, it is reasonable. And so our minds assent. The second stone was the practice of voluntary association. In freedom, we choose the groups that we participate in, and we choose how we influence the nature of those groups. I think of this as an idea to which we give social assent, but more than that we give incarnational assent. You can’t just say to yourself, “Yes, I believe in voluntary association.” You must drag your body out of bed on Sunday morning and show up. By choosing to be part of this voluntary association you incarnate, or embody, Unitarian Universalism.

Today we take up the third smooth stone: the creation of a just and loving community. Adams introduces this idea with the strong language of moral obligation. He is saying that there is, inherent in being religious liberally, a

requirement that we work towards the ideal of a just and loving community. I think of this as an idea to which we give spiritual assent. By the time we have finished packing those first 3 stones into our little sack, we have obeyed what Jesus said was the one and only commandment: to love with mind, body and spirit. (I am paraphrasing just a little bit.)

To live up to the moral obligation to create the community of justice and love requires that we move out of our comfort zone, confront the reality that all is not well around us, that we bear responsibility for some of that unwellness, and that we then do something (not talk about it, but do something) to nudge our community closer to that ideal of justice and radical, inclusive love. That moral obligation is the reason I and others in this congregation have chosen to embrace the challenge of using the language of white supremacy in church. By using language that makes us uncomfortable, and then offering opportunities to deal with that discomfort, we hope to come closer to recognizing that white supremacy culture pervades even this beloved community. If we recognize it and acknowledge it, then we can begin to dismantle it. Last spring, we joined more than 600 other congregations for a White Supremacy Teach-In. Ours was well attended, and I was pleased with the level of engagement you brought to this difficult subject. Some of you asked that we repeat the break-out workshops, since you had to choose one and wanted to do both. Today, after church, we will repeat the White Supremacy Pyramid workshop. Next week you can join Marie Oakberg and Susan Wilson for a repeat of the Step Up/Step Back workshop on white privilege. In November, we will once again answer the call to join with other UU congregations around the country and support, both financially and in worship, the Black Lives of UU Collaborative.

“A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring us to grief,” Adams wrote. “It thwarts creation, a divinely given possibility; it robs us of our birthright

of freedom in an open universe; it robs the community of the spiritual riches latent in its members; it reduces us to beasts of burden in slavish subservience to a state, a church or a party – to a self-made God.” That is a pretty powerful statement Adams makes. Let’s unpack it a bit.

A faith not committed to justice will bring us to grief. It is, at best, an insufficient faith. But it is worse than that. Even by passively ignoring the moral claim on us to do the work of justice, we risk thwarting creation. Centuries ago, we took exception to the claim that we were stained by original sin. We choose to believe that people are born with the capacity for both good and evil, and it is incumbent upon us to nurture the good and discourage the evil. That is our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We believe that people are, under the right circumstances, inclined to be good. We believe that creation itself, under the right circumstances, is inclined to be good. And upon that principle we build our congregations – with the intention that they be places that bring out the best in people and discourage the worst. To do any less will bring us to grief.

A faith that is not committed to justice robs us of our birthright of freedom in an open universe. Does Adams really mean to say that if we turn our backs on the moral obligation to work towards justice, we are less free? The transcendentalist preacher Theodore Parker once said that the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice - words that Martin Luther King Jr. was fond of echoing. If we ignore that assumption – that built into creation is an intrinsic movement towards a more just human society – then we distance ourselves from the truth of creation itself. We find ourselves living and working in opposition to the intention of creation. While we may believe that we are free because we choose consciously to turn our backs on the call to justice, we actually bind ourselves and limit ourselves by making that choice. The power of voluntary

association – creating groups through mutual and free consent – is compromised when those groups turn their back on the call to justice. Such groups become marginal in and irrelevant to the larger community.

A faith that is not the sister of justice robs the community of the spiritual riches latent in its members. So the cost is not just individual and spiritual. A congregation that disassociates itself from this moral mandate loses the ability to bring out the best in its members. What a terrible loss! Our free churches, founded on the principle that the inherent good in every person needs nurture and encouragement, would be empty places indeed if we were to forget that the primary purpose of the church is to elicit that good in ourselves and each other.

