

JUSTICE SUNDAY

A Service led by Barbara W. ten Hove
March 26, 2006 — Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD

CALL TO WORSHIP

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee has designated today as Justice Sunday. They have asked clergy and congregations to take time to reflect seriously on economic justice. I was so pleased when our Social Action Committee agreed to take up this issue and provide opportunities today for education, fundraising and advocacy around this important issue. I hope you will look over the handout in today's bulletin and stay after the service to learn more.

I also hope you will consider becoming a part of our congregation's social action ministry. On Saturday, April 8, the Social Action Committee will host a retreat. We plan to talk about various issues, including what theme we might choose to focus on next year, how to promote more involvement in justice issues at Paint Branch, and the best way to use our resources to help our neighbors in the county, state, nation and world. I hope many of you will come on April 8.

I am also delighted that we have Mosi Harrington, director of HIP—the nearby Housing Initiative Partnership—with us today. She is an inspiration, and the work she and HIP are doing in our community is amazing. I'm glad you'll get a chance to hear from her a bit later this morning.

For now, I invite you to move into worship with me as we acknowledge the power that is among us in this room today. As we gather here, let us celebrate that power, and the mystery at the heart of it all. Let us sing to bring the spirit of love, hope and justice into this room as we worship together. (#389: Gathered Here)

READING from *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*
by Barbara Ehrenreich

INTRO: About five years ago, Barbara Ehrenreich went under cover (as it were) to research a book on the working poor in America. Ehrenreich, a well-known author living a generally upper middle class life in Florida, left that behind to see if she could survive on the low-paying jobs so many men and even more women do in our nation. She went to three different states and took a number of different jobs. And she learned a lot, most of which she shares in her riveting best seller, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*.

In the chapter called "Scrubbing in Maine," she tells of the time she spent in that state working two jobs—as a maid for a cleaning services agency, and as an assistant at an Alzheimer's unit in a nursing home on the weekends. She lives first in a motel and then in a

trailer park. She barely has enough money to cover expenses and, unlike many of her co-workers, she is not supporting an aging parent or kids on her meager wages.

These words come from the end of the chapter on her Maine experiences, where she reflects on how it feels to view the world from the bottom of the heap.

Low wage work ...has the effect of making you feel like a pariah. When I watch TV...I see a world in which almost everyone makes \$15 an hour or more...so it's easy for a fast food worker or nurse's aide to think she is an anomaly—the only one or almost the only one, who hasn't been invited to the party. And in a sense she would be right: the poor have disappeared from the culture at large, from its political rhetoric and intellectual endeavors as well as from its entertainment. Even religion seems to have little to say about the plight of the poor...the money lenders have finally gotten Jesus out of the temple.”

Ehrenreich, though not ostensibly religious, decides to attend a tent revival one evening while in Maine. She hears the preachers rant about being saved but what she really wants to hear is this:

“It would be nice if someone would read this sad-eyed crowd the Sermon on the Mount, accompanied by a rousing commentary on income inequality and a need for a hike in the minimum wage. But Jesus makes his appearance here only as a corpse; the living man, the wine-guzzling vagrant and precocious socialist, is never once mentioned, nor anything he had to say.”

At the end of each of her sojourns into the low wage life, Barbara Ehrenreich tells her co-workers (some of whom became friends) who she is and why she has worked among them. Once ‘out’ she asks them a question she’d been longing to ask. How do you feel about all these people who demand so much from you and have so much more than you? One answer she received is both beautiful and heartbreaking.

“ I don't mind really, because I guess I am a simple person. And I don't want what they have. I mean, it's nothing to me. But what I would like is to be able to take a day off now and then...if I had to...and still be able to buy groceries that week.”

Some words from the last page in her book will end our reading this morning.

“When someone works for less pay than she can live on—when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply...then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health and her life. To be a part of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor to everyone else.”

SERMON: JUSTICE SUNDAY Barbara ten Hove

My mother was born in 1927, just before the Great Depression devastated our nation. She, like so many of that generation, grew up poor. My grandfather was a grocer who worked hard to support his family. That he *did* work throughout the Depression is a point of pride to my mother. So many people did not. Those were hard times.

