

The Hard Path of Social Justice

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September 25, 2011
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The tenth chapter of Isaiah, verses one through four, reads: “Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth, so as not to crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain?”

Many of you sitting here this morning will wonder why I am quoting from the words of an angry God, a God, that may or may not be part of your theology, angry or not. Well, I am here to tell you that I take these words literally—not necessarily that God looked down from the clouds and spoke to the wayward people, but rather the prediction of doom if the wealth is not shared and those of us who have the most do not help those most in need. There will indeed be a judgment day, when the greed of our power grids exhausts the resources of the earth, when the environmental degradation is too severe to reverse in time to save our very species, not to mention the other species that share our planet. And before that, I believe, those often

termed the least among us will rise up and take some of what has long been denied them. I believe that this includes, in our day, not just the impoverished, but those whose ethnicity, religion, political preference, or sexual orientation often makes them the subject of discrimination or worse. I believe that all these things shall come to pass if those of us who believe in equity and compassion do not do as much as we can do.

Whooh! Welcome to the church of peace and love, where all things are possible, and the guest minister is going off the deep end.

I hope I'm not.

I am preaching to you today about risks. The topic came up a couple of weeks ago when some of the members of my congregation in Brunswick were speaking about the Welcoming Congregation curriculum about GLBTQ people at the beginning of the social justice team meeting, and I inquired as to what publicity had been used to advertise some of our Welcoming Congregation programs. A few people expressed real fear of advertising some of the programs in the local media, and preferred to use less potentially risky means such as word of mouth to let people know what we are doing. I asked if there were a gay pride parade in Brunswick, and was told that even the King Day parade was controversial. I posed the question, "Do you think it may be time for the church to come out? In other words, I

was thinking that what we have to offer should be advertised as well as possible for the maximum coverage. Now the people in the room that day represented some of the movers and shakers of the Unitarian Universalists of Coastal Georgia, those most likely to be active in social justice.

Nevertheless, the tragic shooting at the Tennessee Valley UU Congregation three years ago was brought up as an example of what could go wrong if the wrong people heard what we were about. The fears were real, and the people were right to be concerned. No one wants to worry about one's personal safety, especially when attending church in a room commonly known as the sanctuary, and certainly, no one wants to bring their children to somewhere they perceive as unsafe. Perhaps your concerns here in Savannah are not as great. Nevertheless, I believe that every congregation needs to be mindful of these

What, then, do we do? Do we proceed cautiously, letting information out through mutual friends and other channels perceived as safe? Do we lessen our risk that someone with hatred in their hearts will decide to act against us, and proceed with greater caution than gung-ho enthusiasm?

In the end, of course, these have to be very personal decisions. I read somewhere that following the news that civil rights workers Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Mickey Schwerner were missing, Robert

Moses, head of the Council of Federated Organization's Freedom Summer Project in 1964, gathered the young civil rights workers together. He told these young people, many of whom were white northerners, that they needed to decide whether they should stay or go home. He assured them that this was a personal decision, and that no one would think less of them if they left. Of course, as Robert Moses and the others had feared, Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner were later found murdered. Some of the young people had gone home, but many decided to take their chances.

While the decision to come to a church or to leave it is also personal, the decisions a congregation as a *whole* makes on controversial issues need to be carefully discerned. We are not just making a personal decision, but rather making one that will affect the entire body. We need to be very perceptive about what it is we're about, and why. Of course, it's important to keep safety in mind, but we should not make it our only means of discernment. Let me read you a few lines of note: "We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: The inherent worth and dignity of every person; Justice, equity 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 congregations and in society at large; The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” Most of you will recognize these as our first six principles—those through which we try to live our lives, and to which we can turn to help guide our paths. Of course, we are all independent thinkers, and for us, nothing is written in stone. Nevertheless, they seem to me to be a good model to guide us as we face difficult decisions.

