

Joining Together for Climate Justice ©

A homily by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

UUSC Justice Sunday

On Friday night I had an incredibly vibrant dream. I dreamed that I was having tea with the artist Georgia O'Keefe. The setting, as you can imagine, was beautiful and serene; somewhere in the Southwest. The colors in the dream were - well, they were O'Keefe like. The two of us sat and sipped tea and chatted when suddenly a group of very anxious people ran into the room. They were, I knew in the dream, her advisors. They told her, all chattering at once, that climate change was a crisis that would soon affect her beloved landscape, and she had to do something. She quickly agreed to paint a picture that would be auctioned off to raise money for environmental justice. And right there in the dream, while I sat watching, she painted the picture and auctioned it off, raising many millions of dollars. Then she turned back to me and said, "Now, where were we?"

When I awakened with the dream still vivid in my mind, I felt incredibly jealous. "If I were Georgia O'Keefe, I could do some something tangible like that and really help the cause. But what could poor little me do?" Then I had my first cup of coffee and realized that the dream was not really about saving our precious earth, it was about many of the things that are wrong with our attempts to save our precious earth. It was a dream about a single wealthy, entitled individual waving a magic wand made of money and thinking that they had addressed the problem of climate change. It was a dream about misunderstanding cause and effect. It was a dream about what the heck I really wanted and needed to say in

this homily, which is this: the root cause of climate change is structural. It is structural injustice deeply imbedded in our political and economic systems. This injustice is sustained by racist assumptions about the relative value of peoples who depend for their very existence on access to particular land and to clean water. The displacement of indigenous peoples around the globe? Not important in comparison to getting that gas or oil to dominant culture cities. Cutting through a native burial ground? So what? It's not like we're digging up graves in a 'real' cemetery; the kind with big tombs and marble crosses. The risk of polluting water in a place where 'nobody' lives? No big deal. The water protectors are criminals; let's set our militarized police on them and blow them out of our way. The erosion of the rain forest? Who lives there anyway?

Structural injustice encompasses all the social evils that we sometimes tend to deplore separately, as though we could tease out racism from the widening wealth gap from pollution from misogyny. The solution to such a complex and inter-related set of issues does not lie in the hands of individuals working piecemeal. No matter how well-meaning we are, no matter how much we care, no matter how carefully we recycle and compost and reduce our dependence on single use plastics, the ultimate solutions will be strategic and corporate and societal rather than individual.

That is why our UU Service Committee chose solidarity as the theme for our annual Justice Sunday reflection. Writing on behalf of the Service Committee Josh Leach says, "The importance and strength of deep solidarity - the kind of joining together that does not sacrifice the

interests of any one group for the sake of another - is clear. But many of us might be wondering: how can I be in solidarity? . . . Many of us who are less directly impacted by . . . human rights abuses may wonder how we can be allies in struggles for liberation. Maybe we see the value of solidarity and the reason why it is necessary, but still we worry in our hearts that there may not be room for us in the movement, that our desire to get involved in some way is not welcome or beneficial. In truth, we are needed.”

Remember that our Seventh Principle calls us to deep connectedness. “We affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” We tend to romanticize that Principle sometimes, as a poetic and lyrical metaphor. It is, of course. It calls us to revere all of creation, to recognize that all of life - plant and animal and mineral - is sacred. But it also demands that we recognize some ugly and scary truths. It reminds us that when President Bolsonaro of Columbia says, “It’s a shame that the Brazilian cavalry wasn’t as efficient as the Americans, who exterminated their Indians,” he is talking about exterminating us all. It means that when the police turn their fire hoses on the Water Protectors at Standing Rock, they are turning their fire hoses on us. It means that when a white supremacist gunman enters a mosque or a synagogue, they are shooting at all of us.