You can't look at pictures from that era without seeing the despair that poverty and hopelessness brought to people struggling to survive. I remember learning about Franklin Roosevelt's speech where he said, "One third of [our] nation is ill-clothed, ill-fed, and ill-housed." One third of our nation—that's an incredible number.

The Great Depression ended with the beginning of the Second World War. Since then, there have been hard financial times, but most economists will tell you that it's never been that bad since. As a nation, at least on the surface, we appear to be how most of the world views us—well-clothed, well-fed and well-housed.

But dig a little deeper and you will see a harsher reality. We live in hard times which, for many people, are just getting worse. The most obvious sign of this is the enormous gap between the rich and the poor, a gap that was much smaller when my grandparents were struggling to make a living during the Depression. You all have probably heard the statistics but it doesn't take numbers to prove this point. Just look at all the luxury items advertised in magazines or on TV. Who can afford to buy these things but the rich?

And what about the poor? We don't see much advertising aimed at them! The poor, as Barbara Ehrenreich described in the reading, seem to have disappeared. This is particularly true of the working poor. The truly destitute we see begging on street corners. But the working poor—the people who do the important but low-paying jobs that fuel our society—are rarely noticed. Many of us who buy a soda at McDonalds or have our house cleaned by Merry Maids or shop at Wal-Mart seldom stop to think what the nice (or surly or tired) clerk brings home in her paycheck each week.

We live in a country where the minimum wage can barely support one person, much less a family. It is astonishing to me that so many people in our wealthy nation are unable to work hard enough to move out of poverty. Two jobs, even three, and they are still poor. It is a national disgrace. It is also a moral failing. And as religious people, we should be deeply concerned.

In his book, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, journalist and academic David Shipler writes that there are two prevailing myths about the poor in America. One “supposes that any individual from the humblest origins can climb to well-being” [p.5]. This myth is popular primarily (though certainly not only) with conservatives in our country. They love to point to people like Colin Powell, who made it in spite of long odds.

But there is also another myth, “which holds society largely responsible for ...poverty” [p.6]. This myth is popular primarily (though not only) with liberals. Liberals are quick to support any government program they believe benefits the poor.

Both of these myths have truth in them. Our nation does provide some opportunities for people to rise above adversity and poverty. And there are many government programs that have helped the poor enormously, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit or Medicaid.

But these myths also can be misleading. One is quick to blame poor people for their own problems. The other myth too often leads its proponents to expect that a government program will solve all the problems of the poor.

David Shipler sums this up effectively when he writes, “Each person’s life is the mixed product of bad choices and bad fortune, of roads not taken and roads cut off by accident of birth or circumstance” [p.6].

Whatever the reason, we are at a point in our history as a nation when the blight of poverty impacts more and more people. And there are fewer and fewer opportunities to rise above it. Unless something changes, our nation may become irrevocably broken. The gap between rich and poor may become a chasm, and even those of us who, at this moment, are comfortable may find ourselves falling in.

In times like this, it is appropriate to turn to faith—our Unitarian Universalist faith. What can it teach us about economic justice?

Let me suggest first that we seek to understand what the phrase “economic justice” means. In 2000, the UU General Assembly produced a Statement of Conscience that gives us a good three-part definition.

An economically just society is one in which

1) government and private institutions promote the common economic good and are held accountable;

- 2) *all people have equal opportunity to care for themselves and their families; and*
- 3) *individuals take responsibility for the effects of their actions on their own and others' lives.*

I find this statement powerful because it recognizes and addresses David Shipler's two myths. It also gives us a sense of direction for how we might work to make our nation more economically just. Let's unpack it a little.

An economically just society is one in which government and private institutions promote the common economic good and are held accountable.

Here at Paint Branch, we have many members and friends who work for the government. At least some of you are in positions where the work you do can make a real difference in the lives of people in our nation. You can, in your workplace, advocate for programs that help people on the lower end of our economy. The government, despite its imperfections, has often been a place where real social change can begin. Look at how the military's decision to de-segregate in the 1950s impacted the Civil Rights movement, as just one example.

And there is another idea worth considering that can be advocated for within the government and in corporate America. It's called "The Triple Bottom Line." This concept [see John Elkington's book, *Cannibals with Forks*] advocates an approach to the workplace that takes into account not only the familiar bottom line (profitability) but also two others: sustainability and justice. If the government and corporations looked at all *three* of these "bottom lines" they would not only care about how much money they are making, but also how what they are doing impacts the environment (sustainability) and how their workers are treated (justice).

