

JUSTICE
Sermon V in the 12 Part Series:
***“12 Gates to the City: Spiritual Pathways
for Entering the Holy city of Your Own Life”***
Rev. Scott W. Alexander, preaching
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
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UUSC “Guest at Your Table” Sunday

You know...I really love living here on the Treasure Coast. In so many ways, this is an absolutely lovely and idyllic community. Vero Beach is a charming old Florida town, nestled in an absolutely stunning natural environment. The chamber of commerce has an easy job marketing Vero Beach as a great place to live, work and play.

But – if you are paying even a semblance of moral attention – being a part of this community is also to be aware of some jarring and painful social realities. First among these disquieting realities in our community is the huge and glaring gulf that exist here between “The Haves” and “The Have-Nots”...a gulf of profound economic disparity I am forced to witness almost every day as I ride my bike through our community.

One favorite cycling loop (that I take several times a week) has me start out from my beachside condo, right at the boardwalk, on the barrier island near Jaycee Park, and ride north up A1A several miles past some of the most expensive and exclusive gated communities in America. When I get to the Disney Resort – with its \$300-a-night room rates and its gated, 24-hour security – I turn left and cross the 510 Wabasso bridge over the Intracoastal Waterway...cross busy Route 1 at the light...and then immediately turn south onto the Old Dixie Highway – through the towns of Wabasso and Gifford...where I ride past the extremely modest, and in many cases ramshackle and run-down, housing of the very poor of our region.

As I weave my way further south and west through the center of Gifford...past the county jail complex...I ride through one of the most poverty-stricken neighborhoods of our region, perhaps of all of Florida – where I see leaking roofs covered with temporary blue tarps...broken windows covered up with plywood...junked cars in the driveways...and clusters of people sitting out under the shade of their trees because they cannot afford air-conditioning.

This week I saw a rail-thin, elderly woman with a broken-down shopping cart, picking through an open dumpster, looking for aluminum cans and discarded turkey roasting pans to recycle for what? a buck or two? After leaving Gifford, I eventually pedal my way back through town and over onto the barrier island via the Barber Bridge, and am once again surrounded by incredible affluence, and all the beautiful, gated homes worth millions. The point is that – on an almost daily basis as I ride through our community – I am reminded, here in this place I call home, of the incredibly painful and harsh disparities that exist between the rich and the poor...the advantaged and the disadvantaged...the comfortable and the struggling.

And it's not just in this mostly idyllic part of Florida where such painful disparities can be noted. The Rev. Galen Guengerich, the senior minister of the All Souls Unitarian Church in Upper East Side Manhattan, recently described a similar social dynamic in that New York City neighborhood:

“Take a walk through the neighborhood around All Souls,” Guengerich writes, “[and you] soon see the problem. The wealthiest census tract in New York City is just [a few] blocks from All Souls, [with an average household income] of just over \$300,000 per year. And] the poorest census tract [in the city] begins only a few blocks farther away; the average household income in that area is about \$5,000 per year. In the faces of the people you meet, and the houses where they live, you see a city divided against itself, a painful and unsettling contrast between wealth and want, the privileged and the impoverished, [between] hope and despair, [between] opportunity and oblivion. We live in a condition of class warfare no matter how much we deny it.”

The facts of our national economic life bear out these sad observations. Our most recent national census, completed in 2010, reveals that – economically speaking – America is becoming a nation terribly and radically divided against itself. The latest data released last year reveals that the income differential between rich and poor Americans is now greater than at any time since they have been keeping such statistics, and is the greatest such disparity among all the Western industrialized nations. As one recent report bluntly puts it, *“Income inequality has been rising since the late 1970s, and now rests at a level not seen since the Guided Age (1870 to 1900) a period in U.S. history defined by the contrast between the excesses of the super-rich and the squalor of the poor.”*

Here are the profoundly disturbing numbers...and I am sure that at least a few of you will doubt the accuracy of these shocking statistics...but they are the real numbers:

[THE FACTS BELOW ARE PUT UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

WEALTH DISTRIBUTION IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA TODAY:

- 1. .1% of the population (14,000 families) have 22.2% of the wealth.*
- 2. 9.9% of the population (11.2 million families in the middle) have the remaining 73.8% of the wealth.*
- 3. 90% of the population (102.5 million families) have 4% of the wealth.*

According to the *Wall Street Journal* (in a recent comprehensive study of wealth in America) the richest .10% (one-tenth-of-one-percent) of our families (that's just 14,000 families) now possess 22.2% of the nation's wealth, while the bottom 90% of the people (that's more than 102 million families) control just a meager 4% of the nation's wealth...which means that the rest of us in the rapidly-shrinking middle – 9.9% of the population – control the rest of America's wealth, 73.8%. Here is the sad and startling truth about wealth inequality in America in 2011...fully 90% of our population is obliged to live off a few crumbs that tumble off the profligate American table.

Here are a few more equally disturbing economic statistics. Today, as has been widely reported, about 10% of our population is unemployed. There are almost 50 million Americans (one-sixth of the population) living below the official poverty line, and another 50 million are what the *New York Times* this past Sunday called “The Near Poor”... which means that about 100,000,000 Americans (about 1/3 of our total national population) lives in deprived households suffering a scarcity of life's necessities, including all important health care.

Just last month, the Census Bureau released this additional shocking statistic: the typical U.S. household headed by a person 65 or older has a net worth 47 times greater than a household headed by someone under 35...so the wealth gap between the generations is huge and getting worse. And then there is the issue of the pay differential between America's corporate CEO's and their average workers. In 1965, the average American CEO pay was 25 times that of the

average worker, but just 55 years later, that ratio has grown to a stunning 250 times, even as millions of once-good-paying American jobs have evaporated, along with much of the middle class – and America’s industrial base. And then there are the many billions of dollars a few thousand executives in the banking and financial sector claim for themselves, regardless of how they perform for their investors.

In the face of these terrible and undeniable facts -- about the growing economic inequality of American life -- the people of our nation are finally, finally beginning to pay attention. Despite the smoke-and-mirrors deception of many political and economic leaders, who justify this growing disparity between the rich and the poor by saying that the rich are “Job Creators” who cannot possibly be asked to pay more taxes to lift more people out of poverty – this despite a recent Treasury Department study which reveals that only 14% of Americans who earn more than a million dollars a year have anything to do with job creation – the growing gulf between “the Haves” and “The Have-Nots” has finally begun to catch the nation’s attention.

Over recent months, the “*Occupy Wall Street*” movement – with its cry of “*We are the 99%!*” has captured the nation’s attention, by demanding that the nation and its leaders – both political and business -- begin to consider concrete steps to ensure and enable greater economic parity and opportunity for all. Wealth and income disparity in America have reached such astronomical and unhealthy levels that even the most ardent free-market capitalists are being given pause...and are coming to realize that our nation cannot be socially and economically healthy, prosperous, humane or secure if these trends (of increasingly consolidating most of the nation’s wealth in the hands of a few) continues unchecked.

It seems clear, to me at least, that eventually profound disparity of wealth in America will not only threaten the moral well-being of the nation, but also directly endanger the security and comfort of everyone along the economic continuum., including the very rich! Let me return just for a moment to these stunning *Wall Street Journal* Statistics up on the screens behind me, and ask the most obvious and basic economic question. How can the very rich ever think to maintain their incredible wealth over the long haul if fully 90% of the population has almost no assets with which to participate in the American consumer economy? Leading economists agree: national economies with vast numbers of people forced to live in poverty cannot sustain the wealth of those at the top for very long...so some measure of economic equality is in everyone’s interest.

