

LET JUSTICE FLOW

by Rev. Kit Ketcham, March 13, 2005

I don't know how many of you grew up in a conservative Christian church, but a song from those early days of my life kept running through my head as I prepared for today.

To those of us who are familiar with rivers and oceans and their dangerous aspects, the words of this song can have a meaning beyond their literality. Let me sing it for you and if you know it, feel free to join in.

“Throw out the lifeline across the dark wave, there is a brother whom someone should save. Somebody's brother, oh who then will dare to throw out the lifeline, his peril to share. Throw out the lifeline, throw out the lifeline, someone is drifting away. Throw out the lifeline, throw out the lifeline, someone is sinking today.”

Growing up singing this song in my dad's little church out in eastern Oregon, I had a chance to think about what its words meant metaphorically, apart from their Christian context.

And today I want to tell you some of my thinking and extend that metaphor a little farther.

Athena Oregon was a tiny town, 750 people, a lot of them wheat ranchers and pea farmers, plus the usual small businesses and an assortment of schoolteachers and other professionals. Three fourths of the year it was quiet and sleepy, with high school basketball games the biggest excitement to be found.

But in the summer, life changed. As the peafields ripened in May, carloads of Mexican field workers began to roll into town, looking for seasonal work in the hot dry peafields or the canneries of Umatilla County.

At the same time, other ragged, dusty men straggled in from the highway, carrying bedrolls, sleeping under the trees or along Wildhorse Creek, which ran through City Park.

Our mothers warned us not to talk to them and told us that if someone should come to the door asking for food, to call her and she would come help by giving him a sandwich and a glass of milk.

My dad had an extra job in the summer, beyond his ministerial duties in the First Baptist Church, driving what we fondly called “The Pea Bum Express”, an ancient schoolbus which transported workers out to the fields at dawn and returned them to town 12 hours later and a few dollars richer.

The setup for pea harvest was that we girls drove the open cab trucks in the fields driving loads of peas from field to viners, the boys drove the swathers and loaders which mowed and loaded the peavines into our trucks, and the Mexicans and hoboes pitched the peavines into the huge cylindrical machines known as viners.

We all worked 12 hours a day or all night, for no more than \$1 an hour, coming home filthy dirty, dog tired, and full of stories about our day’s adventures.

We were just kids from Athena, the children of salesclerks, doctors, ministers, bartenders, teachers, ranchers, and construction workers, and all summer long we rubbed elbows and joshed freely with the migrant work force which harvested the peas and wheat of Umatilla County.

There was Swede, the battered looking fellow in his 60's, who drove a loader better than any of the smart-alecky teenage boys. Swede, who could give a truck driver signals that would result in a load of vines that was balanced, not too heavy on the high side of the bed, which could cause an unevenly loaded truck to roll over on a steep slope.

And there was Gramps, ancient, toothless, and bent, cackling uproariously at our antics, never fazed by teenage girls who dumped a huge load of peavines several feet too far from the feed chute of the viner, meaning that the guys who pitched the vines into the viner had to take several extra steps with each forkful. Gramps, who didn't take the Pea Bum express back to town one night because he'd fallen into a viner and had been killed by its blades.

Both men were probably alcoholic and essentially homeless, with families who were unwelcoming because of their drinking habits. They occasionally disappeared from the fields and we'd hear that they'd been on another bender.

When we'd sing "Throw out the lifeline" in church during the summer months, I'd always think of Swede and Gramps and others like them, who drifted from one seasonal job to another, rootless, homeless, living from day to day in the uncertainty of migrant life.

And yet I knew clearly that they were real human beings, not trash, not terrible people, just men overcome by the circumstances of their lives.

One summer, I quit driving truck and became the timekeeper for Weber and Kirk, the outfit most of us girls worked for. This job meant that I went from field to field taking names of the workers who were pitching peas or driving. My high school Spanish came in handy here, as I knew how to spell the beautiful names of the Mexican men and I could answer questions for them.

I visited the pea camp, the barracks where some of the men stayed at night. This was a hot, smelly quonset hut on the edge of town, with only outhouses and no bathing or cooking facilities. It never occurred to me to be afraid or to shrink from dealing with these men, whose lives had brought them to this place.

My parents' attitude toward our pea bum friends modeled acceptance and compassion and I carried this understanding within me from that time on, into a job in welfare work, a job in a Denver inner-city mission, school teaching and counseling, and now, into a vocation where I am urging others to learn to be with folks in need, one-on-one when possible, not at arms' length.