I am a northerner by birth. I grew up in New York State and have spent over half my life in Chicago. I am new to the politics of southeast Georgia and I don’t pretend to have all of the answers. A couple of weeks ago, I finished reading *Praying for Sheetrock*. Many of you know that it is the story of the corrupt former sheriff of Darien County, south of Savannah, and the local African Americans and U.S. attorneys who tried to change the status quo that remained especially oppressive for African Americans, even a decade after the Civil Rights era. For those of you who read the book or lived the story, you know that change is not automatic and neat. Things don’t always turn out the way we would like them to, at least not in our time. Often, those who try to make change suffer severe consequences. I have been told that the politics in Glynn County, where Brunswick is located, have their own difficulties, of which I am learning more every day. I have

seen the local paper and I am reading bumper stickers with interest, and often alarm. The comments I make today are not to be taken as Gospel. They are just a part of my own discernment process that I offer up to you as an admitted newcomer.

I offer you up another piece of interest. This was sent to me and others last weekend by a member of my congregation, Mary Freeman. It was an article from the *Valdosta Daily Times* about their South Georgia Pride Parade, which took place September 17. The article begins this way, and I apologize in advance for the vulgar language: “In the early morning hours of May 2007, three men called Sean Kennedy over to their car. Kennedy was leaving a Greenville, S.C., bar. The men asked him for a cigarette. ‘Sean gave him a cigarette and was walking away,’ writes his mother, Elke Kennedy, ‘when the guy from the backseat got out of the car, came around the car, approached my son and called him ‘faggot.’ He punched him and Sean fell to the ground. Sean’s murderer got back into the car and left my son dying there.’” “Sean Kennedy was gay,” the article continues. “He died from the attack. His mother formed a group, Sean’s Last Wish. Elke Kennedy travels the nation sharing the experiences of losing a son to a hate crime. She tells a tale that seeks tolerance.” Sean Kennedy’s mother was the featured speaker at that South Georgia Pride festival last weekend, and the

city of Valdosta declared Saturday South Georgia Pride Day, and in so doing recognized that members of the LGBT community work in regional businesses, as well as contributing to the community through charitable, service, and religious organizations. The article says that Elke Kennedy ends all of her speeches this way, “No mother should ever have to bury her child. No mother should ever have to lose her child to hate and violence. No mother should ever have to fight for justice for her child.”

I have never been to Valdosta, and some of you, I hope, will enlighten me about how progressive that city is compared to Savannah or Brunswick. However, it is worth noting that not only was there a pride parade there, but the article received a prominent place in the paper. Also of note, and one of the main reasons I bring up the story, was that it also mentions that the Unitarian Universalist Church of Valdosta was to host the Valdosta Interfaith Pride Service, and it lists the time and the church’s address. Now this is, I think, tremendously good news, and aside from gay pride, worth not a small amount of UU pride. According to Mary Freeman, that congregation has gone through a process of reconciliation and fostering better understanding with the community following an incident a few years ago where a rock was thrown through one of their windows.

The Valdosta article made me wonder whether we are being unnecessarily fearful. I don't know. I have suggested that my congregation invite some of the members of the Valdosta congregation, or even Elke Kennedy, to speak to us about the pros and cons of various actions we might take. What I do know for sure, though, is that right now in my community, and here in Savannah, there are GLBT young people who are afraid to come out, to their parents, their neighbors, and their churches. There are GLBT adults who are afraid of losing their jobs or their children. How many of them are too afraid to make the connections that might allow them to learn about our welcoming congregations, something that might finally bring them to find refuge with us on Sunday morning, and give them hope of living openly as who they are?

I offer you yet another person's perspective. Because the shooting at the Knoxville church was brought up in my congregation as something that should be taken seriously, I decided to do just that. The Rev. Gordon Gibson was, on more than one occasion, the Minister in Residence at my seminary in Chicago. A southerner himself, he and his wife, Judy, led the civil rights tour class that I took back in the spring of 2008 to Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama. Gordon was minister at the UU congregation in Jackson, Mississippi during the Civil Rights era. That church knew what it meant to

live in fear, for it was one of the few openly integrated gathering places in town. When a new building was constructed, the entrance was indirect like the opening to a maze and the windows were at least ten feet from the floor, so that members would not be shot at when they came to worship.