[THE WEALTH STATISTICS COME DOWN FROM THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

But never mind the pure economic unsustainability of it all, there is also the glaring moral issue which arises with profound economic inequality. Martin Luther King once pointedly said, “*All too many of those who live in affluent America ignore those who exist in poor America; in doing so, the affluent will eventually have to face themselves with the question Adolf Eichmann, Hitler’s deputy, chose to ignore. How responsible am I for the well-being of my fellows?*” And then King sharply concluded, “*To ignore evil is to become an accomplice to it.*”

I believe King was right. None of us, no matter how personally wealthy or comfortable we are, can or should ultimately deny or ignore the truth that poverty – life-robbing, spirit-crippling poverty – is a social ill that is crippling and poisoning America’s future. But in many American communities like this one, the social, economic, and educational segregation we have allowed to exist – like that between Vero’s barrier Island and Gifford – grants us the dangerous psychic and moral luxury of generally keeping the millions of American poor conveniently “out of sight and out of mind.”

Now...this American illusion – that poverty “isn’t a problem where I live” -- is dangerous because, as I have already observed there can ultimately be no safety, no health, no enduring satisfaction or well-being for either individual Americans or the nation as a whole until the national specters of poverty and economic inequality are acknowledged and addressed as the dangerous human and social diminishment that they are. The reason I have included this, Justice – despite a recent Treasury Department study which reveals that only 14% of Americans who earn more than a million dollars a year have anything to do with job creation – as one of the 12 gates of the human spirit necessary for full and responsible religious living – is that I am passionately persuaded that unless America establishes as social and economic policy a solid, basic floor of economic decency and justice for all persons, we can never as individuals or communities fully enter “the holy city” of our own lives – and find there safety, blessing, satisfaction and peace. Again, the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King:

“In a real sense, all life is interrelated...[we] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be... and you can never be what you ought to be, until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”

This morning, I am talking to you about what I believe is the absolute moral necessity (for us as a people...as American citizens, one with the other) of creating what my colleague the Rev. Richard Gilbert and many other economists and theologians call distributive justice. Now distributive justice...and I’ll explain precisely what that means in a moment...distributive justice is an extremely complex and controversial topic, one which within the confines of a Sunday sermon one can only begin to scratch the surface of. This is why I have arranged for there to be a sermon dialogue after this service this morning – back here in the sanctuary at about 11:15 – to enable any of you who want to, to go a little deeper into this topic, or at least to offer another view than that which I am sharing from my heart this morning. I would also refer you to Rev. Gilbert’s challenging and important book, “How Much Do We Deserve: An Inquiry Into distributive justice,” and his more recent essay “Was Robin Hood Right? Ethics and Economic Justice in America Today,” which you can find online by googling his and Robin Hood’s name.

In an ethical nutshell, distributive justice means that a society intentionally decides by fair and rational means to redistribute some of the total economic and material assets of that society, in order that no citizen of that society lives in abject poverty and want. Let me quote now the moral conclusion which Rev. Gilbert reaches at the end of his book, the moral conclusion I have also reached, after much study and reflection, about what our nation must seek if it is to be a good and just and healthy society:

“My thesis is that these great and increasing gaps in income and wealth between the haves and have-nots are inherently unjust. I argue not for absolute equality of distribution in which wealth and resources would be meted out equally among all people, but for [a humane] equity in which all people are presumed to have human dignity...[I argue for a just and compassionate economic system which simply guarantees] a basic, decent minimum for all.”

Now this vision of economic and social justice – where abject poverty is simply not allowed as a matter of social policy – is, of course, not just a Unitarian Universalist moral proposition. Roman Catholic moral thinker John Ryan, in his landmark book “distributive justice” asserts that “All human beings have the inherent right to have their basic needs met before any economic surplus is distributed to others. Simply stated,” he goes on, “the basic needs of the poor [in moral importance] transcend the superfluous desires of the rich. This principle is affirmed in

religious and philosophical traditions from Plato to the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures,” and I would parenthetically add it is also found in Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic thinking. *“It is based on the [universal] idea that all people are worthwhile [and sacred].”*

Early in his adult life, the great Hindu moral teacher Mahatma Gandhi – in rejecting the extreme wealth and social privilege into which he personally had been born – in an India where most of the population lived in horrible poverty and deprivation – expressed a similar ethic of distributive justice that establishes meeting basic human needs as a moral priority for the human family:

“I suggest,” Gandhi wrote, *“that we are thieves in a way...If [we] take anything that [we] do not need for [our] own immediate use, and keep it, [we] steal from somebody else...You and I have no [moral] right to anything that we really have until these [many millions] are clothed and fed better...You and I, who ought to know better, must adjust our wants...in order [that others] might be nursed, fed and clothed...There is enough wealth [in the world] to meet everyone’s needs,”* Gandhi concluded, *“but not enough to meet everyone’s greed.”*

Now...this idea of distributive justice is also the core social and economic message which animated the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Although many conservative, evangelical Christians today like to conveniently ignore this theological message, in a time of great economic disparity not unlike our own, Jesus repeatedly said that the rich and those of great economic privilege had a moral and human obligation to share a portion of what they had with those who, for whatever reason, were impoverished and suffering. You will recall that he said it was as difficult for a rich man to get to heaven as it was for a camel to thread itself through the eye of a needle...and he repeatedly said that everyone had the moral duty to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, and take care of the sick. In Christian moral thought, this emphasis on society meeting the basic needs of the impoverished is called “the preferential option for the poor,” and it means we all have a special obligation to take care of those in our society who, for whatever reason, find themselves in dire material straits.

In 1986, the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States – fully aware of Jesus’ challenging economic teachings – issued a pastoral letter entitled “Economic Justice for All,” which calls for significantly greater distributive justice in our nation, with special emphasis on the poor.

“Distributive justice,” the Bishops concluded, *“calls for a floor of material well-being on which all can stand. This is the duty of the whole society and it creates particular obligations for those with greater resources. This duty calls into question extreme inequalities of income and consumption when so many lack basic necessities. Catholic social teaching,”* they go on, much as Rev. Gilbert did, *“does not maintain that a flat, arithmetic equality of income and wealth is a demand of justice, but it does challenge economic arrangements that leave large numbers of people impoverished. Further, it sees extreme inequalities as a threat to the solidarity of the human community, for great disparities lead to deep social divisions and conflict.”*

The point here is – and Rev. Gilbert goes into great detail to spell all this out – that there are many religious and philosophical traditions that call for a much greater degree of distributive justice than exists in the United States today. As I already pointed out earlier in this sermon, the fact that economic disparity and poverty are increasing rapidly right now in America, is a social trend that should greatly morally concern everyone in the nation. As Gilbert puts it, in our time *“The rich are getting richer...the poor are getting poorer...and the middle class is [shrinking]. Income disparity in America,”* Gilbert concludes, *“is at an all-time high. In this nation, we have what author Jonathan Kozol calls savage inequalities.”*

This morning -- here on the Treasure Coast which has some of the wealthiest zip codes in the nation -- I am adding my voice to those many religious and ethical leaders from many different traditions who believe it is time (indeed past time!) for our society to more intentionally and compassionately structure its economic life and the distribution of its wealth and material assets in a way that ensures that no American is obliged to live in abject, dehumanizing poverty. No society can imagine itself as good, compassionate or just with such stark and painful contrasts of quality of life between rich and poor. It is as Martin Luther King once affirmed, *"True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar, it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produced beggars needs restructuring."*

I believe, emphatically believe, that America must significantly restructure its economic life if it is to become a more just, humane and equitable society. And while I am hesitant to offer (here in the context of this sermon) specific economic and social remedies, I do believe we as a people might want to consider beginning to provide for the basic needs of the poor, through modalities like:

- A sustained earned income tax credit for low income families...or
- A national living wage, at a level several times than the completely unrealistic \$7 minimum wage now in place...
- Some structure of a national guaranteed income, including providing comprehensive health care for all citizens...
- And, of course, the increased tax revenue – however we might choose to structure that – from the nation's very rich to pay for this "floor" of economic justice.

This week in the *New York Times*, Paul Krugman, who was one of our popular "Celebrated Speakers" here at *The Emerson Center* last year, suggested that two fair and reasonable ways to ensure a greater measure of wealth distribution would be: 1) a tax on all financial transactions, and 2) restore a somewhat higher tax rate for very high income individuals. And I am sure there are other reasonable and fair approaches we could agree upon as a governed people.