As Leach writes, “At its root, solidarity is love - love for the inherent worth and dignity in every person. It is a commitment to the belief that no human being is disposable, that no fundamental human rights should ever be sacrificed for the sake of the advancement of a few.” An example of this kind of solidarity is the UU Service Committee’s

participation in a summit last fall of peoples affected by the Trump administration's cruel cancellation of TPS (Temporary Protected Status) for most recipients. As just one example of the cruelty of this policy, the administration wants to deport people back to places that are in peril of being obliterated by rising seas. At the summit, UUSC participants came to understand that being an ally to people from the Marshall Islands, for example, could be a powerful way to use our mainland American privilege to resist the narrative that climate change is debatable. We need to understand that the threat of encroaching seas is already obliterating the island homes of indigenous peoples around the world. By the time those seas obliterate the waterfront mansions of Miami Beach, it will be too late.

So what can we do? As individuals we can and should make careful decisions about our own lifestyle. Can we eat more ethically? Can we reduce our dependence on carbon-based fuels and plastic? And we should support organizations with our treasure that are working for environmental justice. In just a few moments you will have an opportunity to do so by making a generous donation to the UU Service Committee. And, we should do together the hard work of understanding the complexities that create and sustain structural injustice and figure out where in that complexity we can best leverage our time and talents to bring about change and to dismantle those structures.

Once more quoting Josh Leach, "We may have more of a stake in social justice than we think. As the well-known community organizer Saul Alinsky wrote, having a stake isn't just a matter of material interest. It also has to do with the desire we all share to lead a meaningful life. If we

can use the time, commitment, and resources we have to contribute to movements larger than ourselves - movements that help the larger human family and will continue when we are gone - this is how we build lives of lasting purpose.”

UUSC Justice Sunday

March 17, 2019

Beverley Baxter Homily: “The UUSC Journey”

The UUSC Journey began in 1939 when Unitarian minister Waitstill Sharp and his wife Martha left their church in Wellsley, Massachusetts to go to Prague Czechoslovakia to help rescue intellectuals, artists, Jews, and others targeted by the Nazis. Martha & Waitstill were shadowed by Gestapo agents, their offices were ransacked, they had to burn files to protect refugees’ identities, and they had to carry their passports and crucial papers with them at all times in case they needed to escape quickly. Which they did. They narrowly escaped arrest as they fled Prague.

Upon their return to Wellsley, the Unitarian Service Committee was established, and Martha and Waitstill again left their church, and their small children, to continue this journey of rescue, this time from Southern France. The Sharps, and other Unitarians, continued, throughout the war, to rescue those targeted by the Nazis, as well as their children.

In 2006, the Yad Veshem Memorial in Israel conferred upon Martha and Waitstill Sharp the status of Righteous Among the Nations, only the second and third U.S. citizens to be so named, as people who risked their lives to help Jews escape during the Holocaust.

The flaming chalice, which we light each Sunday, was designed by Austrian refugee Hans Deutsch **FOR the Service Committee, during the war**, to become the underground symbol, in occupied Europe, for assistance to help those targeted by the Nazis.

Since its founding, during World War II, the Service Committee has been

on a human-rights journey. Merging with the Universalist Service Committee, with the formation of the UUA in 1963, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, UUSC, has been responding for nearly 80 years, around the world, to difficult human-rights issues. The Service Committee is frequently the **first** NGO (non-governmental organization) responding to a difficult human-rights issue. Sometimes the only one. Usually, working with the most marginalized. Always working with local partners to empower those without.

The Service Committee was in Central & South American during the turmoil of the 70s and 80s before the U.S. acknowledged its military involvement. Because of our work, we were invited back for the signing of the peace accords in El Salvador. We were in Ethiopia before the world knew there was a famine, “We Are the World” became a hit, and we all joined in Hands Across America. UUSC was in Eritrea before the world paid attention to the attacks from Ethiopia. We were empowering untouchable women in India before the world took notice. We were partnering in Rwanda before the world recognized the genocide. We were in Darfur long before the celebrities began paying attention. We were in Burkina Faso before the world cared about poor women enslaved to prostitution. We were in Kenya as the disputed election turned violent. Our partners were active in non-violent education efforts in Egypt as the Arab Spring began. We worked with those **left behind by the big NGOs** after the earthquake in Haiti, then again following Hurricane Matthew.

