

**Shoreline Unitarian Fellowship: Homelessness**  
**July 13, 2009**  
**David Wertheimer, Guest Speaker**

Reading #1

If any of your Israelite relatives fall into poverty and cannot support themselves, support them as you would a resident foreigner and allow them to live with you. Do not demand an advance or charge interest on the money you lend them. Instead, show your fear of God by letting them live with you as your relatives.

-- Leviticus 25:35-36

Reading #2

Then the King will say to those on the right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.' Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?' And the King will tell them, 'I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'"

-- Matthew 25:34-40

When I have the good fortune to join you from time to time on a Sunday morning, as I have now for the past 10 years, I have always been careful in the selections of my readings to include something that represents more than just the Judeo-Christian tradition. Unitarians are open to the truths of every religious tradition, and give great respect to the wisdom that comes from cultures across the planet.

Today I have chosen to limit myself to our Western Judeo-Christian tradition for a very deliberate reason. The selections I shared with you this morning – one from the Old Testament and one from the New – were selected in order to ask a very targeted and specific question: How could our society, our nation – so clearly founded upon and rooted in Western traditions – have gotten it all so utterly wrong? How could we have missed so completely one of the basic tenets of our religious heritage? How is it that we have so completely forgotten the commandment to do unto others as we would have them do unto us?

While there are many contexts in which we could explore this question, this morning I'd like to ponder one specific issue: Why, when we live in the wealthiest nation in the history of the human species, is anyone homeless? This question can be asked of us as a nation, as the State of Washington, as communities within the state, and even of each of us as individuals within the community.

Homelessness is no isolated problem. According to the best data available from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and the National Alliance to End Homelessness, approximately 700,000 people are homeless on any given night, and 2.5 and 3.5 million Americans will experience at least one episode of homelessness every year. Veterans represent one quarter of this total. People with chronic illnesses represent one fifth of the total. And, perhaps most shocking of all, close to half of this total represents families with children. In fact, families are currently the most rapidly growing groups experiencing homelessness. HUD just reported last week that family homelessness increased 9% between 2007 and 2008. Based on projections for unemployment and home mortgage foreclosures, it is anticipated that as many as 1 million more Americans will become homeless before the current economic downturn has run its course.

These are staggering numbers. There are more people homeless in America on a given night than there are people in Seattle. There are more people homeless in a given year than live in the entire Puget Sound region.

There are many, many reasons for this complex problem. For individuals with chronic illnesses, especially mental illness and substance use disorders, we have the phenomenon of deinstitutionalization and the failures of our community mental health system to blame in large part for the problem we are facing: As hospitals, residential treatment and long-term care facilities have shut down, the resources required in the community to house, treat and support these individuals have not been made available.

In fact, all too often this population of people with serious behavioral health illnesses have experienced what the researchers refer to as "trans-institutionalization" – responsibility for custodial care has merely been transferred from one system – the mental health and alcohol and drug treatment systems – to another system – the correctional system. As the number of in-patient psychiatric hospital beds has dropped, the number of jail and prison beds has soared. Among those crowding our jails and prisons are people who were homeless and will be homeless again as soon as they are released. But more on that later.

For families, the lack of affordable housing is a primary cause of homelessness. Wages and income simply have not kept pace with the cost of housing. Here in our own part of Washington State, where almost half of the homeless population is comprised of families – more than three quarters of which are single parent households, most often led by mothers – the cost of a modest apartment requires these women to work an 80 hour week just to keep up the rent and feed their children. Many just can't make it and end up homeless.

But for families, there are also other factors beyond the cost of housing that contribute to homelessness. Women and children fleeing domestic violence or abuse often end up living in shelters, cars or on the street. The loss of employment puts other families out of their homes. For those of us without health insurance, a single medical emergency or a chronic illness can quickly put us out on the street when doctor and hospital bills leave us no longer able to pay the rent. Many families are literally 1 or 2 paychecks away from homelessness.

I could go on here about the multiple, systemic causes of homelessness – as well as the multiple failures of our service systems to address the issues ways that make sense and are truly responsive to the needs of those who are experiencing homelessness. But this is not a lecture on the failings of our governments and social institutions. We can read about that any day of the week in the newspaper. Instead, I'd like to focus at a somewhat more personal level – on why so few Americans seem to care about this problem enough to bring about the changes in our nation, states, communities and individual lives that could truly end homelessness.

To restate my core question: How could we have strayed so far from the challenge put to us by our own Judeo-Christian traditions – the very basic religious beliefs that are cited so frequently by those who lead us, whether those voices come from the far right, center or left of the political spectrum?

Certainly, this is a complicated conversation with no single answer that can be simply articulated on a Sunday morning. But I will dare to launch an opening salvo by suggesting that most Americans today think that people who are homeless are, somehow, failures. People who have made bad choices. People who have decided to drop out of school and not gotten the education and training that can lead to living wage jobs. People who have made poor selections of partners who become abusive and violent. People who have let themselves fall into patterns of substance abuse. People who refuse to accept treatment for their mental illnesses. In short, people whom most of us imagine have elected to be homeless.

In each of these examples, it is very easy to slide into believing that each of these choices was voluntary – that people somehow chose to put themselves on a path that led to homelessness – that they are blameworthy, at fault, or somehow deficient in their ability to take the more positive, stable and lucrative paths that we too often think are available to anyone and everyone in this land of great opportunity.

