

## **Justice Sunday: 2009**

Rev. Mark Hayes

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Welcome to Justice Sunday 2009, sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) as an annual opportunity for Unitarian Universalists to stand together and call for justice on urgent issues affecting lives in our own nation and throughout our world. We stand with the UUSC today to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and seek out ways that we can help ensure that the rights we enjoy are upheld for all.

As part of this year's Justice Sunday effort, the UUSC has encouraged congregations to focus on one or more of four areas: environmental justice, economic justice, civil liberties, and rights in humanitarian crises. I won't be addressing all of those in detail, but there are handouts available outlining "Simple Steps For Justice" for each of the four areas, and I encourage you to pick those up and learn about some possible actions you can take in the pursuit of justice.

Another resource provided by the UUSC was a sample sermon for this service. I will be drawing heavily from it, and simply want to acknowledge that these are not my words, but are words being offered up generously for use in Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country.

For more than two hundred years, our forebears, the Unitarians and Universalists, have devoted their lives to the creation of a religion dedicated to building a better world. Above all, they wanted to build a world where justice took precedence over self-interest. They wanted to help the disadvantaged and the poor. They wanted to build strong social institutions based on equality. They wanted to put an end to discrimination. They believed that liberal religion was about creating a better society on earth, not worrying about life beyond death.

They had read the prophetic words of Amos, the prophet from the eighth century, BCE. Amos's words resonated with them: "Seek good and not evil... establish justice... Take away from me the noise of your songs... But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." These are powerful words, words of courage spoken boldly to the powerful rulers of that time. Justice and righteousness were at the center.

That is a part of the ancient tradition that Unitarians and Universalists have upheld. We are not interested in a world of dominance, where the chosen are blessed and included, where the wealthy and powerful inherit more privilege and opportunity, and where the rest are left to find their own way. Our founders, for the past two centuries, have called us to be prophets, to work for justice, to protect the poor and disadvantaged, to speak out against those who seek wealth and power for themselves. That is our Unitarian Universalist birthright. That is our challenge, our calling. It is a standard by which to measure our lives. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it so powerfully, over and over again: "Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." Many of us Unitarian Universalists do not know that those words were spoken first not by Martin Luther King, but by Theodore Parker, the great Unitarian minister, in Boston, more than a hundred years before King led the civil rights movement. "The arc of the moral universe" is our phrase. It is our mandate. It is our vision of the future. It is a foundation of our liberal faith.

Two of the founders of the Unitarian Service Committee, a Unitarian minister named Waitstill Sharp and his wife Martha, surely understood those words, as they plunged into war-torn Europe in 1940, to do what they could to rescue people threatened by the Nazis. The hymn

*Come, Sing a Song with Me*, which we sing fairly often, is a reminder of the work they did in the midst of sordid internment camps in Vichy France. The Unitarian Service Committee did indeed “bring hope where hope [was] hard to find” as it set up relief and rescue operations. The state of Israel has a special designation for non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust – they are called Righteous Among the Nations. In 2006, Waitstill and Martha Sharp became only the second and third Americans among more than 21,000 people worldwide to be honored with that honorific title. By the end of World War II, they, and the Unitarians who followed in their footsteps, assisted more than 2,000 men, women, and children to escape the Nazi terror.

Out of the ashes of World War II came a call from the fledgling United Nations to create a codification of individual rights that all human beings would be entitled to and that, if observed, would prevent another Holocaust. Under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt, some of the most respected legal thinkers, political theorists, authors, and philosophers were consulted. Also consulted were sacred texts, constitutions, and declarations from around the world. Out of almost two years of careful crafting, and sometimes acrimonious redrafting of language, in 1948 emerged a collection of thirty simple articles known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or UDHR.

The UDHR begins with a preamble, which sets out the reasons for its adoption. The first paragraph asserts that the recognition of human dignity for all people is the foundation of justice and peace in the world. The second paragraph observes that disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts that have outraged the conscience of mankind, and that the four freedoms – freedom of speech and belief, freedom from fear and want – have been proclaimed as “the highest aspiration” of all people. The third paragraph states that because people are not always compelled to rebellion against tyranny, human rights should be protected by the rule of law.

The articles themselves are quite simple. One article says that we all have the right to profess our religion freely, to change it, and to practice it either alone or with other people. Another says that all children have a right to education and should be allowed to go to school. Another says that everyone has the right to work for just remuneration. One, often perceived as radical, says that everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation on working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

On December 10, 1948, when the UDHR was ratified by a vote of the 56 countries then represented at the UN General Assembly in Paris, its architect, Eleanor Roosevelt, said, “This Universal Declaration of Human Rights may well become the international Magna Carta of all men everywhere.” Many today believe it has surpassed her expectations, having influenced practically every new constitution of the now 192 nations in the UN system. Although when it was adopted the UDHR had no basis in law, in the ensuing decades it has become an important part of customary international law. Some would say it has had more influence in the modern era than any other written document.

