

ECONOMIC JUSTICE AS A MORAL ISSUE

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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Let me begin my talk today with a metaphor: the game of musical chairs. Do you recall how the game is played? [describe it] I would like to use this game as a simple opening metaphor for discussing a complex topic: the state of our economy. During the past few years, our nation, like the participants in musical chairs, has been trapped in a game in which there are lots of dissatisfied losers and only a tiny number of winners. Who chose the rules for this game? What determines when the music stops during each round and the players must scramble for the few remaining chairs? In other words, **whose game is this?**

In discussing this sensitive subject, I realize that there is a significant potential for different and possibly divergent points of view—even within a group such as ours. But I also believe that the issue of economic justice is too important to be ignored, just like the issue of racial justice was too important to be ignored in the 1960s. The mess we find currently find ourselves in—and the solutions being proposed—are much bigger than the differences between our political parties, even though most of our politicians are unwilling to admit that. They too are trapped in the game of winning—a game with only a handful of winners and lots of losers. Is this a game the rest of us want to play? As public polls have demonstrated beyond doubt, the answer is a resounding No. I hope that we can avoid turning this discussion into a partisan political debate. So let's take a chance together.

The issue of economic justice challenges us to apply our core Unitarian Universalist principles, including our commitment to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person and justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, challenges us to view the issue of economic justice within a broader framework when he says, "In the current strident debate about unemployment, we hear politicians and pundits argue about economic policy. The talk is about deficits and economic stimuli and tax policy. All of this rancor obscures a more fundamental issue: We **choose** the society in which we live. The choices we make are **moral choices** and, as moral choices, they

are ultimately based on our central religious values. We tend to treat changes in the economy as if they were like the weather—natural phenomena governed by forces beyond our control. Nothing could be further from the truth. We have chosen to live in a society with high unemployment and with income distribution that is becoming medieval. A tiny percentage of Americans own most of the wealth. Meanwhile millions of willing and able people are without work. This did not just happen. We created this situation.” [Peter Morales, “Unemployment as a Spiritual Issue,” www.huffingtonpost.com 9/16/11]

So how did we get into this mess? The words of Lao-Tse that we read together earlier express our folly succinctly. Individually and collectively, we have **over-reached, over-spent, and over-rated**. The fact that these words were written more than 2,500 years ago might console us that we are not the first humans to behave foolishly in these ways, but it also should challenge us to do our best not to repeat the mistakes of the past. As Mark Twain once observed, history does not repeat itself, but it sometimes rhymes. What are the rhymes here?

Quoting from the 46th chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*: “There is no misfortune greater than not knowing when enough is enough. There is no mistake greater than wanting to get more and more.” As individuals, millions of middle-class Americans have been living way past their means, inspired by the lifestyles of the rich and famous and seduced by the easy availability of credit cards, home mortgages, and home equity loans. “The typical new home built in the United States in 2007 (2,500 sq. ft.) was about 50 percent bigger than its counterpart built in 1977 (1,780 sq. ft.), **even though median incomes** [for the middle class] barely rose.” [Robert B. Reich, *Aftershock*, p. 97]

Meanwhile, our government was mirroring the irresponsible over-reaching of its citizens. Economist Paul Krugman wrote in May 2011: “What happened to the budget surplus the federal government had in 2000? The answer is, three main things. First, there were the Bush tax cuts, which added roughly \$2 trillion to the national debt over the last decade. Second, there were the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which added an additional \$1.1 trillion or so. And third was the Great Recession, which led both to a collapse in revenue and to a sharp rise in spending on unemployment insurance and other safety-net programs.” [quoted in wikipedia.org/wiki/

United_States_federal_budget] The United States expends as much on military spending and Homeland Security as the rest of the world's nations **combined**—more than **\$1 million per minute**. These additional expenses were not supported by additional revenues, on the widespread belief that Americans are already overburdened with taxes. This view is simply not supported by the facts. The October 10th issue of *Time* magazine puts it bluntly: “The U.S. collects less tax as a percentage of national income than any other leading economy.” [p. 30]

