

“Equity, Equality, and Wealth”

**Rev. Mary Gear**

**Delivered Sunday, February 28, 2021**

**Our first reading is offered by Senator Elizabeth Warren:**

There is nobody in this country who got rich on their own. Nobody.

You built a factory out there--good for you. But I want to be clear. You moved your goods to market on roads the rest of us paid for.

You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate.

You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for.

You didn't have to worry that marauding bands would come and seize everything at your factory...

Now look. You built a factory and it turned into something terrific or a great idea? God bless! Keep a big hunk of it.

But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.

**Our second reading is a quote from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from a speech originally titled “America’s Chief Moral Dilemma.” Dr. King writes:**

Now there are those who are trying to say...that the civil rights movement is dead. I submit to you that it is more alive today than ever before. What they fail to realize is that we are now in a transition period. We are moving into a new phase of the struggle.

The new phase is a struggle for genuine equality. It is not merely a struggle for decency now, it is not merely a struggle to get rid of the brutality of a Bull Connor and a Jim Clark. It is now a struggle for genuine equality on all levels, and this will be a much more difficult struggle. You see, the gains in the first period, or the first era of struggle, were obtained from the power structure at bargain rates; it didn't cost the nation anything to integrate lunch counters. It didn't cost the nation anything to integrate hotels and motels. It didn't cost the nation a penny to guarantee the right to vote. Now we are in a period

where it will cost the nation billions of dollars to get rid of poverty, to get rid of slums, to make quality integrated education a reality. This is where we are now.

**Sermon/Homily:**

My first job in state government was at the Community Service Office in Vancouver, Washington in the early 1990's. The CSO was commonly known as the welfare office, and in those days, people would come to the office to pick up their financial aid and food stamps in person.

I was hired to be the local social worker for a new program called First Steps, intended to help new parents transition to parenting while managing the requirements of receiving assistance and just life in general. As an aside, the state-wide coordinator in Olympia for the First Steps program back then was Diana Larsen-Mills. I never imagined that one day I would live in Olympia and serve Diana's congregation as the minister.

Down in Vancouver back then, my soon-to-be boss asked me to show up for a job interview on the first day of the month, the day that everyone came to the welfare office to get their benefits. When I arrived at 9 am it was packed with people, overflowing out into the parking lot, some who had been waiting since the office opened at 8 am, many with children in tow. I learned later that this request was strategic; my boss said that he'd specifically asked me to come on the first day of the month and if I didn't flee, he'd hire me. When I asked what he meant by that, he said that many are unwilling to work with people who live in poverty for many reasons, including that their stories are so hard to hear.

This began for me more than 20 years of working in government programs intended to help people living in poverty; new parents, people with disabilities, seniors and others in need of long-term care. The CSO in Vancouver was my first real life exposure to people living in poverty. While my family was working class, we always had enough and other family to draw on when things were tight. I hadn't known poverty or the challenges that

come from living in poverty.

Working in state systems over the years brought me face-to-face with the cultural beliefs we have about poverty and the poor, and challenged me to examine my own beliefs, those I was taught and those I developed over time. I experienced the “welfare reform” of the 1990’s which imposed time limits on assistance with the belief that everyone who is poor should be self-sufficient within a specified period of time, specified by those who have enough. Over the years, more restrictions were put in place by Congress based on a narrative of lazy welfare cheats, poor people who take advantage of the programs funded by the generosity of working people, and the belief that everyone has equal access to opportunity in our capitalist system, so should be able to support themselves and their families. Over time I learned that none of these things were true in the real lives of people who lived in poverty. And, I learned that this system was built on mistrust, set up to spend \$5 to ensure that not \$1 of assistance goes to anyone deemed “undeserving.”

Fast forward to this past year as we’ve faced a global pandemic which, for safety’s sake, required that we shut down many businesses creating the highest number of unemployed people since the Great Depression. Last year, 10 million jobs were lost and have not been recovered, and 400,000 businesses have closed for good.

If you pay attention to the narratives about the economic stimulus packages you hear these same themes emerging again: if we are too generous in unemployment benefits people will lose their will to work, people should have jobs that give them medical care, people are lazy and will take advantage. The reality is that the economic relief has mostly gone to people who needed it for food, shelter, and medical care, and those who could have shared their stimulus funds with others.

