

Justice, Equity and Compassion

(Seven Principles series)

(Version 1a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on November 20, 2016, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WELCOME

Welcome to this place of possibility!

This is love's hearth, the home of hope,

a refuge for minds in search of truth unfolding,

ever beautiful, ever strange.

Here, compassion is our shelter,

freedom our protection from the storms of

bigotry and hate.

In this place, may we find comfort and courage.

Here may our sight become vision to see the unseen,

to glimpse the good that is yet to be.

- Marianne Hachten Cotter¹

Please take some time now to greet your neighbors.

¹ Brandenburg, Ellen, ed. *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship* (Boston: Skinner House, 2007). p. 29.

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Come into the circle... come into community.

We gather here and hold onto to each other.

We face life's challenges together.

Always, we journey towards justice –

For all, we seek equity and fair treatment –

With compassion, we devote ourselves to others.

By lighting the flame of our chalice,

We acknowledge these aspirations, to work for

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

This is who we are. This is what we do.

This is why we are here this morning.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

MEDITATION

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds. We will bring our meditation to a conclusion by joining in singing a Musical Meditation, Hymn # _____, _____ (name) in the (grey/teal) hymnal.

[Silence]

Thank you. Blessed be.

OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is _____.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

READING

Writing about the *Ethic of Compassion*, the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama wrote:²

... [A]ll the world's major religions stress the importance of cultivating love and compassion. In the Buddhist philosophical tradition, different levels of attainment are described. At a basic level, compassion is understood mainly in terms of empathy — our ability to enter into and, to some extent, to share others' suffering. But Buddhists — and perhaps others — believe that this can be developed to such a degree that not only does our compassion arise without any effort, but it is unconditional, undifferentiated, and universal in scope.

² Dalai Lama. *Ethics for the New Millennium*. (NY: Riverhead, 1999). pp.123-125.

A feeling of intimacy toward all other sentient beings, including of course those who would harm us, is generated...

But this sense of equanimity toward all others is not seen as an end in itself. Rather, it is seen as the springboard to a love still greater. Because our capacity for empathy is innate, and because the ability to reason is also an innate faculty, compassion shares the characteristics of consciousness itself. The potential we have to develop it is therefore stable and continuous. It is not a resource which can be used up — as water is used up when we boil it. And though it can be described in terms of activity, it is not like a physical activity which we trained for, like jumping, where once we reach a certain height we can go no further. On the contrary,

when we enhance our sensitivity towards others' suffering through deliberately opening ourselves up to it, it is believed that we can gradually extend our compassion to the point where the individual feels so moved by even the subtlest suffering of others [...]

In Tibetan, this ultimate level of attainment is ... [translated as] "great compassion."

... I have described ... [great compassion] not because it is a precondition of ethical conduct but rather because I believe that pushing the logic of compassion to the highest level can act as a powerful inspiration. If we can just keep the aspiration to develop ... [great compassion] as an ideal, it will naturally have a significant impact on our outlook. Based on the simple recognition that, just as I do, so do all others desire to be

happy and not suffer, it will serve as a constant reminder against selfishness and partiality. It will remind us that if we reserve ethical conduct for those who we feel close to, the danger is that we will neglect our responsibility toward those outside the circle. It will remind us that there is little to gain from being kind and generous because we hope to win something in return. [...] It will also remind us that there is nothing exceptional about acts of charity toward those we already feel close to.

Here ends the reading.

It seems that the Dalai Lama teaches we should extend our compassion beyond the circle of our family and friends. ***May it ever be so...***

Justice, Equity and Compassion

(Seven Principles series)

Reverend Michael Walker

The latest installment in my series of sermons about the Seven UU Principles explores our **Second Principle**, which states that *we affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.*

I love that these three concepts come together in this single principle, showing that they are intimately bonded to each other. There can be no justice in the absence of equity, in which classes of people are not treated fairly. Equitable treatment of all people implies the need for a deep-seated sense of compassion. Caring

for others, having compassion, implies that we can put ourselves in the place of others; that we can try to understand how others may feel in the face of whatever hardship has come their way. This compassion, our ability to put ourselves in another person's shoes, encourages us to act for justice. Seeking justice, we realize there is no equity without compassion, and there is no justice without equity. I've just outlined a rather circular argument, but one which I believe is true and quite inspiring.