The gap—I should say the **chasm**—between the very wealthy and the rest of us has widened steadily in the past half century. In the 1960s, a CEO made about 40 times the average worker's wage. Today that figure is more than 300 times. The Social Security tax on income is capped at slightly more than \$100,000— meaning that for wealthy people whose income exceeds this amount, there is no additional Social Security tax. **Does that make any sense?** Quoting again from the *Time* magazine article: “America was once the great middle-class society. Now we are divided between rich and poor, with the greatest degree of inequality among high-income democracies. The top 1% of households take almost a quarter of all household income—a share not seen since 1929. An economy this lopsided cannot prosper. The poor and working classes are squeezed. The rich are increasingly absenting themselves from the country's troubles. Their businesses sell goods and outsource jobs to China; their homes are behind gated walls; much of their corporate income is in offshore tax havens.” [p. 30] The Roman philosopher Plutarch wrote: “An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of republics.”

Is it any wonder that there is so much frustration and anger among America's working middle class? And yet so much of this anger is **misdirected**—toward immigrants who are supposedly taking away jobs from American workers, toward those who have grown increasingly dependent on government support programs for their subsistence, toward employees who are campaigning for their right to a decent living, toward local public officials who are trying to maintain services in spite of shrinking budgets. In the face of all the anger and frustration over the economy, what are we to do? Here is my short list of what each of us can do to see us through:

- **Support local businesses**, even if it means spending a few dollars more. Avoid Wal-Mart and other discount stores who sell cheap, mostly foreign-made goods.

This holiday season, if you cannot find a gift item locally, look for catalog items that are not imported.

- **Give money to charities** that provide daily support to those who are most dramatically affected by our current economic situation, including the local food bank, Salvation Army, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens.
- **Actively oppose anyone who claims that we are overtaxed**, because it simply is not true. Among the world's leading economies, America ranks last.
- **Support political candidates whose priority is meeting human needs rather than destroying our enemies.**
- **Finally—and perhaps the most difficult: Demonstrate compassion for those with whom you disagree.** We got into this economic mess together, and we will need to cooperate in order to get through it together.

I began my talk this morning by invoking the metaphor of musical chairs, and I would like to end with the same metaphor. Robert Fulghum, a best-selling author (*Everything I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*) and now a retired UU minister, comes the closest to being a sage within our faith tradition. In his writing, he expresses a finely tuned appreciation for paradox and complementarity that reminds me of the ancient Eastern sages such as Lao-Tse. In his book with the paradoxical title of *Maybe (Maybe Not)*, Fulghum describes playing different versions of the game of musical chairs with a group of high school students. In the first version—the traditional version—“the competition is ferocious but finally won by a member of the high school wrestling team. Upon winning, the winner has a look of triumph on his face and raises his hands in the familiar victory salute, ‘Number One, Number One.’

“But games are supposed to be fun, and this game has become much too competitive to be fun. Fulghum invites the students to play musical chairs again. Only this time, if they cannot find a chair when the music stops, they are to sit in someone's lap. The students play, but the mood changes. There is laughter and giggling. No one is in a hurry. Only the winner of the first game has a hard time. There is one more step in this process: The music plays, the students march, Fulghum takes away the last chair. When the music stops, the students are to sit down in each other's laps. Despite youthful protestations that it cannot be done, Fulghum shows them

how by carefully stepping sideways in a circle, each taking a step into the middle of the circle, and by carefully sitting down on the count of three, they can—and do—accomplish it. Fulghum concludes:

They all sat. No chair. I have played the chair game with many different groups of many ages in varied settings. The experience is always the same. It's a problem of sharing diminishing resources. This really isn't kid stuff. And the questions raised by musical chairs are always the same: Is it always to be a winners-losers world, or can we keep everyone in the game? Do we still have what it takes to find a better way?

[quoted from Richard S. Gilbert, *How Much Do We Deserve?* pp. 196-97]

Does our country have what it takes to overcome our economic problems? I believe that we do, but it will require us all to take a side-step toward the center and form a tighter circle.