



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Class Act

Rev. Hannah Petrie, Associate Minister
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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

Some of you know that for most of a year now I've played an active role in the Pasadenans for a Livable Wage campaign – we're trying to convince City Council to vote in favor of matching LA and LA County's new ordinance, to get to \$15 per hour by 2020. The title of our coalition is a misnomer that we're discussing changing, because the actual livable wage for Pasadena is \$23 per hour, and only if you work full-time.

I pointed this out to new City Council member and very pro-small business Tyron Hampton that, what this means is, most employees in the ballpark of the current minimum wage aren't even making *half* of what it takes to get by – it forces them to have really sub-par, overcrowded living situations, which frankly, aren't much different than how a lot of people in 3rd world countries live. So not only is this a moral issue, this is a patriotic issue, about keeping America great and keeping the American dream alive.

Mr. Hampton's district is the same district our church is in, but many of his constituents are these poverty-wage earners, in northwest Pasadena. They didn't vote him in, because they were too busy working two or three jobs. I didn't tell him that part, but I should have. I also told him that I gave up a lot of my summer vacation to work on this campaign because A) I thought, well Martin Luther King didn't take his summers off either and B) after really learning about and understanding the numbers, I see how wrong it is to force so many people to struggle so much. I said it's part of my job as a moral leader to speak out when our basic, moral standards aren't cutting it.

I don't need to give you the numbers regarding the widening gap between the rich and poor, and the shrinking middle class. You probably know, for instance, that the top 1% of Americans own one-third of the wealth. But isn't it interesting that, beyond shaking our heads at that number, we don't talk about it much. So it's also part of my job as a religious leader to help us begin these kinds of challenging conversations. I've come to understand that talking about race and talking about class are both often difficult conversations for Americans - and white Americans in particular - and often for the same reason. Because both conversations can dredge up shame and guilt that we would, consciously or not, just assume avoid.

From the anthology of essays in 2014's *Class Lives, Stories From Across Our Economic Divide*, in many of the personal reflections of people in the middle or owning classes, guilt was frequently mentioned – especially in cases where a large amount of wealth was inherited with no sense of having earned it. For some people, it can be paralyzing – what to do with the money, and how to find purpose and meaning in life. I know this is the “poor little rich girl” extreme end of the spectrum, but closer to home may be the cognizance of general unfairness.

For example, I'm uncomfortable knowing that, when my husband and I received the money we needed for the down payment and closing costs on our first house from our parents, this kind

of money given by living relatives is called “transformative assets” because it boosted our lifelong prosperity and security. I’m uncomfortable because I’ve learned that one in two white families give this kind of head start to young adults, compared with just one in five black families. I feel guilty because, while also feeling deeply grateful for that asset, I know it’s just not fair.

It’s the same reason so many white families fared better after Hurricane Katrina than African American families – black Americans have only a fraction of the wealth of their white counterparts, due to historical and ongoing racial discrimination.

But just as Rabbi Goldberg last Sunday made the distinction between helpful and unhelpful guilt, it does present a spiritual opportunity for anyone to engage in self-reflection and dialogue with others about our class identity. To not only transcend the guilt, but to do something productive with it. The action in this case is two-fold. One, we take the time to learn about the facts and history of class and racial inequality, and two, we see what role we might play in addressing it.

And like the work of racial justice, the work of economic justice is hard, long, with ups and downs. I know the two runs of Beloved Conversations we’ve had have been fruitful, but they’ve also been challenging at times.

At some point, I would love to facilitate a reading and discussion group about economic class, perhaps using the book *Class Lives*, or *The Color of Wealth*, both of which have been eye-opening for me, but especially the latter. I am no longer tempted to claim, “Oh, it’s not about race, it’s about class; we need to tackle colorblind poverty.” It just ain’t so, and while there’s plenty of factual evidence to back that up, I’m going to offer anecdotal and personal evidence, which works better in a sermon.

For example, recently I knew of a white woman who was looking for a place to rent, and a black person looking for a place to rent. They both commented on how difficult it was, even though there is affordable housing available. Despite the difficulty, the white woman found a place to live last week. The black person – still looking. He’s been looking for over a month, and he’s one of our own, our new Interim Director of Religious Education, Greg Boyd. When I asked him if he thought it was because he was black, he responded, “Oh absolutely. A lot of people don’t even call me back.” Racial discrimination that thwarts access to basic needs is alive and well, and has never gone away.

The title of this sermon refers to a realization that dawned on me while reading *Class Lives*. A lot of the shame and guilt I came across in these stories was also related to *acting* like we belong to a class we’re not really sure we belong to. Especially heart-rendering were the stories of poor children working hard, unsuccessfully, to pass as middle class, or, the people who had climbed from working to middle class as adults, but continued to experience self-doubt that they belonged there, and in the end felt that, class-wise, they don’t belong anywhere.

Despite how class stratified we have in fact become, many Americans still cling to this notion of, “Oh, we’re all in the middle class, aren’t we?” Part of me has affection and nostalgia for that idea – it speaks of an American idealism that as equals we share similar values, that we’re united in our general Americanness.

But, when you look more deeply, it begs a question that cuts to the heart of our spiritual integrity. If we’re pretending to be in a class we’re not, whether we’re trying to pass as middle class but we’re actually impoverished, or we’re trying to pass as middle class, but we’re actually wealthy, we’re not really honoring the authenticity of who we are. We’re wearing a mask, not truthfully presenting ourselves. The energy we put into pretending is energy that could be better spent.

