

Justice, Equity, and Compassion
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
UUMSB
November 7, 2021

Today in our series looking at the Unitarian Universalist Principles, we come to our Second Principle: Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. One way of seeing our Second Principle is as an outgrowth of our First, that if every person has inherent worth and dignity, then compassion, and work for equity and justice, are the call to protect that dignity in our relationships and in our human systems. Justice, equity, and compassion happen in relationship with other people, and in connection to the world. Part of the power of this principle is that justice, equity, and compassion in human relations is not a goal with a finish line, but is naming a practice of working toward these things.

Earlier this week a friend at work let folks know they were going through a tough time. When a colleague, who is from the South, heard about it, they shared that while they haven't been to church since they were a kid, they knew that casseroles needed to be delivered. Folks chipped in, I made a lasagna and scones and brought them over yesterday. On the ride home I was listening to an interview with Monica Lewinsky about her work on a recent documentary on public shaming. In the interview she talked about the power of compassion and kindness, saying, "You just can't know... When someone is drowning, a kind word, a smile, hey, I saw what happened, or I'm sorry, or hope you're doing okay... It really [matters]. That's easy for us to do."¹

In the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25, we hear a parable that is still so important today. Jesus names all the things that the righteous have done for him, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."² The assembled ask *when* they have done these things, because of course, they have not done them for the person of Jesus. He replies, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."³ When we act with compassion toward others, we connect with the holy (with an h), and wholly (with a wh) with all people. Each act is more than a good deed for one person--compassion and love, they grow more compassion and love, and we are all connected.

Cornel West was interviewed for *Rolling Stone* back in 2009 by Jeff Sharlet:

"*Hesed*," he tells me one evening in Princeton, the Hebrew word for "lovingkindness."... "Steadfast commitment to the wellbeing of others, especially the least of these," West says. That demands a lot of love, but West doesn't stop there. "Justice is what love looks like in public." For him, justice is not vengeance but fairness; the respect he believes should be accorded every soul. "And democracy," he continues, "is what justice looks like in practice." That is, a society where there is justice—a vast, public lovingkindness—for all.⁴

¹ <https://crooked.com/podcast/monica-lewinsky-on-the-internets-culture-of-humiliation/>

² NRSV Matthew 25:35-26

³ NRSV Matthew 25:40

⁴ 2009 Jeff Sharlet. A version of this article appeared in the May 28, 2009 issue of *Rolling Stone*.

<http://killingthebuddha.com/mag/witness/the-supreme-love-and-revolutionary-funk-of-dr-cornel-west-philosopher-of-the-blues/>

Hesed is covenantal love, and is sometimes translated as mercy. It is love in relationship, with expectations and consequences, and with commitment to the least of these. In Psalm 23 the psalmist sings, “Surely goodness and mercy (*hesed*) shall follow me all the days of my life.”⁵ In the Talmud, in the book *Sukkot*, there is a deep dive into understanding the difference between *tzdakah* - charity, and *chesed* - mercy or lovingkindness. The medieval commentator Rashi explained that, “*Chesed* occurs when there is understanding between two people and when the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” is fulfilled... Acts of *chesed* are the active representation of a covenant among people.”⁶ *Hesed* is given, and asked for in return.

In looking at many of the fundamental breakdowns in community and government in US history and present, we can point to lack of compassion, and accountability, or covenant by those who are in power. The “founding fathers” who framed our justice system and government came from convenantal religious traditions, some Unitarian and Universalist, with an expectation of responsibility and relationship among people, but let’s be real, among white male people who owned property. And so over time, that inequity, the expectation of relationship and accountability to and for only a portion of our society, has fed inequity and lack of compassion for *all* people. As we work to build a more just world--a world with *hesed* for all people, where we live into accountable relationships with one another, practicing compassion is fundamental—a foundation on which to build just and equitable systems and relationships.

Consider the modern parable of the babies in the river, which came up in a recent social justice team training. Imagine you are sitting by the Housatonic River, maybe watching some fly fisherfolk do their thing on the way home from worship. And you see a basket floating down the river with a baby in it. What would you do? Of course you wade out into the water and grab the baby to help it out. It is a huge day, super scary, and you are so glad you happened to be there. Then the next Sunday, you are driving home and you see two baskets with babies floating down the river. And as you are helping them out, a fisherman yells, “here come two more!” And you realize that babies in baskets are coming down this river all the time, not just that one day. And while you are gathering all the babies, someone on the river bank starts sprinting up river, shouting, “we need to see where these babies are coming from!”

Compassion and justice are connected. Of course, the babies need care, but without justice and equity, without figuring out where they are coming from, suffering will continue. Each act of compassion is transformative in the lives of the people it touches directly. *And* we know in our networks of relationships, just as in the Gospel of Matthew, when compassion is offered to anyone, because of our radical interconnection, it impacts all of us. To alleviate another’s suffering, to run to find where the babies are coming from, is a call to justice. Compassion connects us to one another, to the body of all people, to the holy, and helps people know they are not alone.

In a time when so many folks are feeling disconnected from one another, from community, not only because of the pandemic, but surely heightened by it, I am grateful to be here in community with all of you. Some of us stand ready to help with casseroles and care, living out a *hesed* love. And some, also, are lacing up their sneakers every morning to keep running upstream. All of this practice together makes up our Second Principle. A practice, not a finish line, though may we grow ever closer.

So may it be. Amen.

⁵ From Ben Witherington III, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 19:06, Dec 2003, “From *Hesed* to *Agape*: What’s love got to do with it?”

⁶ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/acts-of-loving-kindness/>