

Back to School: Doing Justice, Loving Kindness, Being UU – Sept. 2, 2012

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by David Green

I'm glad to say we have a number of teachers among us, members of our Fellowship who are professional educators. Last Sunday I thought it was worth noticing that in both the 9 and 11 o'clock services, during the time of sharing joys and concerns, some of our teacher-members came forward to light candles. They did so because this past week was the beginning of a new school year, and as teachers do, they spend quite a bit of time and effort preparing lesson plans and getting ready for the arrival of the new students, the start of the new fall semester and all that entails.

One teacher lit a candle but said he was leaving it open to interpretation as far as whether the start of the school year was a joy or a concern. It was really both!

On my own journey, education has mostly been a joy, mainly because I've been lucky enough to have some wonderful teachers. One was a Hebrew professor in seminary, who helped open my eyes to the very idea that something like the Old Testament had any kind of relevance at all for me or any modern person. Maybe I was jaded, but for me, the Old Testament, and particularly the prophets whose writings make up a very big chunk of it, was largely irrelevant.

What did I care about some old guy with a long beard claiming to speak for an angry and vengeful God, making furious proclamations and scary predictions several thousand years ago? My image of a prophet looked a lot like one of those modern bedraggled street preachers who holler and wave thick Bibles in the air at innocent passers-by, claiming doom and destruction and the end of the world at any moment.

But then, I actually read some Hebrew prophecy. While there are prophets who do tend to get a little melodramatic from time to time, I learned several things. Not all prophets are the same, not by a long shot, and most, when you read them in the context of their time and place, were serving a very useful purpose for their contemporaries.

Our popular bias may be they spent a lot of energy predicting future events, but it's more accurate to say they were using creative imagery and metaphor to teach; to teach about events in their own time, and in particular, to point out things like economic and social injustice, religious hypocrisy and corruption, prejudice, and calling people in positions of power to accountability.

In that sense, most Hebrew prophets were naming aspects of the human condition we're still dealing with today. Much of what they proclaimed is quite relevant. In fact, it's not a stretch at all to claim – as crazy as it may sound – that the Principles you and I follow as Unitarian Universalists can be found again and again throughout Hebrew prophecy.

Let's take just a moment to review those principles; it's important to revisit and affirm our shared values every so often.

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- justice equality, and compassion in human relations;

- acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- a free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregation and society at large;
- the goal of a world community with peace, justice, and liberty for all;
- respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we're all a part.

One of the best examples of an Old Testament prophet who taught an ancient version of the seven UU Principles was named Micah. Micah lived during the Eighth century B.C., in Judah. This was a time when Israel was actually divided into two distinct kingdoms; the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. These kingdoms shared a common religion and ethnicity, more or less, but had split over political turf battles. They weren't exactly direct enemies, but they didn't shed any tears when the other kingdom might get invaded by the likes of the Egyptians or the Assyrians. One kingdom would make an alliance with the enemy of the other kingdom in an effort to gain power and influence over their northern or southern cousins, as the case might be.

The political and religious leaders of each kingdom accused the other of being heretics and other high crimes and misdemeanors. It's not a perfect analogy because the specific issues were different, but it resembled the split that occurred in 19th-century America between northern and southern states that led to the Civil War.

For the average person on the street, on either side of the divide, this was a pretty stressful state of affairs. Rulers and religious leaders on both sides – and we have to remember in those days there was not the concept of separation of church and state – but these leaders regularly abused their power in order to stay in power. They were in league with the very wealthy, who had an economic interest in having people in power whose policies would make them even wealthier. If they'd only had the foresight to form super-pacs to fund elections, they would have jumped at the chance.

Whenever there's a system in place like that, where a small percentage of the very wealthy control public policy, and even when they do so claiming that their economic advantage will be a good thing for everyone on down the line, the truth is more often that the rich simply get richer while the poor get poorer.

It's a system of injustice, where the good things that could be shared are jealously guarded and walls are built to prevent anyone but the elite even the opportunity to share in the wealth. To any unbiased observer, it's a system of greed. In a world where there's actually plenty to go around, those in power may insist that their wealth is helping others, while in the same breath they're doing all they can to enrich themselves at other's expense.

Micah was one of those lonely and brave voices who could see straight through that line of baloney, because he lived and worked with people who suffered, who starved, who fought and died in unnecessary wars to maintain that unjust way of life. A way of life that ran counter to the principles of respecting the inherent dignity and worth of every person. A way of life that denied justice, equality, and compassion in human relations. A system that flew in the face of true peace, justice, and liberty.

It's impossible to know if Micah had any legal training in a modern sense, but the format of his writings reads like a lawsuit against the powers that be. No doubt, the most striking statement he makes is to the religious leaders who were participating in this system and also enriching themselves.