I’ve been admiring some of the new artwork that our new Senior Minister Lissa has in her office. One of the pieces is a cross-stitched quotation of deceased UU minister Forrest Church: “Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are.” I love that.

To add a layer of nuance, it can be confusing to try to figure out what class you’re actually in. What are the criteria, what are the rules? Part of the lack of clarity, and la-la land thinking of, *oh, someday I too will be a millionaire*, has only served to keep most Americans unconscious of the alarming, widening wealth gap.

There’s a question I’ve raised in two expressions of my public ministry, in a comment letter for the Pasadena Weekly when the Tale of Two Cities article came out about the wealth disparity in Pasadena, and also at the public forum back in January we held as part of the public launch of the livable wage campaign. I said, a lot of us cling to the belief that we’re in the middle class, but we’re not so sure.

My dad said something to me recently that made my jaw drop, he said, “Hannah, you and Kit are in the top 2%.” Now, being of southern stock, he was exaggerating, but as it turns out, not by a ton. We’re actually in the top 8%, but since we live in LA County, it’s the top 10%. We’d be in the top 2% if we earned what we do *and* lived in Flint, Michigan. There’s an interactive feature on the New York Times web site. Just google, “What percent are you in?”

But it only asks for income. There are so many other features and factors of wealth, or the lack thereof: job security and marketability; assets, stocks; education, status of student loans and other debt; cultural and social capital; safety nets, what we’re likely to inherit . . . the list goes on. I guess I’ve managed to stay in the comfortable middle class I was brought up in, but it was with help, with those transformative assets, in addition to my own hard work. While in my day to day consciousness I feel secure, I’m also aware that if catastrophe were to befall us, it’s a problem that we have no cash savings. We’ve also concluded that saving for college for our kids is impossible at this time. Maybe we can in a few years, when our childcare costs no longer represent a 2nd mortgage in our monthly budget.

So while, in essence, I can't complain, like a lot of American families, my foothold in the middle class is contingent on our good health and ability to work full time. We're glad because we find our work meaningful and of use – which makes up for the time we can't spend in greater proximity and availability to our small children. But will we be able to give those transformative assets to our kids when they need money for higher education, or to buy a house? Probably only if we take on more demanding work positions, which will take us even further away from our children, on a day to day basis. The trade-offs weigh on us.

Is this getting too personal? Money is personal. Money gets to the heart of how we live our lives, and what values we choose to live out. To learn one's values, you follow the money. It gets to the heart of how we treat our fellow human beings. It is absolutely of spiritual relevance. Jim Nelson used to point out that the Bible mentions money to love fourteen to one, or something like that. Jesus talked about money way more than he talked about love. "What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?" or "**Sell your possessions, and give alms.** Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For **where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.**"

One of our greatest emotional and spiritual tasks in life is to know who we are, so we can *be* who we are. I've come to understand in my journey of self-reflection where class is concerned, that 1) I've been blessed with several advantages, several head-starts; 2) but I've also gotten where I am today because I value hard work and contributing to the common good; and 3) I'm not alone, as a member of the shrinking middle class who has concerns that I or my descendants could be shrunk right out of it; but 4) regardless of what happens, I feel good knowing I'll face decisions with the values I have as a Unitarian Universalist, honoring what's best for me and my family while also asking the important questions.

What really is enough? What really does buy happiness and satisfaction? I have faith that while I don't earn a ton, my entrée into social justice work as a minister offers wealth of a different kind to my life – it not only enriches my knowledge and sense of self and purpose, it teaches my kids that it's better to understand how deeply connected we all are than to be isolated in the false reality of, "I can only work for the benefit of me and mine."

If you would like to become more involved in the fight against poverty wages in Pasadena, or learn more about it, please be in touch with me – there is a lot you can do, and a variety of ways to be involved, from showing up to a rally, to helping with connections to small business owners and non-profit directors, whose endorsements are needed to win this. The fight is now, and it's at a critical juncture where – well, let's just put it this way. At our last meeting, there was talk of forgoing the "Pasadena politeness." Also, if you have rental properties available, do let our new DRE Greg Boyd know so he can finally have a place to call home here. He wants to live in Pasadena, and the only thing stopping him is not the content of his character.

As I was preparing this sermon I paused to read the very last essay in *Class Lives*, the Afterword, by one of the editors, in which he shares that one of the four editors of the book died before it was published. I was so moved by the ending paragraphs, that I'll wrap up with them too:

Felice's key insight was that each of us holds a piece of the puzzle in the process of becoming human. She described how difference enriches us – how, for example, different race and class experiences give us complementary insights and information about the world. She didn't buy the idea that everyone should aspire to traditional norms of white middle-class culture. She knew how people who were raised poor and working-class had tremendous skills, knowledge, and insight that come from their life experience. She fumed at how useful trades and working-class skills were undervalued, while phony wealth-creators and speculators were celebrated in our culture . . .

As she wrote in the Introduction, "When we do talk about class, we tend to talk only about the strengths of wealth and the limitations of poverty. But in reality it's much more complex. All of us derive strengths as well as limitations from our class position and experience. Because of intense class segregation in this country, few of us have the opportunity to learn about each other's strengths and to grow past our limitations." The solution is building cross-class relationships and listening to one another's stories as we walk the path toward regaining our full humanity.

While I'm not calling on you to upend the tables of the money lenders like Jesus did - though it may soon come to that - I am calling on you to open our hearts and our minds to the value created in our communities by poor, working class, middle, *and* wealthy class. May it be to the betterment of our spiritual evolution if we are who we are, bringing our gifts to the altar of our full humanity.

May it be so, amen.