There are companies in Europe, for example, who recognize that the packaging they put their products in has to go somewhere—like into already packed landfills. So they have made an effort to create containers that are compact and biodegradable. Think about that when you go into an American store. Something I buy regularly from the drugstore not only comes in a bottle twice the necessary size, but it is also wrapped up in a sheet of cardboard that makes the package even bigger. Whoever makes it is certainly not looking at the triple bottom line.

I am no economist, but this seems like a no-brainer to me. I am a professional religious person, however, and I see this through that lens. Since the Triple Bottom Line clearly takes into account our belief in human dignity and the interconnectedness of all life, it seems like the religious way to go.

All right, let's look at the second part of economic justice according to the UU Statement of Conscience, that...

...all people have equal opportunity to care for themselves and their families.

Equal opportunity can mean lots of things. It can apply to housing and education, as well as the workplace. I have learned from my reading on this subject that housing is probably the most challenging issue facing the working poor today. Housing prices in our area have gone sky-high. While those of us lucky enough to own a home are generally happy to see them rise in value, for the working poor, this has been devastating.

There is no way that a person making the minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour can afford to live in decent housing. Is it no wonder apartments are crowded with six to eight people living in a place designed for two? Is it no wonder that people commute two hours by bus to work in places they can't afford to live? Is it no wonder that people work two and sometimes three or four jobs simply to afford a house for their family?

This is a justice issue. And housing is one area where we can make a difference. I am inspired by people like our guest, Mosi Harrington, who, along with other organizations like the UU Affordable Housing Corporation (UUAHC) are working to make sure all people have access to housing that is not only inexpensive but also safe and attractive. I am glad we can, with our dollars today, help HIP. And I am proud that Paint Branch invested a large chunk of a recent bequest with the UUAHC.

I also encourage us to do what we can to advocate for a true living wage. The minimum wage is outrageously low. It is in no way a living wage. I urge all of us here to think hard about how important it is for us to buy cheap goods and eat cheap food. Is access to such goods worth the labor of so many of the working poor? I don't think it is.

I admit that my appetite for fast food and off-price shopping has decreased a lot this week as I learned what it means to the people who work these jobs. And my energy to make a difference by advocating for a living wage has increased. I hope we can work together to bring this much-needed change to our nation and to our state.

Finally, economic justice means that...

...individuals take responsibility for the effects of their actions on their own and others' lives.

It is easy, and yes, even appropriate for us to see this through the eyes of The Working Poor. As David Shipler notes in his book of that title, sometimes folks make bad decisions that put them in this category. Certainly there are those who have a lot of advantages yet who squander such things as a good education or strong family ties by making poor choices.

But taking responsibility for our actions does not only apply to the working poor. Those of us who are middle class or better also need to take responsibility for what we do that does or does not promote justice. Our shopping and eating habits are just one obvious example. But there is more to it than that.

David Shipler notes that Americans, rich and poor, are “surrounded by constant advertising from television sets that are almost always turned on, [thus] many Americans acquire wants that turn into needs” [p.7]. He also suggests that “being poor in a rich country may be more difficult to endure than being poor in a poor country, for the skills of surviving in poverty have largely been lost in America” [p.9].

Greed has become acceptable in all walks of life. Can we influence our nation to move away from rampant materialism? I would like to think we could. It won't be easy. It means making different choices and walking a different road. But the path toward a more economically just nation and world begins in each of our back yards.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee encourages us to do our part to create a just economic society. There are lots of ways we can work for economic justice. We can listen to those who are struggling and invite their presence and energy into this work. We can make informed decisions about what we buy and where we buy it. We can advocate for a living wage at both the state and federal levels. And I am sure there is more.

But let me leave you with this. Our 19th century religious forebear, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, once said (and Martin Luther King Jr. was fond of this quote), “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Part of our religious job is to believe in each other enough to trust that justice is attainable. As the radical Catholic Dorothy Day once wrote, “no one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is too much work to do.”

Let's do that work. So one day, we'll be able to sing this next hymn and know that the vision it imagines is finally a reality. [#121: *We'll Build a Land*]