

Order of Service
Classism In America
January 17, 2010



Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

We come together in diversity and unity,
As the many and as the one,
Together in a practice of worship.

Meditation and Prayer

At times our sorrow is great
And we feel its full extent.
And yet we know
At this time
Someone near or far away
Struggles with sorrow
Even greater than our own.
And our heart goes out to them.

Amen.

Reading from his Nobel Prize Speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

...Almost two-thirds of the peoples of the world go to bed hungry at night. They are undernourished, ill-housed, and shabbily clad. Many of them have no houses or beds to sleep in. Their only beds are the sidewalks of the cities and the dusty roads of the villages. Most of these poverty-stricken children of God have never seen a physician or a dentist. This problem of poverty is not

only seen in the class division between the highly developed industrial nations and the so-called underdeveloped nations; it is seen in the great economic gaps within the rich nations themselves. Take my own country for example. We have developed the greatest system of production that history has ever known. We have become the richest nation in the world. Our national gross product this year will reach the astounding figure of almost 650 billion dollars. Yet, at least one-fifth of our fellow citizens - some ten million families, comprising about forty million individuals - are bound to a miserable culture of poverty. In a sense the poverty of the poor in America is more frustrating than the poverty of Africa and Asia. The misery of the poor in Africa and Asia is shared misery, a fact of life for the vast majority; they are all poor together as a result of years of exploitation and underdevelopment. In sad contrast, the poor in America know that they live in the richest nation in the world, and that even though they are perishing on a lonely island of poverty they are surrounded by a vast ocean of material prosperity.. ...

So it is obvious that if man is to redeem his spiritual and moral "lag", he must go all out to bridge the social and economic gulf between the "haves" and the "have nots" of the world. Poverty is one of the most urgent items on the agenda of modern life.

...In the final analysis, the rich must not ignore the poor because both rich and poor are tied in a single garment of destiny. All life is interrelated, and all men are interdependent. The agony of the poor diminishes the rich, and the salvation of the poor enlarges the rich. We are inevitably our brothers' keeper because of the interrelated structure of reality. ...

Sermon

Classism In America

Rev. Bruce Davis

Last Sunday Earle Canfield spoke to us about the oppressive and antiquated system of caste in Nepal and India. A child of the lowest caste, the sudras, or a child who is not even up to that lowest class, the outcasts, may find herself essentially sold into servitude. She has no opportunity to improve her social position, and she is likely consigned to a life of poverty,

prostitution, and early death. That the system appears to be breaking down is a blessing, and rights advocates in both nations deserve our support.

How convenient it is to point a finger across the Pacific Ocean. Thank God we don't have a caste system here in the land of opportunity.

And yet, though we are not confined by an ancient system of birthright, are we without oppression in our own land?

Often three elements come together to create a powerful system of destruction. We learn in grade school that the conjunction of simple sugars, bacterial action, and plaque formation will cause the teeth to rot and fall out. We learned in fire safety that it takes fuel, oxygen, and igniting heat to cause a house to burn down. In both cases the destructive effect can be resolved by eliminating the three causative elements. Even to remove one of those elements has the potential of dramatically reducing the destructiveness.

Take away the oxygen and the fuel will not burn. Break up the plaque by brushing and flossing and the decay can't get a foothold.

Martin Luther King Jr., especially in his later writings, demonstrated that three elements worked together to cause oppression in America. He showed that each element worked separately but in tandem with the other two to create a perfect storm of lost opportunity for about fifty million of Americans.

The first element is racism. By the color of another person's skin and the character of their cultural heritage, one American may ignore, reject, or attack another. The hierarchy of racism has put white American men in control of a domination system that has kept people of color and women out of positions of power and opportunities for advancement. Because of the work of the American Civil Rights movement and leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., more Americans are aware of the damage that we cause other human beings by our intentional or unconscious racism. Even King, before he was assassinated, suggested that changing laws and improving behavioral norms in many companies were beginning to break down this element of oppression. No doubt, even in 2010, we have a long way to go to address American racism.

The second part of the triangle of oppression is classism. It is more subtle, more insidious, but certainly as significant as racism in the subjugation of large portions of the American society. Racism and classism can work separately from each other, but their greatest damage comes in the destructive synergy they exert. King realized, as he peeled the proverbial onion on American oppression, that racism was not operating alone. How could it be that people of the racially dominant group could be subjected by oppression with a power equal to that of racism? And how could it be that people of color minorities could achieve at the highest levels in some parts of the American society, in business, academia, and government, in spite of their color and cultural background?

The third part of the triangle comes out of the other two: poverty. If poverty alone were alleviated, so that each person truly had enough food, wealth, healthcare, and good jobs, it would mitigate the oppression caused by racism and classism. But it would not remove that oppression. Poverty operates as an independent variable in the formula of oppression. These statistics come from the United States Census Bureau:

The number of Americans living in poverty jumped to 35.9 million last year, up by 1.3 million, while the number of those without health care insurance rose to 45 million from 43.6 million in 2002.