I learned that people in need were not as scary as they might seem, that they responded to smiles and friendliness in the same ways I did, that they needed to be treated like fellow humans, not like pathetic losers, and that this behavior from me resulted in friendly, respectful interactions. As I thought about it, this seemed to be the essence of the lifeline we were throwing them, beyond what a job and paycheck meant.

In short, I learned that meeting people one on one, face to face, and being human with them, changed things, that the respect my parents offered these lonely men may have helped them find greater respect for themselves.

I am reminded of the 1st principle of Unitarian Universalism: we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And I know that being in relationship with people who were “underprivileged”, in the parlance of the time, taught me that all humans truly have worth and dignity.

Our service today is a recognition of Justice Sunday, a special day acknowledging the efforts of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee worldwide. Its theme this year is “Let Justice Flow” addressing the global need for clean drinking water for all persons.

Chances are, few of us are well-acquainted with the global crisis surrounding clean drinking water for all. But in this year of impending drought, in the normally soggy Pacific Northwest, our need---and the need of all living things for water---can help us become more aware of the criticality of the earth’s water supply. Not only do humans need a lifeline, as the old hymn suggests---so does the earth.

We know that life originally emerged from water, that we are utterly dependent on water for our survival. A mere 72 hours without it, and we’re goners. We gestate in water, are born in a flooding gush of fluid, are baptized or dedicated or christened by it; we UUs engage in ceremonies using water as a symbol of unity when we recount our lives in terms of the water we bring back every year to this place.

Water has healing properties-----it cleanses, transforms, irrigates the dry earth, purifies and regenerates life. It is recognized by all religious traditions as sacred, present at the creation of the universe. Water is utterly essential to life, though it can deal death in its unpredictable and dangerous moments.

Did you know that the average person in the United States uses 185 gallons of water per day? Did you know that the average person in West Africa uses 7.6 gallons? The water we use in this country to wash our cars, water our lawns, flush our toilets, is often as pure as the water we use for our coffee and our orange juice. In other countries, clean water is a luxury, doled out sparingly for human consumption.

Even then, water-borne diseases take many lives, and water sources are often many miles from homes, and sometimes unreliably clean, depending on whether an animal has died nearby or a person has fouled the well.

Wars are fought over oil these days, as we know, but the day may likely come when we fight wars over water. Because water is a limited resource. The world has the same amount now as it had in prehistoric times, according to some sources. And yet our population has exploded into the billions.

On this continent, we have “cleverly” rerouted rivers like the Colorado, drying it up before it gets to Mexico, using it for our golf courses, our lawns, our swimming pools and fountains. In some areas in this country, water resources have been privatized and water has been denied to citizens who cannot pay.

The question we need to ask is “who owns the earth and all the riches of nature? who owns the clouds, the rivers and the lakes?” Do corporations own it? Does the government own it? Do we own it? Or is our job, whether we are corporations, governments, or citizens, to take care of it, not waste it, to be stewards of the bounty, not manipulators.

For why should a few profit from something that has been provided by the earth for all of us, for the common good?

What can we do to address this watery crisis? Locally, we are careful to guard our water resources. We lobby against corporations who would endanger its purity by unwise use of the land and sea. But the problem is global and must be addressed globally.

Our UUSC advocates for just legislation and gives direct support to people worldwide who are struggling to acquire affordable clean water, helping them organize, learn about avoiding water-borne disease and pollution. Many of us support the UUSC financially.

But the issue of privatization is something that touches us in the PNW. As environmentalists, human rights advocates, and economic justice activists, we are united in a common concern for the health of our rivers, streams, lakes, and oceans.

We know that when our water is fouled, our global ecosystem begins to falter, whether it happens here on Holmes Harbor or in Bolivia where the Guarani’ people live. We humans are dependent on pure water and the right amount of it to support the ecosystem which supports us-----the salmon, the trees, the streams, the oceans, the perpetual rain which replenishes and drives the cycle of life.

Though we know we must act to protect water here and around the world, we often hesitate to act. What causes us to hesitate when it comes to tackling the social issues that confront us and threaten our planet?

You probably have your own ideas about this, but here are mine:

- we often feel a sense of powerlessness, a fear that the difficulties are permanent and unfixable, that we won't be heard.
 - we may feel a lack of a larger connection with others, a feeling that we must act alone.
 - we may fear losing our familiar identity, getting too close, too involved, being hurt.
 - we may fear that we are not eloquent enough, not well enough informed, not good enough, unprepared.
 - we may fear challenging institutional power, being shouted down, discovering we are wrong.
 - we may believe that the timing isn't right, or that the issue isn't that important. And we may be just tired of the constant effort.
 - we may suffer from a lack of understanding that, as Marian Wright Edelman has commented, "Social involvement is the rent we pay for living."
- Consequently, we may identify some perceived flaw--large or small--in ourselves or in the issue and use it to dismiss the entire idea.

