

FAITH AND VALUES

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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The Reverend Jim Wallis is a very interesting guy: he is both an evangelical preacher **and** a political progressive. In his most recent book *Rediscovering Values on Wall Street, Main Street, and Your Street*, he describes our recent economic crisis and the response to it as a kind of **bad morality play**. Most of you are all too familiar with the plot. Major financial firms advised their clients to sink their money into high-risk investment funds while at the **same time** placing side bets that these investments would fail. In order to avoid the total collapse of our economic system, government leaders decided to spend huge amounts of taxpayers' money to bail out the very same financial institutions that got us into this mess in the first place.

“What the banks were supposed to do with our money was to start lending again—which they had stopped doing—to credit-worthy businesses and homeowners for whom credit had dried up. . . . But some banks bought up (with our money) stocks, bonds, and other assets at rock-bottom prices and then made a killing in profits as the stock market stabilized and began to rise again. Then, to congratulate themselves for recognizing the opportunity for making a profit, they gave out record bonuses to themselves while wages for the rest of the country continued to fall and more and more people found themselves without a job at all. It was a morality play almost too unbelievably bad to be true; yet that is exactly what happened. . . . To see that Wall Street is now having a party while the rest of the country continues to buckle down, sacrifice, and do what is necessary to make it through is just too much.” [pp. 220-21]

No wonder our country is consumed with so much outrage and resentment toward Wall Street and our government leaders! If there is anything we have learned in the past two years, it is that unregulated free-market capitalism offers powerful incentives for people to lie and cheat in order to make short-term profits. But Jim Wallis argues that the current economic crisis reflects a deeper moral and spiritual malaise for **all of us**, not just those whose selfishness and indifference to others' suffering are so transparent. He says, “If our goal is to get back to business as usual, we will soon be right back to what got us into so much trouble, because what was *usual* is what got us here in the first place. To go back to business as usual would be to miss the opportunity this crisis provides to change our ways and return to some of our oldest and best values.” [p. 5]

“The story of how we got here is not one of just a few bad apples at the top, a Wall Street conspiracy, or merely some bad public policy. It is, plain and simple, a story as old as humanity: it is a story of idolatry. We have replaced God with the ‘invisible hand’ of the market, substituted ‘market value’ for ‘moral values’ and attributed all that was good and right to the power of the market to make it so. In an essay written nearly a decade before the crisis, Harvard theologian Harvey Cox argued that “The Market” had over time assumed qualities that have traditionally been ascribed to God: **omnipotence** (all-powerful), **omniscience** (all-knowing), and **omnipresent** (all-pervasive). [*The Atlantic*, March 1999] Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Elie Wiesel lost virtually all of his personal wealth and his foundation's (up to

\$37 million) to Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme. 'We gave him everything,' he said, 'we thought he was God, we trusted everything in his hands.'" [Wallis, pp. 27-29] In short, our **blind faith** in The Market as the final determiner of what has ultimate value and meaning has been shaken to the core.

Each year an elite group of global political and economic leaders is invited to participate in the World Economic Forum in the tiny mountain village of Davos, Switzerland. When Jim Wallis was invited to speak at the 2009 gathering, he recited Gandhi's Seven Deadly Social Sins:

1. Politics without principle
2. Wealth without work
3. Commerce without morality
4. Pleasure without conscience
5. Education without character
6. Science without humanity
7. Worship without sacrifice

He reports that "For days after the Davos 'values panel,' participants would come up to [him], pen and paper in hand, to make sure they got them right." [p. 4]

The discussions about what went wrong and how to make things right have brought to the surface a fundamental **values tension** that lies at the core of the American Creed. This tension is expressed succinctly in the final words of our Pledge of Allegiance: "**. . . with liberty and justice for all.**" We value individual freedom while also pursuing equality. I believe that much of our history can be viewed through this lens, from the Civil War to the civil rights and gay rights movements. During the past three decades—and particularly in the past two years—we have seen how freedom can be abused, as the gap between the very rich and the rest of us gotten wider and wider. Jim Wallis argues that the current economic crisis offers the opportunity to replace an exaggerated emphasis on individual freedom with a renewed commitment to the common good. Here are the values he believes must change:

"Greed is good" must be replaced by "Enough is enough."

"It's all about me" must be replaced by "We're in it together."

"I want it now" must be replaced by a concern for future generations.

Admittedly, these are simple ideas, but they express deeply held values that can be implemented at both the individual and collective levels of our shared life.

There is a similar tension between individual freedom and commitment to social justice that also lies at the core of Unitarian Universalism. I hope to use this part of my talk as a bridge into our discussion about changing the name of our district. This tension is embodied in the two branches of our faith tradition. Historically, Unitarians have emphasized individual freedom of conscience and the use of reason as the ultimate measure of truth. Universalists, on the other hand, have insisted that we all share a common fate and emphasized the importance of compassion in all of our relationships.

For the advocates of individual freedom of religion there is no greater champion than Thomas Jefferson, author of the nation's first statute protecting freedom of religion from government intrusion. Although he also promoted the cause of equality, he was an unrepentant slave owner. He was both a prisoner and an **imprisoner** of the racism of his time. How can we possibly resolve the contradictions so evident in Thomas Jefferson's life? I don't think we can, and I'm not sure that it's worth the effort. He could stand on a mountaintop and envision equality in principle, but he could not see through the thicket of racism that surrounded him and his contemporaries.

So where does that leave me in the current discussion about changing our district name? At the district meeting in 1997, I did **not** vote in favor of changing our name. In the thirteen years since then, I have gradually changed my mind. **I believe the time has come to let go of Thomas Jefferson.** His opinions about race stand in sharp contrast to the racially diverse, multicultural society that he believed was impossible. We also need to let go of our self-serving attachment to him as a Unitarian. In point of fact, he never joined a Unitarian congregation. His view of religion as an entirely private matter contradicts our movement's efforts to become a more visible force in our culture. Throughout our history, Unitarian Universalism has emphasized that **deeds are more important than creeds.** The disparity between Thomas Jefferson's creed and his deeds is no longer worth defending. He was indeed a "man of **his** times," and for this we can **forgive** him. But I believe he is no longer a man for **our** times, and for this we should no longer **enshrine** him.

Whatever we decide to do, we should strive to avoid the discrepancy between our principles and our actions that so clearly plagued Thomas Jefferson. We UUs have a regrettable tendency to substitute lofty words and symbolic gestures in place of the hard work it will take to bring about social justice in our society. Even more important than the name of our district is how effectively we welcome people of different backgrounds into our congregations. **Our actions are far more powerful than our words.**