

“The Heart of Justice” (Roddy)

Two weeks ago our Small Group met in the parlors right behind this Sanctuary. Like other Small Groups in our community we meet every two weeks to share our experience around a certain topic like: faith; spiritual heroes; forgiveness; bitterness; or prayer. Our last meeting the topic was guilt.

We opened with the customary words: “We come together in an attitude of openness – not knowing quite what will happen, yet daring to receive a new idea, a new experience, sustenance for our minds and hearts . . . We come with an attitude of humility, knowing how much we need one another, how alone we can be in the world, how vulnerable if we face life solely by ourselves. We come in a spirit of love, seeking human warmth and fellowship in the hands and faces of those around us . . .”

Time and time again I’m amazed at how different and yet alike we all are. And how we do find sustenance for our minds and hearts in the sharing of one another’s experience. It’s a unique time spent together in which we practice deep listening, no interruptions, no judging, no advice.

My own experience of guilt changed somewhat dramatically in my 30's with the study of Liberation Theology. The new word for “salvation” became “solidarity,” solidarity with the oppressed.

Salvation meant joining in the struggle for liberation of those marginalized by society, kept in poverty by unjust economic structures and the maldistribution of wealth. In the area of morality there was a decided shift in the 1960's. Concern shifted from sexual to social morality. It felt much healthier as well as a relief from an over absorption in the sins of the flesh which were a far easier target than poverty, racism and the military industrial complex.

In the circle of our small group I shared that what I experienced in our own community, among UU’s who profess not to be into guilt, a healthier kind of guilt, if there is such a thing, a real dis-ease with the way things are and concern about not making some effort to change them.

Just last week during our Vermont Interfaith Action meeting my neighbor from Ohavi Zedek Synagogue reported that for the first time in Burlington, non-profit agencies were in a contentious tug of war over the limited funds that have been slashed for housing. Funding for the war in Iraq is draining our national budget of the resources necessary to house the most vulnerable, to sustain a human environment.

One of the questions addressed in our small group was: “Can guilt serve a useful purpose?” I said “yes,” thinking of the dis-ease with the state of our country, the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots and the unjust war being waged in Iraq. The useful purpose is to move us to take action. Edmund Burke, the British statesman once said: “The greatest sin is to do nothing because you can only do a

little.” Interestingly if Burke had prevailed in Parliament during the period of the American Revolution we might all be British citizens today. He continually urged his government to conciliate the colonies. He believed that the colonists should be allowed to enjoy all the rights of English citizens.

The best antidote I have found for guilt is grace, the grace of community. Often a couple in preparing for marriage or civil union disagrees or strongly disagrees with the following statement on the marriage survey: “I believe our relationship must include active participation in a place of worship.”

At the same time that I affirm the couple in their response and say how well I understand, still I feel compelled to redeem their negative stereotype of religion and speak about the grace of community. I think of a faith community as a vehicle of grace, an antidote to cynicism, as a way of responding with like-minded people to the pain of the world. By ourselves we are more vulnerable to that greatest sin of doing nothing or simply “numbing out.”

As part of a community, you can contribute your little or your “possible” as they say in Ghana. A dear friend of mine who was a medical missionary sister for years told me that the Ghanaians have this saying: “You do your possible.” Once when someone died who was in the care of the medical missionary sisters, one of the sisters apologized to the relatives of the deceased, the family’s response was: “Sister, you did your possible.” The saying summarized their attitude toward life.

This Society offers its members many opportunities to do their possible whether it be working with VIA to provide transitional housing for youth or with Social Action to work on Media Reform or with prisoners or volunteering at JUMP to provide a safety net for those who have fallen through the cracks and have no place else to go for anything from baby formula to bus passes.

None of the people doing their possible in these various activities are looking for any kind of reward either here or hereafter. Still I believe that they do receive grace which comes in unpredictable ways, at times a deeper sense of connection, of solidarity, of gratitude for life.

Stories about the presence of grace in people’s lives abound in ancient mythology and in Judaeo-Christian scripture. The story of Baucis and Philemon appears in both Greek and Roman mythology. This is about a poor couple with very little means. Their only wish was that they never be separated. One day Jupiter and Mercury were wandering about the earth checking out the good and bad people. In Greek mythology their names were Zeus and Hermes. The two Gods disguised themselves as paupers, dressed in shabby clothes. When they asked for shelter at the homes of the well to do they were turned away. Finally they came to the edge of the village where stood the humblest cottage, the home of Baucis and Philemon. They were warmly welcomed and given the best food the couple had. The wine bowl kept refilling as they drank from it. And so Baucis and Philemon recognized the true nature of their guests.

The Gods changed the humble cottage into a stately temple and ordained Baucis a priestess and Philemon, a priest. When the couple grew old Jupiter granted their wish. He turned them into trees beside the temple, so they were never separated.

Jesus told a similar story of grace which Gary retells every Christmas at the candle light service. It comes from the 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel. It's about the last judgement when the king will say: "Blessed are you, happy are you for when I was hungry you fed me, when I was in prison you visited me, when I was homeless, you gave me shelter." And the people being judged are as surprised as Baucis and Philemon were to discover the divine presence in disguise.

How can we come to penetrate one another's disguise, to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person which we are called by our first principle to affirm and promote. If we are operating within a framework that stresses only rights, rules and norms, a system of justice symbolized by a blindfolded woman holding a scale in one hand and a sword in the other, then we might be more calculating and judgmental when it comes to our concern for the underprivileged.

Mary Daly along with a number of other feminist ethicists prefers to have justice depicted not as a woman blindfolded, holding a scale, objective and indifferent to oppression but rather as Nemesis, the goddess of Vengeance in Greek mythology. Nemesis punished those human beings who angered the gods by becoming too proud of themselves. Today the word nemesis has come to mean a kind of justice that is deserved.

Not only does Nemesis have both eyes opened but she has a third eye that makes her particularly alert and angry with all forms of oppression. She is less concerned with punishing rule breakers than she is about whatever contributes to dominant/subservient relationships in society like sexism, heterosexism, classism, militarism and racism.

Ethicists who prefer Nemesis with her third eye over a blindfolded woman holding a scale and a sword say that you have to have the experience of oppression in order to see it, you need an experiential base. This is why Liberation theologians prefer the word solidarity to salvation, only by engaging in the struggle of the oppressed can we honestly share their perspective, can we see what they see.

Anyone who heard Barack Obama two weeks ago regardless of their political persuasion could not help but acknowledge the authority with which he spoke, his gift for connecting with the people young and old. In reflecting on the significance of the event, the turnout of over 2,000 Vermonters and the enthusiastic reception, I remembered a similar gathering in Patrick Gym two years ago when Archbishop Desmond Tutu came to speak. It seems that both men share the perspective of a third eye as did Martin Luther King and Gandhi. We hear in their words the heart of justice and our own hearts are quickened and filled with hope.

The kind of hope Augustine of Hippo, an African bishop spoke about in the fourth

century when he said: “Hope has two lovely daughters. They are anger and courage. Anger that things are not what they ought to be, courage to make them what they might be.”

Barack Obama stirred his audience, by recalling the words of Martin Luther King: “The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.” He encouraged us to put our hand on that arc saying how each of us is needed to help bend it toward justice. I’m grateful to be part of a community that resonates with these words. I’m grateful this morning to have with us the co-chair of our Social Action Ministry, someone who challenges us to keep our hand on the moral arc, our shoulder to the plow, and someone from whom our Social Action Ministry receives sustenance for our minds and hearts.