Now...I fully realize that any such call for such equalizing measures will be met with howls of protest from many of those who are doing well in the current economy. Any call for a greater measure of distributive justice is not easy to sell to American culture at this time.

Many conservative economists, politicians and social theorists do not believe in any form or degree of distributive justice (or the increased taxes on the affluent which would be required), nor are they moved by the idea of the "preferential option for the poor" or the moral necessity of sharing personal wealth that Jesus talked about. They assert rather that the best way to end poverty – and encourage the poor to take full responsibility for the quality of their own lives – is not by taxing the rich to provide more for the poor, but by simply allowing the unseen but wise hand of free market capitalism and individual economic initiative to eventually increase the wealth of the nation. "The rising tide (of the wealthy) it is argued, "lifts all boats." So conservative economists and politicians are suggesting that when affluent Americans do well, don't tax them – which might reduce their willingness to make capital investments and might reduce their personal economic initiative – in your effort to uplift the poor, rather let their wealth and success "trickle down" to the poor, as they suggest it inevitably will.

The only problem with this argument, of course, is the undeniable fact that, as I have already statistically spelled out, the rising tide of American prosperity for the few which we are experiencing right now is not lifting all boats...and is not creating jobs or any real opportunity for millions of Americans with little or nothing. In 2011, the power yachts of the very rich are riding

higher and higher, while the vulnerable little rowboats, canoes, kayaks and rafts of those of little means are being tossed about in the wake!

Now...in all fairness to conservative economists, one must admit that there probably is some tip point of taxation and economic redistribution beyond which capitalism's productive engine – whose growth is substantially driven by those with assets and affluence – might be dangerously choked. I would find it helpful to listen to a spectrum of economists, both liberal and conservative, debating the finer points and pitfalls of modalities of distributive justice, like the earned income tax credit or a national living wage, or a tax on financial transactions...for example. Surely we must avoid trying to end abject poverty by strangling America's economic vibrancy.

But, finer points aside, what I will assert to you this morning with great moral confidence is that with the rich hungrily increasing their share of the American economic pie each year – as more and more Americans become poorer and poorer – we are no where near that tipping point. I am morally convinced that (as still the richest and most innovative society on the earth) we can well afford to redistribute a significant share of the nation's total wealth to ensure all Americans have adequate food on the table, decent clothing on their backs, a reliable roof over their heads, and quality health care and educational opportunity. I believe it is as Oliver Wendell Holmes once observed, "*Taxes,*" he wrote, "*are the price we pay for living in civilization.*" It is through our national taxation policies – specifically taxing those who are affluent to help the impoverished – that we must achieve greater distributive justice in the United States.

Now...please understand that I say all this primarily for moral and religious reasons, not economic or political ones. We in this room are Unitarian Universalists. We are a religious people. It says so right here on the backs of your orders of service. We are a religious people committed to first and foremost protect and promote "*the inherent worth and dignity of every person.*" That is the foundational theological and ethical affirmation of our centuries old religious tradition. Our faith is built on the theological preposition that all people have worth...and all deserve protection, dignity and care. This is why I believe distributive justice – which I and others have defined as the intentional creation "of a floor of material well-being upon which all can stand" – is a moral necessity. We can do nothing less for one another in human community.

In the lovely, old, African American spiritual "*O what a beautiful City, Hallelujah,*" upon which this sermon series is based, the New Jerusalem – the City of holiness and goodness that is yet to be built – will have 12 welcoming gates for all the people. Listen to the lyrics:

*Oh what a beautiful city...
There's twelve gates to the city...
Walk right in, you're welcome to the city...
Step right in, welcome to the city...
Rich and poor, welcome to the city...
Young and old, welcome to the city...
Weak and the strong, welcome to the city...
There are twelve gates to the city, Hallelujah.*

I believe we have no moral choice but to try to build the beautiful city.

I believe we have no moral choice but establish basic economic and social justice at the gates of our city.

I believe we have no moral choice but to welcome all persons, most especially those who are now poor, into our city...

Let's build the beautiful city – with gates wide open – where all God's children will be safe and protected and welcome.

Amen.