How is the UDHR having such an impact, in every corner of the world, every day? It begins when the United Nations appoints a working group to address a specific set of issues, such as those relating to children. Intergovernmental groups such as UNICEF, NGOs such as the Children’s Defense Fund, and representative governments met for more than a decade to elaborate a treaty of all the basic rights to which children everywhere should be entitled. When that treaty, known as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, was signed at a celebratory ceremony in 1990, nations indicated their willingness to bring it before their parliaments for

ratification. Ratification means that member states agree to abide by a convention's provisions, they consent to be monitored, they amend their domestic law to be consistent with the treaty, and they report back to the United Nations on their progress at regular intervals.

When 60 nations have ratified a treaty, it enters into force as international law. Today, 190 of the 192 countries in the UN system have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Two have not: Somalia and the United States. Somalia's excuse is that it has not had a government for more than a decade. The United States has given two reasons for resisting ratification. The first is that it did not want to give up the right to try a juvenile who had committed a heinous crime, convict him or her, and then wait until the child reaches majority to impose the death penalty. The second is that the United States does not want to give up the right to have 17-year-old soldiers, while the rest of the world feels that a person should reach their majority – age 18 – before being armed with a weapon and asked to take someone else's life.

The United States will – at long last – under the new administration become the 191<sup>st</sup> nation to ratify this treaty. So the United States will rejoin the “community of civilized nations” and abide by the many conventions that have been discarded in recent years, sometimes with no formal process, like the Geneva Conventions, which someone determined were “quaint.”

For nearly forty years after the Universal Declaration on Human Rights was ratified, there were virtually no remedies for serious violators. Writ large, the concept of human rights has often been pitted against the concept of sovereignty. Dictators like Augusto Pinochet of Chile were protected by the notion of the immunity of heads of state. Chile was one of more than a hundred nations that signed the Convention against Torture, which stipulates that torture originating from the state is a crime against humanity. After signing the treaty, however, Pinochet continued to torture and disappear political opponents. In the late 1990s, a Spanish court, recognizing that crimes against humanity enjoy universal jurisdiction and have no statute of limitations, indicted Pinochet, ignoring the immunity he had granted himself with a lifetime seat in the Chilean Senate. Then, a Spanish judge indicted him and issued an extradition order that was enforced when Pinochet traveled to London for medical care. He remained under house arrest for a year, as the case worked its way through the British legal system. Finally, the House of Lords ruled that the indictment and extradition order were legally valid. Though he was released because of medical problems, the case reverberated around the world, as the rights promised in the UDHR finally *began to make a difference*. In that year, 1999, the *New York Times* created a new verb when it commented that dictators and thugs around the world now hesitated to travel for fear of being “pinocheted.”

Around the world today the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is beginning to fulfill Amos's prophecy about justice flowing like a stream. The twenty treaties and conventions springing from the UDHR, the thousands of domestic laws in hundreds of countries around the world that are modified each time a treaty is signed, and the promise of universal jurisdiction, which has emboldened other courts around the world to begin providing remedies when rights are violated, all represent a great awakening of hope.

The UDHR is the foundation of all of the work at the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Its mission statement says that UUSC advances human rights and social justice by partnering with those who confront unjust power structures and by mobilizing to challenge oppressive policies.

This is the work of justice and righteousness that Amos wrote about. This is the moral arc of the universe that bends ultimately toward justice, a powerful vision spoken first by

Theodore Parker and echoed by Martin Luther King. That has been the work of Unitarians and Universalists for more than 150 years.

Before I mention some specific ways that we can help advance the causes of justice, I'd like to describe one example of how the UUSC's partners do so.

In America we do not often equate human rights with labor rights, but how would you like trying to survive on a minimum wage of just \$2.65 per hour? That was the minimum wage in Kansas until last July, when one of UUSC's domestic partners, the Kansas Action Network, was able to shame local officials into raising it to match the federal minimum wage of \$6.55 per hour. But childcare providers, food-service workers, janitors, and health-care aides all working full-time at the federal minimum wage will earn just \$13,624 per year – a salary much too low to provide for their basic needs of rent, food, and heat. A decent minimum wage can often mean the difference between survival and hardship to millions of Americans. That is why UUSC and its partners Let Justice Roll and the UUA will be working to raise the federal minimum wage to \$10 per hour in 2010.

So how can we work more effectively for justice? There are several ways. First, through financial support of groups like the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Our "First Sunday" special collection next Sunday will go to the UUSC. Please come prepared to be generous. Second, look at the "Simple Steps for Justice" sheets from the UUSC to learn more about some of the issues they're working on, and what else you can do to support them. Third, be sure and come to our Freedom Seder next Friday evening, at 6 o'clock, right here. This annual event has been an important vehicle for our support of social justice for ten years now. Fourth, plan on attending an all-congregational social justice workshop on Saturday, May 2, at Foxdale Village. Called "Being the Change We Want to Be," and led by the Rev. Dick Gilbert, that gathering will give us an opportunity to harness our collective energy and give greater focus to future social justice efforts of our congregation.

Finally, I leave you with these words from the Talmud:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.

Love mercy now.

Do justly now.

Walk humbly now.

You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

So may it be.