Often are these words spoken: *love thy neighbor, as thyself.* When we stopped to greet our neighbors earlier, did you think about who your neighbors are? When it comes down to it, we speak often of loving our neighbors. It is easy to claim a person we know well as

our neighbor, but sometimes we find ourselves conflicted when considering whether to claim someone we may not know, nor understand, as our neighbor. Is that homeless person our neighbor? Is that person we saw shooting-up drugs in their car our neighbor? Is that Muslim family, or Jewish family, or even that Christian family down the street our neighbor? Is that person whose skin tone is different than one's own our neighbor?

When we start to consider the ways in which we help to foster justice, equity and compassion in our surrounding communities, are we doing so as an effort to which we give money or otherwise help to support from a distance, or is it something that we wrestle with face-to-face with the neighbor who is different than oneself?

Let's take these in reverse order, starting with compassion... There are so many reasons to pull our compassion down off the shelf where we keep it, dust it off, and present it to others as a gift from our innermost selves. Buddhists call this *loving-kindness*, to show that it is not just a feeling, but also an action.

We might face differences in those who we meet: different backgrounds, different cultures, different languages, different politics, different religions. In fact, it seems that the one thing all people have most in common with all others is that we are each different from another, in some form or fashion.

Some differences have so much history and baggage that it is remarkable when people find ways to overcome their biases based on those differences. I came

across a story in the news recently, based on a Facebook post – I haven't ever quoted something from Facebook before, but I think this story is compelling. It was written by a young mother named Leena in the Boston area. She is a Muslim with two daughters and she describes a recent experience:³

So this happened today at Barnes & Noble: I went to take the kids to meet the Paw Patrol characters and this nice man approached me, told me how beautiful the girls are, and conveyed a heartfelt apology for the general anti-Muslim sentiment in our society today. He had tears in his eyes and told me that it must be so hard to turn on the news,

³ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10100900184415040&set=a.989178536150.1073741825.2907232&type=3&theater>

that he feels awful about the bigotry my kids might one day experience, and that as a Jewish man whose parents didn't speak any English growing up, he personally understands what it feels like to be rejected and discriminated against. I asked if I could give him a hug (he looked like he needed one more than me, but I guess I needed one too) and he wanted to reassure me that most Americans are decent people who don't hate people like me or believe what they hear on the news.

Coming from two faiths not always known for their love of each other, these two overcame centuries of dislike and misunderstanding, willing to meet each other simply as human beings. The Jewish man took a risk, reaching out with empathy and compassion, for this mother and

her daughters. They both learned something about each other as individuals, as well as learning how each of them has experienced oppression as part of a minority culture. It is in this shared moment in time, when one or the other has taken the risky step of reaching out, communicating, caring, that we witness compassion in practice. The man felt called to speak, I think, from his distress that a whole culture and religion is being treated unfairly, inequitably, by some.

Regarding equity... It has often been noted that every culture has inequities, but also that those among us who most often notice and call out inequities are the children. When something is perceived as unfair, a child is very sure to tell you – and probably quite loudly.

Many words have been written about the difference between equality and equity, and there is a reason why equality is a flawed standard. Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence *that all men are created equal*, which is of course untrue and the idea itself, as presented, is a contradiction: *Men? What about black men? What about women?*

Treating every person the same, and assuming every person *is* the same, ignores certain realities. Let's say that some person was born with good looks or smarts, or into a family with money or the means to provide a good education. But another person may not have received those blessings. It seems that blind equality is not all that helpful.

For example, a college that offers two different

students the same financial aid package, ignoring the fact that one is from a low-income family and other's family is rich, shows us how equality can be unfair. On the other hand, equity, a sense of fairness and access to opportunity, gives the low-income student more financial aid, and the rich student less or none at all. Treating people equitably, rather than equally, provides students of varying backgrounds the same opportunity – in this case, the opportunity to go to college.