Of the three legs of this stool of American oppression, racism and poverty are the most measurable and therefore the most easily understood. Though race itself is a difficult word to capture, and there are those that say “race” as such doesn’t exist, the reality of racism as prejudice against color and culture is obvious. Likewise, poverty can be measured as the sum of what you have, including the flow of income, minus the debt that you carry. Poverty can also be defined concretely in the lack of critical human services, such as health care.

Classism, on the other hand is harder to see. In fact, where racism and poverty have absolute measures that define them, classism can only be seen relatively, between one person and another, and between one group and another. When I look at myself, whoever I am, I don’t perceive that I’m of a particular class of Americans. This is different from the caste system in Nepal and India where, historically, the first consideration in all commerce and

social relations is, what caste do I come from and how must I constrain my activities accordingly.

It is not a bad thing that class is invisible to us when we consider our own selves. I am not essentially defined by class. Nor is it a bad thing when I turn to another human being without any consideration of class comparison. How can I maintain a friendship with someone quite different from myself if I always emphasize that class separates us? It only becomes a problem in the context of oppression, whereby one class of Americans denies the rights of equality and opportunity by another class. Thus class becomes destructive in the context of classism—where one person or one group takes advantage of another through the vehicles of class.

In our conversations we refer to upper class, middle class, and lower class by income levels. Class differences in America are much more complex than this and much more difficult to define. In fact, you can't even speak of class in our society without balancing multiple variables. What results is a whole continuum of complex class characteristics that define the pluralistic American people.

Much of the study here comes to us out of the American Quaker tradition, where a sense of equality is an essential value in their tradition. It is not different from our own first principle, "The inherent worth and dignity of every person," but the Quakers have taken a more active and affirmative step to break down classism in their own communities, with a goal of fighting the oppression of classism in the American society.

Here, then, are the parameters, coming out of Quaker discernment, that have been studied intensively at Illinois State University. According to this work, the more that these factors have been present in your life, the relatively higher your class status is in the American society is likely to be.

1. My father went to college.
2. My father finished college.
3. My mother went to college.
4. My mother finished college.
5. I had more than 50 books in my childhood home.

6. I had more than 500 books in my childhood home.
7. I was read children's books by a parent.
8. I had lessons of any kind before I turned 18.
9. I had more than two kinds of lessons before I turned 18.
10. My parents (or a trust) paid for the majority of my college costs.
11. I went to a private high school.
12. I went to summer camp.
13. I had a private tutor before I turned 18.
14. Our family vacations involved staying at hotels.
15. My parents bought me a car that was not a hand-me-down from them.
16. There was original art in my house when I was a child.
17. I had a phone in my room before I turned 18.
18. I and my family lived in a single family house.
19. My parent(s) owned their own house or apartment before I left home.
20. I had my own room as a child.
21. I flew on a commercial airline before I turned 16.
22. My parents took me to museums and art galleries as I grew up.

These statements begin to create an *operant* definition of class—that is, how does class *operate* in the early years to perpetuate itself, generation after generation. It also begins to define those factors that can begin to break down American classism.

First, notice how much education plays into class. The more years of schooling, and the more one's job or profession is the result of years of schooling, the higher the class designation will be. The opportunity to participate in education was found to be the key to break down the caste system in Nepal and India. It has been found to be the key to opportunity in all parts of the third world. There is no doubt that by expanding and strengthening our educational system in a way that serves all Americans and that provides equal opportunity for advancement, we break down classism.

Next, notice how family activities that take advantage of wealth tends to confer class position to the children. This is only one way that economic position becomes a powerful driver of class privilege that tends to replicate

itself over the generations. Thus economic opportunity will itself reverse the oppression of classism over the period of generations.

Class is not static. It gives way as opportunity is shared by those who have it in abundance. It gives way as opportunity is taken by those to whom it was denied.

I was on a retreat with UU ministers a few years back, and an exercise was done that worked through a list of class determinants, much like the one I shared with you a few minutes ago. People were lined up, based on the score that resulted from that list, forcing us to confront the specifics of our class differences.

No doubt it was an interesting exercise, but ultimately not a useful one. Those whose class position was relatively low by this ranking felt ashamed of their inferior position. Those whose class position was relatively high felt ashamed of their privilege. The positive outcome of the exercise was the realization of the power of class and the enormous difficulty talking about it. The negative outcome was a sort of competition that developed, where participants felt obliged to assert and defend the particular wounds of their own early life experiences. Ultimately it felt as if those with a lower score blamed those with a higher score, and those with a higher score struggled to convince others that their early years were not so privileged after all.

The exercise served to emphasize how we are separated by class. That would be tantamount to an exercise that demonstrated how we are separated by color and culture. Being aware of the differences is helpful, but the goal is to reach across those lines of difference to develop community, find common purpose, and become friends.

I found myself after the exercise highlighting my experience of this Evergreen community. Though we are not comprised by much diversity of color and culture, there is great diversity here as measured by class, and this is different from many Unitarian Universalist churches. In this we are reflective of the class diversity of Snohomish County. And yet we are not *about* these differences. We are about the friendships we create across the lines of difference. We are about creating a single, powerful, and beloved community that is strengthened *by* our differences. We are about pulling

together toward a world that can be just for everyone, regardless of social standing.

Frankly, I see it as one of our great strengths. I see it as one of the gifts that we've been given, that we can work and laugh and play and worship together—as One.