

A Mission of Justice

Lynne Garner
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UUs of Coastal Georgia
Brunswick, Georgia

One of my first memories that things were not always fair in this world came on one of the many Sunday afternoon drives I took with my parents and my brother. Often, we would go and look at houses, but this day was different. On this bright, sunny day, we drove through the hills south of Syracuse and through what was known at the time as the Onondaga Indian Reservation. What I saw through the window of our old Chrysler would change my life. People were living in houses that looked like they were barely standing, with patches on the walls. There were abandoned cars and other litter in the yards and fields. I asked my parents why those houses were in such bad shape, and was told that a lot of people don't like Indians, and that they had been picked on and often driven from their land since the white people showed up a long time ago. I think that it was later, when I was watching yet another John Wayne movie on TV with my grandfather--you know, with the cavalry chasing the Indians-- that I started to put the two images together. These John Wayne Indians didn't look anything like the ones I had seen in the yards next to the dilapidated houses. The Indians I saw looked a lot like me, except that some had long hair, and their clothes were not as nice. Years later, at Syracuse University, I was able to study with Onondaga chief Lloyd Elm, who told us that the only Indian he had ever met had been from Bombay, so I learned that Indians weren't really Indians, either. I also learned from Chief Elm that the Onondagas were a proud people who, even though extremely poor, refused offers for federal housing, and if they were lucky enough to be able to afford it, traveled abroad

on Onondaga passports because they are considered a sovereign nation. Since then, I have met many native people, both when teaching with the Navajos in Arizona and attending events at the American Indian Center in Chicago, and in recent years, it seems that some people use “Indian” and some “Native American.” Whatever the terminology for these first people of the Americas, they remain the most impoverished people in our country, with staggering rates of unemployment, alcoholism, and diabetes that would make Detroit look like a resort town.

On another day when I was young, my parents took us to a nearby sub-division in the same suburb where we lived, and drove by a house much like ours where the owners had put up an ugly industrial fence. My brother and I were told that a Negro family had moved in next door, and the white homeowners had put up the fence so they didn’t have to see them. This drive had been an intentional lesson, and we were told that this was not right. I had already learned when I was very young that there was something different about black people, but I didn’t really understand what it was at the time. We had been driving to Sears, which at the time was in a mostly African American neighborhood, and there were kids running around outside playing. This was, I think, the first time that I had ever seen black kids, since there were none in my neighborhood. Many of the little girls had multiple ribbons in their hair. This was amazing to me, a kid with slippery hair who invariably would come home from playing outside, having lost a ribbon from my hair. The only way that my hair would keep a lot of braids would have been to use Crazy Glue, and that hadn’t been invented yet. I yelled in amazement, “Look at those kids!” to which my mother snapped, “Don’t say that. They’re just like you.” Well I didn’t understand that at all. They were not just like me. My hair wouldn’t do what theirs did. Nevertheless, I guessed that there was more to this than I was comprehending, and I filed the incident away in my memory until many years later. When I asked my mother about it, she didn’t even remember.

By then, I realized that she was reacting out of the assumption that to be different in some way was not considered a good thing in the dominant society.

When I was in seminary, the most life-changing course I took was a tour of Civil Rights sites in the South led by a Unitarian Universalist minister and his wife. I had not thought seriously about doing ministry down here, partly because I was a Northerner, but also because I guess I didn't think that I wanted to deal with intolerant people on a large scale. I'm not sure *what* I was thinking, since as I have related to you, I had already seen many instances of northern intolerance and bigotry.

When we arrived in the Mississippi Delta, after having visited the Lorraine Motel in Memphis where Martin Luther King had been killed and the adjacent Civil Rights Memorial museum, I got my first glimpse of a shotgun house. And just as I had many years before when as a child I had ridden through the Onondaga Nation, I found myself observing the face of poverty from a comfortable vehicle, like an intruder on someone else's pain. This time, however, I had studied history, and not just the stuff I learned in school. I knew that my ancestors and I had benefited directly from the pain of these people's ancestors. I felt an overwhelming sadness that forty years after King had died people still lived this way in America.

The terminology has changed. Most people today act like they have more respect for others by using the terms "Native American" and "African American" instead of "Indian" or "colored" or worse. Yet whatever name you put on a people, their suffering is still the same. Sure, things are much better now than they were when I was a kid growing up in the fifties and sixties. Not just ethnic minorities, but also women and children have more legal protection. It's no longer OK to beat your wife or your child. Yet in the schools I have seen in Chicago a great

disparity remains, and in the streets I drove as a Chicago Transit Authority bus operator, that disparity often spilled over into rage.