As religious authorities, they were careful to make pious shows of their faith. They sacrificed animals, made offerings in grand public displays, prayed loudly, and claimed they were holier than thou by following the letter of the law. They were what today we might call fundamentalists. At least those fundamentalists who make a lot of noise and expend a lot of energy demonstrating that they are faithfully doing God's will, while using that convenient excuse to sidestep living in ways that promote peace, justice, and right human relationships.

So, what does Micah say about this (and I might add, at the risk of his own life)? In chapter 6, verse 8, he poses the question, "What does the Lord (really) require of you? Here's what: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." That's it. In other words, the God you claim to follow could care less about all your sacrifices and prayers and pronouncements, if people are going hungry, if the rich just keep getting richer, and if you wage wars of profit and conquest at the expense of innocent human life. Micah 6:8 is justifiably one of the best known passages in the entire Bible, at least among those who find themselves, like Micah and his community did all those centuries ago, suffering at the hands of injustice, cruelty, and inequality.

Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking in humility has been quoted by the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Desmond Tutu. By the way, the Hebrew word for kindness – *Hesed* – can also be translated as mercy. But any way it's translated, it resonates in powerful ways whenever it's high time to call people in positions of power to accountability. And it's echoed – I believe quite clearly – in our own Unitarian Universalist Principles.

After all, our very first UU Principle compels us to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. For me, that means we do that regardless of another person's faith, or where they're from, or who they love, or how they're made. We're not superior to anyone, but respect the value of everyone. That's humility.

So let me suggest that we take on for ourselves a way of living where we intentionally do justice, love mercy, and walk in humility as Unitarian Universalists. But let's not pretend that living that way is always easy. It's one thing to read about injustice, and quite another to actually speak out against it. It's one thing to love kindness and mercy, and quite another to make that real in our personal relationships and also demand it of people in positions of power and influence. It sounds nice to say we're humble, that we love and care for all people, but sometimes that means we have to take a stand on the side of love.

Any time you or me or our congregation is bold enough to act in ways that reflect those values, we need to be clear that's not always going to make us popular. But are we about being in a popularity contest? Or are we about doing the right thing?

Sometimes, doing the right thing might take the form of speaking out in a public forum, writing letters to the editor, sponsoring or participating in events that highlight injustice, and that seek mercy and understanding; putting ourselves out there in ways that demonstrate our values. But just as importantly is how we live out our values in

personal, seemingly small but significant ways. In our everyday living, within our families, in our neighborhoods, at work or school, in our daily interactions with others.

Some of you know Ellen's daughter and mine, Natalie. Natalie is quite small of stature, standing only four feet-two, but quite large in personality. She now lives in the biggest of places, New York City, which is only fitting for someone of her drive and determination. She lives life large.

Natalie was born with a form of dwarfism, that was complicated with other significant physical issues. When she was ten, she underwent surgery to correct a condition called Legg Perthes, which caused her femur to die, and break in two places, and her hip joint to disintegrate. While recovering she had to wear a full body cast for eight weeks, and learn how to walk all over again. Following her surgery, Natalie had a noticeable limp, and simply walking could be painful. She returned to school – 4th grade – where even at that tender age any child is quite conscious of their appearance and ability to fit in, to be accepted, to simply be considered “normal.” Natalie, who weighed all of 30 pounds, was required to carry – like every other student – a backpack. A heavy backpack.

With her limp and the weight of her backpack, Ellen suggested a solution: a rolling backpack on wheels, much like the carry-on luggage that's so common today. These rolling backpacks – even then – were expensive, \$50, but it seemed a reasonable alternative to Natalie having to struggle so much. But Natalie refused. Her limp and her stature already made her stand out enough as it was; having an unconventional accessory like a rolling bag – which no one else at school used – would only make her stand out more.

At school, one of Natalie's friends, Blake, was the acknowledged “leader of the pack,” the trend-setter among female ten-year-olds. One evening, Ellen mentioned to Blake's mother how she wished Natalie would consent to a rolling backpack but would not, because of the stigma she feared. As it happened, unknown to Ellen or Blake's mother, Blake overheard their conversation.

After Ellen left, Blake went to her mother and asked that she take her to buy a rolling backpack that very night. They did. They didn't tell Natalie, but they also proceeded to call at least a dozen other girls and their parents – swearing them to secrecy – who then went out and purchased rolling backpacks. Over the next three or four days, more and more ten-year-old girls showed up at school with rolling backpacks in tow, loudly proclaiming how cool their new accessory was.

The old-style, shoulder-carried backpacks were “out.” Rolling backpacks were suddenly, mysteriously “in,” and given that social reality, Natalie then naturally acquired one. Her friends never did tell Natalie the secret – she only found out years later after graduating from high school. Blake and her other friends never spoke a word.

They merely did justice, loved kindness, and walked humbly – pulling rolling backpacks. They were ten-year-old prophets.

To follow Micah's lead, we have to be prophets of a sort. As a congregation, and as individuals, if we follow our Principles – if we say we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly – then we have the obligation to walk that talk.

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