As we move through this pandemic, we are faced with a looming housing challenge as those who have been unable to pay mortgages and rent have been protected by moratoriums. Those without health insurance have been covered by federal and state

assistance. There is an economic disaster waiting that will require massive assistance to prevent even more suffering, especially by those already on the margins.

At the same time, last year saw the largest profits ever for tech giants, large corporations and Wall Street investors. Our nation has 659 billionaires, that's billion with a B, and over the past year, their fortunes have grown by more than \$1 trillion, that's a 1 followed by 12 zeros. This 1% of the 1% has amassed wealth that is double the wealth of the bottom 50% of all people in the US, creating the largest wealth gap since the 1920's.

[In December, the news reported that MacKenzie Scott, the ex-wife of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, had given away \$4.2 billion of her fortune in four months. Scott said that her motivation was that "This pandemic has been a wrecking ball in the lives of Americans already struggling. Economic losses and health outcomes alike have been worse for women, for people of color, and for people living in poverty. Meanwhile, it has substantially increased the wealth of billionaires." While I applaud her philanthropy, I noticed that neither Scott nor any news source questioned how one person could amass so much wealth.]

So why is a wealth gap a problem? Research shows that inequality is bad for everyone's health. Societies with big wealth gaps have more mental illness, obesity, shorter life expectancy, child mortality is higher and children do worse in school, and more people are imprisoned.

More importantly, the wealth gap highlights the fallacy of equality. Our economic, educational and social systems assume that everyone has the same access to opportunities, so anyone can become a millionaire, or a CEO, or a Wall Street Investor. The reality is that opportunity is not equitable and depends greatly on where you are born, who your parents are, where you are schooled, and the color of your skin.

As author Chuck Collins, a self-identified one percenter wrote, it's easy to hit a home

run when you are born on third base. Most of us are born on second, or first and way too many of us never even get a chance at bat. A belief in equality prevents us from acknowledging that moral and just solutions are based on a model of equity. Rather than assume that everyone needs the same—equality or what some call fairness, we must acknowledge that justice demands that some need more than others—equity rather than equality.

What I hear in this nation's narrative about poverty and wealth is a remnant of the Puritan colonizers of this land who, along with the Calvinists, believed in predestination, which meant that God chooses who God will save, creating the "elect" who will be blessed in this life. Being blessed is often interpreted as being comfortable, even wealthy. So, being poor is interpreted as not being chosen by God to be saved, not one of "the elect." Worthy only of charity based on the goodwill and generosity of those who have enough. This is a way that theology shows up in our culture and isn't even recognized as such, because that's just the way it is, right?

This Puritan/Calvinist theology was rejected by our Universalist ancestors who asserted that all souls would be saved by a loving God. They rejected the idea that some are more worthy or that anyone would be outside the loving embrace of God. This belief is reflected in the first of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles: the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

The second Unitarian Universalist principle says that we affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. This principle recognizes this important distinction between equality and equity. With these principles together, we assert that all are worthy and that equity should guide our human interactions.

Unitarian religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs taught that it matters what we believe. Even if we don't name it or recognize it as theology, what we believe informs our actions and our actions create our relationships, our culture, our laws and our society. It is this

spiritual grounding that leads many of us to work for justice, not only relief for the immediate needs of those who are suffering, but systemic change toward a society that acts as if all are worthy of housing, education, food, health care and safety. As civil rights attorney Bryan Stevenson says, the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice.

This month we have explored the spiritual theme of beloved community. I name poverty and the fallacy of equality as barriers to beloved community. [Rev. Victoria Safford reminds us that “The Beloved Community [is] not a goal or destination..., but instead a way of being - spiritually, politically, economically, emotionally, intellectually.”] It matters what we believe because what we believe can either help us build beloved community or it can prevent us from doing so.

Over the years as I have learned, grown and journeyed with people living in poverty, it was my faith community that helped me understand what I was experiencing, make meaning of it, explore and transform my beliefs, and work toward justice. At its best, our OUUC community offers a place where we each can integrate our life experience, deeply examine what we believe, grow and change, and work together toward justice. I invite you to consider what you believe today in the breakout rooms and in the weeks to come.

As we go forward, may we have the courage to discover and name our beliefs, individually and collectively. May we be bold enough to believe that all are worthy. May we bring justice, equity and compassion to all our relationships. May we come together to build a new way, in service to beloved community.

May this be so.