Gordon and Judy retired to Knoxville, where they are members of the Tennessee Valley congregation. As fate would have it, they were present on that terrible morning when the gunman opened fire, but thankfully, they were not hurt. When I decided to preach on the subject of social action and fear, I thought that no one would be better at giving me advice than Gordon, so I wrote to him. He wrote back, and has given me permission to share his thoughts. He said, “Lynne,...I heartily support your instincts in this. The biggest mistake we regularly make is to hide our light under a bushel. Although letting it shine where it can be seen may bring out the occasional kook, it is far more likely to bring out the person who needs us. And it could even empower some of your clergy colleagues to take small steps themselves.

“The Sunday before the shooting here we had just unveiled a permanent sign outside the front door that told the story of what had happened here in 1950 or 1951. The congregation, just a year or two old, was meeting in a junior high school where it rented space on Sunday

mornings. There was a portable sign out front that gave our name and said, “Everyone welcome.” A man walked up and asked the greeter at the door, “Does that mean me?” The greeter said that it did. The visitor became the first Black member of the congregation. There was a downside in the short term: the church was kicked out of that meeting space fairly soon and began a period of meeting in different rented or borrowed spaces—which they referred to as ‘the wandering in the wilderness’ period. But at least from that time forward Knoxville knew that Unitarians (this was, of course, pre-merger [with the Universalists] were people with principles and backbone to live their principles.

“When the shooting occurred here in 2008,” Gordon continues, “the support from all over the community was fabulous and important. Lots of people knew that this congregation had stood up for other people and so they stood up for us. One of the most conservative big Protestant congregations catered lunches every day for several weeks as people came to TVUUC to offer or receive help, for example.

“This mirrors what I experienced serving our small congregation in Jackson, Mississippi. Incidentally, we were “out” with our acceptance of gay people in the 1980s,” says Gordon, who ends with a quote: “An un-lived faith is not worth voicing.”

Now my church building is out in plain sight on a busy road where everyone can see us. The windows here are large and probably easy for anyone to break. I had to drive through a county still known as Jeff Davis in order to get to Brunswick, and one of the ministers in town has told me that she does not attend the local ministers' group because she doesn't agree with their conservative focus on issues such as abortion. Here in Savannah, this building is in the heart of the city and easy for anyone to find. Our churches were normally not meant to be built as protective fortresses against hatred. Yet we do meet on Sundays as a protective community against hatred and bigotry, as a refuge for those who have nowhere else to turn. What if they don't know where we are?

So how do we proceed? You've heard my perspective. Now it's up to you, and you, and you. The first hymn in our hymnal reads, "May nothing evil cross this door...and, though these sheltering walls are thin, may they be strong to keep hate out and hold love in." When you shine a light on them, the cockroaches will scatter. Hatred thrives in the darkness.

Justice work is hard, it's frustrating, and it can be dangerous. It is also important, life-saving, and holy. We do indeed live in troubled times. Yet what times were not troubled for those whom society has judged unworthy of the spoils, unholy, depraved--whether because they were a woman, a

Palestinian, a Hindu, a transvestite, a Unitarian Universalist? I believe we need to be unequivocally *not* on the side of those who would write oppressive statutes, turn aside the needy from justice, and rob the poor of their right, to revisit the words of Isaiah. We need, sometimes, to take a bit of a risk. If you don't think I know enough about local politics, I hope you will consider the words of Elke Kennedy and Gordon Gibson. Both of them have been witness to terrible violence on the part of hateful people and yet, they still believe we must continue to do whatever we can to change the world.

This is, as I have said, both a personal choice and one we must make as individual congregations, one step at a time, with respect for a healthy difference of opinion. However, I believe that we **can** be alchemists, and turn hatred into love, one person at a time, as we shelter one person at a time.