



JUSTICE

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

Only two words repeat in the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism. (Let's ignore little words like *the*.) *Congregations* is one of the two, an inclusion that makes sense given our historical emphasis on congregational polity over denominational authority. But the other word surprises. In the long list of values that our principles espouse — peace, truth, compassion, liberty, dignity, acceptance, respect, conscience — only *justice* earns a double mention. We envision ourselves as people who do justice, who live justly.

Yet though we uphold it as fundamental to our religious identity, justice is a slippery value, confounding in its complexity. In one of her lesser-known novels, nineteenth-century writer George Eliot captured the impossibility of defining justice with precision. Eliot asked “who shall put his finger on the work of justice, and say, ‘It is there?’ Justice is like the Kingdom of God — it is not without us as a fact, it is within us as a great yearning.” For Eliot, justice was an inner truth longing to be made real, but impossible to name as a universal reality.

The whole notion of justice is shot through with power and privilege. Justice is synonymous with the law, yet the legal system often fails to render justice and sometimes impedes it. When over 70 percent of American prisoners are non-white, we know the criminal justice system thwarts justice rather than creating it. In *Civil Disobedience*, Henry David Thoreau claimed that the “law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice” by following unjust laws. Justice that flows from above — whether teachings based on a masculine deity dispensing divine justice or the Supreme Court pronouncing on reproductive rights — makes justice for those below harder

to achieve. “Justice for whom?” is a constant, necessary question.

Perhaps this is why we frequently modify the term, expanding and amplifying it to detail what *kind* of justice we seek to make real. The UUA website, for example, offers us six different ways to engage in justice work: environmental justice, economic justice, immigrant justice, LGBT justice, racial justice, and reproductive justice. Unity Church goes one further than the UUA and has a Racial and Restorative Justice team. Our adjectives parse our desires and help us focus our energies.

Our principles do the same. In our second principle, we promise to create justice in “human relations.” We resolve to create moments of personal, intimate justice in our families, our relationships, and with our friends. In our sixth principle, we aim wider still, pledging to build a “world community” with “justice for all.” The sweeping call asks us to work on larger, systemic issues that get in the way of justice for everyone.

The sixth principle especially resonates with many UUs. We support “deeds not creeds” in expressing our religious beliefs. Understanding justice as a fight for a better world animates us, nourishes our souls as we work to transform society’s gaping inequalities, its unfair distribution of resources, its unjust detentions and arrests. Indeed, Unity’s own sixth Ends statement echoes the sixth principle, as we promise to “advance justice, wholeness, and equity for people and our Earth.” The justice work embedded in the sixth principle and our sixth End helps to ground our identity as Unitarian Universalists. Wearing our yellow “Standing on the Side of Love” t-shirts, we nod in agreement when Harvard University professor Cornel West says that “justice is what love looks like in public.” We do justice because we *feel* love.

Yet sometimes we neglect the more intimate “human” justice of our second principle. This is not new. Unitarian founder William Ellery Channing spoke out forcefully against slavery and other injustices, but as the years wore on, he expected “less and less from revolutions, political changes, or violent struggles.” Corrupt institutions, Channing insisted, “will be succeeded by others equally, if not more, corrupt, whilst the root principle lives in the heart of individuals.” Instead, achieving justice required a “moral change” centered in religious communities. As Channing understood, seeking justice demands authentic relationships and deep listening as much it does marching and petitions. Our second principle rejects exclusion and demands embrace, and asks that we seek justice on the most personal of levels, accepting that our behavior has wounded others and opening ourselves to being transformed by that knowledge. Justice starts at home.

Justice will never be a fact, no matter how much we yearn for that to be true. But bound together in congregational life, building intimate relationships within, among, and beyond ourselves, we can move together along a road bending toward justice. There will never a moment when we can say that we have reached justice. But we must keep marching down that road.

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Justice Theme Resources

MOVIES

13th (2016)

Milk (2008)

RGB (2018)

Spotlight (2015)

The Hate U Give (2018)