I know you all know this, but I'm trying to make a point. We've had affirmative action for many years, although the Rev. Alma Crawford, one of my seminary professors once said (I'm paraphrasing),⁴ *white people*

⁴ As quoted in *Theology Ablaze*, Tom Owen-Towle. (San Diego: Flaming Chalice Press, 2011). p. 210.

have been the beneficiaries of the most successful affirmative action program. While I used an economic example for my college students, of course race and other factors also need to be considered in order to have equitable treatment for all.

Equity is a building block of justice, because fairness and opportunity are methods of addressing oppressions and systemic inequities. Talking about equity seems so dry, the concept so abstract, that I find it helps to consider equity alongside compassion. We seek equity because of our compassion, our willingness to put ourselves in another's shoes, our interest in reaching out to and recognizing the needs of our neighbors. Doing so, we see that what they are experiencing is unfair or that they do not have access to opportunities in the same way

as some others in our society. When we realize that, we tend to think that such inequity is unjust.

This brings us back to justice... Unitarians have a long history of working on social justice and in fact, for some, that is the primary reason they are UU. We have accomplished much with our Second Principle, *promoting justice, equity and compassion in human relations*. We have seen a major societal shift in attitudes about LGBTQ peoples, and reached a point of marriage equality much sooner than most expected. In past generations, many Unitarians successfully worked to achieve women's suffrage. Many among us were delighted that a qualified leader, who happens to be a woman, received the presidential nomination from one of

the major political parties. Other injustices related to voting and inequity have been addressed, as well. Many Unitarians supported Dr. King and thousands of others in the effort to achieve civil and voting rights for American citizens who happened to have a different skin tone than the majority in power at that time.

We have more work to do when it comes to civil rights, and I know that some of us worry that much of the progress we have made in recent years may be overturned in the next presidential administration. Personally, I believe that there will be efforts to do that. I also believe that it is very difficult to turn back the clock, and that our politicians will find that taking away freedoms, rights and needs, and replacing them with injustices and inequities is a losing battle. We will not sit

idly by and allow that to happen. I'm reminded of the words of a former UUA president, the Rev. Bill Sinkford, who said:⁵

We are a gentle and generous people.

But let us not forget our anger.

May it fuel not only our commitment to compassion but also our commitment to make fundamental changes.

Our vision of the Beloved Community must stand against a vision that would allow the privilege of the few to be accepted as just and even holy.

Our religious vision must again and again ask "Who is my neighbor?"

⁵ *Lifting Our Voices* #159 (Boston: UUA, 2015). Reading adapted from words by William Sinkford.

And strive always to include more and more of us.

As we intone the words that gave birth to this nation, "We the people..." We are, and we should be, both a gentle, and an angry people.

I don't think many UUs will be sitting on the sidelines as we seek to uphold that which is just, that our neighbors are treated fairly, and that we expand our circle, as Bill said, to include more and more people.

All of what has been spoken today has been about actions we have, will or should take to better life for ourselves and our neighbors. These actions also have a spiritual dimension, in that that we believe that every person is imbued inherent worth and dignity, and these

actions we take for justice, equity and compassion are because of that belief. Working for justice becomes our spiritual practice; advocating for equity becomes our spiritual activity; treating all of our neighbors, known and unknown, with compassion becomes our spiritual gift. Living this out in our lives, providing the example, is a sacred calling. Bringing justice, equity and compassion to every civic debate, election, and social justice event, is how we cause change. Do not be disheartened by setbacks; this is why we call it spiritual *practice* – we are not yet perfect. But making the effort is what can truly affect another person’s life, and thereby also our own.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

In this building, within our own little circle,

We greet the neighbors we know.

We freely offer our empathy and care.

We support and we listen.

We live, we laugh, we love.

Let us take all of these outside this building.

Let us work for our highest ideals,

Let us stand on our principles and speak out...

Doing so, we expand our little circle,

By loving even those we do not yet know.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!