How do we begin to change our fears and beliefs? As the wellknown 12 step bumperstickers advise, we do it one step, one day at a time. We don't wait for great strength, perfect timing, clear vision, full understanding. One day we just take a step. We do something. With every step, we accomplish change. We will go beyond our comfort zones in time, but we will grow in the process.

Getting involved helps us see the larger patterns of social injustice, gets us beyond our narrow scope of vision to understand the many threads that make up the matted, tangled net of injustice. It builds on who we already are, changing us in unexpected and lasting ways.

Our society has become cynical, as we see political and corporate corruption pollute our planet and impoverish its citizens, as we see children sexualized in the media and victimized by the adults in their lives, as we observe the smirks of those in power and see our freedoms abridged and nations at war, despite the protests of their citizens.

Lies seem endemic in our culture and we come to believe that the world is inherently corrupt, bought and paid for, and that it is impossible to change it.

Cynicism is a poor substitute for hope. Cynicism is treacherous. It undermines and supplants hope. It keeps us from working toward our dream of a world with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

What if Martin Luther King Jr. had been a cynic? Or Gandhi? Or John Muir? Or Henry David Thoreau? Or Walt Whitman? Or any of the hundreds and hundreds of human beings who have refused to give up hope?

Remember Hazel Wolf, that indomitable WA woman whose boundless energy and efforts changed the world for the better? Hazel's method was "endless pressure, endlessly applied". This woman founded Audubon chapters all over the state, got fired three times for starting unions, nearly got deported during the McCarthy era, raised money for medical aid in Nicaragua, encouraged young activists, and cared for the earth and its inhabitants all her life.

What if she had been a cynic? What if she had been afraid of speaking truth to power? What if she had given up in despair that the world would not change because of her work? Hazel Wolf was a runner in the marathon of life; she wasn't going to quit until she dropped in her tracks.

Hazel Wolf knew that change comes slowly, that to see the changes we've made, we need to look back over our shoulders and see how different things are now from what they once were. No matter how dedicated we are, social change never happens overnight. We would like it to, but it always takes time. We can never make these kinds of big changes in one day.

We need to repair the often-broken connection between our convictions and our conduct which has been weakened by cynicism. One way to do it is to cultivate a sense of history. If we see our efforts as isolated acts, we'll be disheartened. But if we view them as part of an ongoing historical narrative, we can see that we have all the time we need to act, even with the urgencies of the moment.

It helps us shift from thinking just about the current crisis to asking how our efforts are shaping the world for generations to come. No matter how we work for what Jesse Jackson calls “the ancient and ageless cause” of human dignity, we need this perspective, and now more than ever in this age of cynicism and dashed hopes.

When we look at history, we see that unforeseen and diverse events created the civil rights movement; it was born out of Gandhi’s nonviolent protests in India, anti-colonial rebellion in Africa, labor struggles in the US, and the long and patient work of activists and groups in the US. All this undergirded Rosa Parks, for example, when she sat down in the front of that Montgomery bus. And it set the stage for what many consider the civil rights issue of our age, the struggle for rights for sexual minorities.

When we consciously set cynicism aside, we see that all around us there is hope for our planet: whether it is in the continued efforts of Freelanders to find an equitable solution to expanded industry on Holmes Harbor, in our Baskets for Books exchange with the Guarani’s whose education will be a deciding factor in stopping the destruction of their forests and waters, in the efforts of the UUSC to support indigenous people’s ability to provide clean water for themselves and their communities, and in the work of this congregation to build a home that is green and sustainable.

We may not see the change we are working for. It may be that the results we hope for do not come in our lifetimes. That’s why it’s so important to take the longer view, to cultivate that sense of history.

For we are agents of change not just for ourselves, but for those who come after us.

The late Rev. Peter Raible wrote these memorable words, a paraphrase of Deuteronomy 6:10-12, and I leave them with you today.

We build on foundations we did not lay.

We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.

We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.

We drink from wells we did not dig.

We profit from persons we did not know.

We are ever bound in community. Amen.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #121, "We'll Build a Land"

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that the work we do today may come to fruition far in the future, for our children's children and their families. May we provide for them foundations, fires, trees, and wells, that their future may be secure and that the human community may survive and thrive. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.