On the South Side of Chicago, in one of its poorest African American neighborhoods, there is a Catholic church that calls itself the Faith Community of St. Sabina. For over thirty years, the church has been served by the Rev. Michael Pflieger, an activist priest who has lobbied for gun control, against the sale of drug paraphernalia, and for other human rights causes, both in Chicago and in the wider world. A recent biography of him called him a “radical disciple.” Just a couple of days ago, Father Pflieger, a white man who grew up in a white segregated neighborhood in Chicago, was reinstated after being suspended from the ministry of his parish. The cardinal ordered another priest to move in and conduct masses. Normally priests rotate to new parishes every few years, and the issue of moving Father Pflieger has come up before. Each time, his parishioners have risen up in protest. Now Father Pflieger has *frequently* thumbed his nose at the cardinal, who is from the old school, and who probably doesn’t like it that this parish priest gets more press than he does. Pflieger is good friends with African American scholar and writer Cornel West, who visits St. Sabina’s at least once a year, and he has regularly hosted speakers such as singer and human rights activist Harry Belafonte and Paul Rusesabagina, the real hero of the Hotel Rwanda movie, whose brave actions saved hundreds of lives during the Rwandan Civil War. I consider Michael Pflieger to be a prophet, unafraid to speak the truth to power, no matter the personal consequences to himself. When he arrived at St. Sabina’s as a young priest, there was a handful of members remaining. He has grown the church to two thousand. I have visited St. Sabina’s two or three times a year, even though the second mass often lasts three hours, and though I don’t share his theology, I do share Pflieger’s vision of a

theology of liberation. His has been a force for social change, and he has used his pulpit not to calm the masses, but to preach a gospel of empowerment and love.

The people in this congregation want to make a difference. You are lucky that you don't have a cardinal looking over your shoulder checking for breaches of church policy. You can follow your mission of social change wherever it takes you. And the larger the congregation's numbers, the more difference you can make.

There are shotgun houses right here in Brunswick. I saw them on my last trip here. There are people in pain, and a jail right downtown. Just as with the other shotgun houses in Mississippi and houses at the Onondaga Nation, I saw them from the safety and comfort of a motor vehicle.

If you call me to be your minister, I am here to make a difference in this community. I am getting off the bus, and I hope you will join me. I will do what I can to make connections with other churches in the city, to see how we can work together on issues of common ground. I will join the local chapter of the NAACP. I speak Spanish, and as needed, will try to make connections with any Latinos in the community. The 2012 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, to take place in Phoenix, will be focused primarily on immigration rights, and has been changed to a social justice assembly. I can envision some of us going there to take a stand as a congregation.

I envision also the congregation's starting a scholarship fund for local high school seniors. My church in Chicago started one over thirty years ago, and this year will give out 16 scholarships of \$500 each, with the possibility of students receiving another check for the second semester. As with many worthwhile endeavors, this one started out small, but now also receives donations from churches in the suburbs, both UU and non-UU. It's not a lot of money, but meant

to be a help with books and supplies, and also to let students know that people in the community care about them.

Another idea that would take a lot of work and even more money, but that could foster cooperation among local churches, is a medical bus that would go out at night to different specific sites in the city, depending on the night, administering basic first aid, doing HIV/AIDS testing, and providing a stand-up meal for those who come. This is not my idea, but is done in Chicago with an organization called the Night Ministry. It is not something that we could likely do immediately, but it could be a worthwhile project to plan for in the future. Several denominations participate in the Night Ministry, and perhaps that could happen here, too.

Small congregations are ideally suited for one-on-one tutoring programs, since you are only limited by the number of volunteers. Such a program may already exist in Brunswick, but I present it simply as an idea, and one possible cog in the mission of the congregation.

No doubt there are local issues that I haven't yet learned about, and I look forward to your telling me about them so we can plan some meaningful actions. The fact that this congregation already has a social justice Sunday tells me that you are eager to be more active, and have many ideas that you would like to implement further.

As I did last week, I want to emphasize the importance of working as a whole congregation, not just as adults. I would want to get children and youth involved in many social justice activities. *They* may even have ideas about what issues we should get involved with. I have focused here today on issues of poverty, but I know the congregation is working through the Welcoming Congregation curriculum in order to be more wisely inclusive of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community members. Social justice can mean environmental issues or issues of foreign policy. There are many issues, and a limited number of us, so it's important to

be very discerning and selective about what projects we could be most effective in starting or participating in.

You should also know, if you call me as your minister, that I will speak out on issues of injustice as I see them from the pulpit. This most likely will mean that you won't always agree with everything I say. Unitarians and Universalists have a longstanding tradition of freedom of the pulpit, and while I don't claim to be as effective as Father Pfleger, I would feel it a part of my duty as your minister to use the pulpit as a prophetic voice when necessary. I will try to temper this with the sensitivity and realization that to be too strident can be counterproductive, and rather than gain members, drive people away and take support away from the cause. Nevertheless, I do my homework, and I am not shy. This is part of what you pay me for.

Finally, if you call me as your minister, I will be your pastor. I will be there to hold your hand and sit with you in times of illness and sorrow, and I will be there to celebrate your joys.

Let us go forth, then, you and I, in ministry together. Together we can do great things and work toward a larger Beloved Community.