The Service Committee’s journey for justice continues **today** as we work with local partners to empower those whose human rights are threatened. We’re in Turkey with a partner that is helping Syrian refugees deal with trauma. We’re responding to the Syrian Refugee crisis with partners in Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, and Greece. We’re in Hungary, where Viktor Orbán is vilifying refugees. We’re in Myanmar, where the Rohingya are facing genocide. We’re in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, assisting partners trying to empower people so they won’t have to migrate to survive. And we’re in Mexico and Arizona with partners supporting refugees from the violence in Guatemala, Honduras, & El Salvador.

We’re challenging climate-forced displacement with partners in Alaska,

Louisiana, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu. We're partnering for the East Africa Famine Response in Kenya and Tanzania.

And we have over 20 partners in the U.S., from *No More Deaths* in Arizona to *Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative* in California, Michigan, and New York; from *Organized Communities Against Deportations* in Chicago, to the *Queer Detainee Empowerment Project* in New York; from *Grassroots Leadership* in Texas to the *Greater Minnesota Worker Center*. And more.

But let me tell you about two. Each illustrates how the Service Committee makes a difference and how little it takes when that difference is targeted.

The first, one of my favorites, is the story of women in the Untouchable Caste in India. Even though the caste system is outlawed, it has prevailed. These women, in a small village in India, were not allowed to use the local water, because they were untouchable, so had to walk 3 miles every day for whatever water they used for their families. Another NGO would have gone in and dug a well for them. Problem solved. But the Service Committee saw that the real issue was one of human rights and its goal was to empower these women. UUSC identified and supported a women's organization in the area which came into the village and began working with the women, first helping them with health care for their children, then build little businesses where they could get income for themselves, then education on their rights and the possibilities of organizing. Bottom line is that now these women not only are using the local water, but also, they are part of the village governing system. Plus, they started similar support groups in 13 surrounding villages. And the Service Committee is no longer there. These women have been empowered, and are empowering others. The Service Committee has moved on to be a catalyst for other groups to accomplish the same empowerment of those denied basic human rights.

Like my second example, where the Service Committee is currently engaged: *Fundación Entre Mujeres* (Foundation Among Women, or FEM), in Nicaragua. Last year, Doyle and I were fortunate enough to meet with women of FEM—an amazing group of women empowering women. In Nicaragua, with its machismo culture, men hold the power, including

owning the land. FEM educates campesina, or peasant, women about their rights, helps them own small parcels of land, maximize their productivity, get their goods to market, create a co-op to sell their coffee, hibiscus , and honey.

We visited the home of one woman where FEM gave her a barrel to collect rainwater from her roof, hose to get the water to her garden, fencing to protect her crops, and seeds. When she planted the onion seeds, so many came up that two-thirds of her garden was onions, because she couldn't waste a single plant! But that was ok, she said, because she could put onions in almost everything she cooked, and, more important, she could sell onions and make enough to buy her daughter a uniform so she could go to school and have more opportunities for a better life! Her future and her daughter's future were dramatically changed by what, to us, is a small investment.

As were so many others being empowered by FEM. Doyle's favorite is a young woman beekeeper who was so enthusiastic about her bees that even though she has a difficult climb, as did we, to get to them, and even though they're the local Africanized bees who sting her, she is bubbly with joy at her opportunity.

And you, with your support, have made these life-changing opportunities possible.

These are but tiny examples of the work of the Service Committee over the years and around the world. We currently have multiple partners working on every aspect of the refugee crisis in the Americas and in the U.S. There is so much more to the UUSC journey for justice.

The journey of the Service Committee is the journey of Unitarian Universalism. It is our journey. Made possible by you, with your support. It is based upon our principles, first and foremost our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and also, justice, equity and compassion in human relations, and a respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Thank you for your support which makes the work of the Service Committee possible.