Jim Adams connects this mandate to work towards justice to the history of prophethood in the Judeo-Christian tradition. He used the term “the prophethood of all believers” to describe the members of the free church. That’s all of us. The ancient Hebrew prophets were not people who spoke from positions of power or authority. They were the outsiders who lived on the margins of established society. They were the heretics of their day, taking on the establishment no matter the personal cost. Unitarian Universalists are also heretics, are we not? Those who deliberately and consciously choose out of the more established religions? We are an entire church of heretics, and Adams would also insist that we be an entire church of prophets. He wrote that the Hebrew prophets “. . . repudiated the idea that the meaning of life is to be achieved either by exclusive devotion to ritual or by devotion to blood or soil, or by self-serving piety. The holy thing in life is participation in those processes that give body and form to universal justice.” Adams pointed out that the ministry of Jesus was in historical continuity with the Hebrew prophets. Jesus too was an outsider, his power came not from money or position but from the recognizable truth of his words. When Jesus said over and over again that the reign of God was at hand, he was reminding his followers that it

was in their power, and was in fact their sacred duty, to help usher that reign in by working for a more just and more loving community. I don't recall any of the gospels telling us stories of Jesus saying, "Follow me and I'll make you feel good about yourself." Or, "Join with us and we will make sure you are satisfied with our programs." His ministry was prophetic in that he called people back to the exercise of their power and their freedom in service of justice-making. He knew that the holy thing in life was participation in those processes that give body and form to universal justice.

Throughout history there have been those who have spoken in continuity with that prophetic tradition, including many Unitarians and Universalists. How did they do it? Where did they get the courage, the inspiration? How did they overcome the temptation to remain comfortable with the status quo? Adams believes that it is by having faith in freedom, by aligning oneself with what he calls the 'sustaining, transforming, commanding reality', that one can speak and act prophetically. "The power of God," he says, "is like a seed that grows of itself if we will use our freedom to meet the conditions for its growth." We don't give up our individual freedom to live prophetically; we use our freedom to create the conditions under which justice and love can properly grow and flourish.

The fruits of this seed are to be found in both individual and social realms. Adams believes that the exercise of the power in freedom leads to 'integrity of personal life.' Indeed, it is the only way to achieve true personal integrity. He also acknowledges that the exercise of this power leads to 'the struggle for justice in social—institutional life.' And he recognizes that there will be tensions in that struggle. Prophethood has always been a costly way to live. Not everybody likes being made to feel uncomfortable.

Adams is adamant about this obligation to bring about the community of justice and love because he is also acutely aware of the power of evil in the world;

in fact, he understands that it's destructive power, if allowed to reign unchecked, can bring us all to grief. All the more reason for his urgent call for Unitarian Universalists to exercise the power of good. "In history and in the human heart," he says, "there are, then destructive as well as creative powers. These destructive powers are manifest in the social as well as in the individual life, although they are most subtly destructive in the social life where the individual's egotism fights under the camouflage of the good of the nation, the race, the church, or the class. These destructive impulses seem veritably to possess people, blinding them, inciting them to greed, damaging the holy gifts God provides. This is precisely the reason for the need for the redemptive, transforming power. Indeed, the pious are often most in need of transformation."

The creation of the community of justice and love must be the active work of every one of us; something we embrace with mind, body and heart or spirit. Just as we do not allow anybody to dictate our beliefs to us, we cannot allow them to tell us who are our friends and who are our enemies. We must each engage the world, in all its glory and all its ugliness, and make those determinations for ourselves. And we must each take responsibility for our share of the work of creating the conditions under which good can flourish and evil languish.

It seems like in every UU congregation I have served, the question has been raised about the balance between spirituality and justice, as though there is a dichotomy between them. This is a distinction I reject out of hand! To my mind, preaching on social issues is every bit as spiritual as preaching on issues of personal growth and transformation. You cannot in good faith separate the individual from the corporate, the spiritual from the worldly. Those are dualisms that do not accurately represent the world we religious liberals live in by choice. No Unitarian Universalist congregation you can survive with integrity unless you are willing to pool your resources to do two things: one is to offer a sanctuary for

the hurting; a place where each of us can come to be healed, to be reassured, to be encouraged, to repent, and to be transformed. The other is to provide ongoing opportunities to prepare yourselves for the prophetic work you do in the world. The work of nudging the bend in moral arc of the universe, the work of establishing a just and loving community. I have always understood my call to ministry to be a call to that work. I hope that this congregation will always understand its call to ministry in a similar way.

So, the third smooth stone has been placed in our sacks, and once again Goliath awaits. “The community of justice and love,” concludes Adams, “is not an ethereal fellowship that is above the conflicts and turmoils of the world. It is one that takes shape in nature and history, one that requires the achievement of freedom with respect to material resources as well as with respect to spiritual resources. Indeed, the one kind of freedom is not fully authentic without the other. Freedom, justice, and love require a body as well as a spirit. We do not live by spirit alone. A purely spiritual religion is a purely spurious religion; it is one that exempts its believers from surrender to the sustaining, transforming reality that demands the community of justice and love.”

Nothing to add to that except a heartfelt amen.