Within this framework – this simple logic – it becomes very easy to blame people who are homeless for their own circumstances. “Those people” could have made better choices, selected different paths, or pursued options that offered more positive outcomes.

And sadly, the way we have distorted our Judeo-Christian tradition all too quickly reinforces what I believe to be this misguided understanding of homelessness. To start with an extreme example, the concept of Prosperity Theology, or the Prosperity Gospel,

teaches that God actually desires material prosperity for those he favors. Material prosperity in this system is not only financial prosperity, but also success in relationships and good health. Although one could argue that the Prosperity Gospel is an extremist theology, found mostly in the Pentecostal, evangelical or charismatic Christian traditions, the belief that some sort of spiritual, God-given power to succeed materially is within everyone's ability to grasp, has seeped deep within many religious traditions and even our popular culture.

On what is ostensibly the opposite end of the spiritual spectrum, there are those within the Buddhist tradition who believe that traditional Buddhist chanting can be used to bring about long life, wealth, prosperity, fame, strength, happiness, and even a good complexion. Here is an odd version of Prosperity Theology where one might least expect it.

Far more pervasive, and perhaps even more pernicious, is the way in which this belief system has seeped into popular culture. Consider, for example, the Oracle of Oprah Winfrey and her affiliation with Rhonda Byrne's belief in "The Secret." Oprah's website is chock full of some of the most dangerous secular re-interpretations of the Prosperity Gospel, masquerading as what she calls the secret of "The Law of Attraction."

Allow me to quote for a moment directly from Oprah's website:

*"Rhonda defines The Secret as the law of attraction, which is the principle that 'like attracts like.' Rhonda calls it 'the most powerful law in the universe,' and says it is working all the time. 'What we do is we attract into our lives the things we want, and that is based on what we're thinking and feeling,' Rhonda says. The principle explains that we create our own circumstances by the choices we make in life. And the choices we make are fueled by our thoughts—which means our thoughts are the most powerful things we have here on earth.*

*"The law of attraction means that everything that happens to you—good or bad—you attract to yourself.... If you were at a restaurant and you ordered something, you fully expect it to come served that way. That's how the universe is. You're putting out orders—consciously and unconsciously. So if you say, 'I'll never have a great relationship,' you just placed an order.*

*"If you think about it, the universe has a conveyor belt of presents lined up for you, and until you receive the one and fully are grateful for it, the next one can't come out of the chute. It's all lined up."*

To me, this is extremely disturbing stuff. For those of us who are happy and successful, it's an easy way to explain our happiness and success. It makes us feel good about what we have, and that we are deserving of it. The universe wants us to succeed – all we had to do was want it and ask for it. But the flip side of this logic is pretty scary: If your life is messed up – if you find yourself addicted, mentally ill, battered, unemployed, chronically ill – or homeless – you really have no one to blame but yourself. You

ignored “the Secret” – you thought the wrong things, or at least didn’t think the right things, so bad things happened. Poor you. In this world-view, those who find themselves in circumstances they didn’t wish for are ultimately at fault for creating their own fate.

Would we dare say this to someone with cancer? Who is struck by a drunk driver? Who has a child born with Down syndrome?

When you push it to its logical conclusion, this belief system lets us completely off the hook of being responsible for people who are homeless. They are not “us” – we, the successful few. They are the losers. And it’s their fault – whether they are the homeless guy living under an I-5 viaduct, the homeless family living in a state campsite pretending with their kids that they are just “on the road,” or, for that matter, any of the 100 million people the UN says are homeless on the planet today or the two billion people who are living on less than two dollars a day.

What a convenient way of dismissing poverty and the absence of opportunity. What a wonderful tool for letting all of us sleep at night without feeling responsible for those without a bed or roof over their heads.

And don’t think that we don’t take it to those extremes right here at home in Washington State. We have, in fact, moved so far away from the golden rule that we have ended up criminalizing homelessness in our own communities. These days, homelessness can pretty easily land you in jail.

No sleeping on the sidewalk or you will be arrested. Where are you supposed to sleep if you are homeless?

No public defecation. Where are you supposed to go to relieve yourself if you have no bathroom?

We have, in fact, created a new iteration of the Golden Rule: *He who as the gold makes the rules.*

As Eric Tars, an attorney with the National Law Center on Poverty and Homelessness has suggested, one can also look at what we’re doing to people who are homeless through a slightly different lens that is even more provocative. Bear with me here for a moment.

- What do you call it when we make people sleep on cold concrete slabs?
- When we expose them to extreme temperatures?
- When they are punched, kicked or beaten on a regular basis?
- When law enforcement officers harass them?
- When we use dogs to attack them?
- When they are not allowed to know when or where their next meal will be eaten?
- When, from time to time, we kill them?

When these things happened in Abu Ghraib, we did not hesitate to call them torture. But these same things happen to homeless people every day in the United States. Just last week in Abilene, Texas, a 16 year-old boy was sentenced to life in prison for beating a homeless man to death. The motivation for the attack seemed to be nothing more than wanting to experience the thrill of taking another life – a life that the teen believed had no value and he thought no one would miss. And such killings are on the rise; the National Alliance to End Homelessness reports that 20-30 of these sport killings happen each year. And these are just the ones we know about. From this perspective, homelessness becomes a form of torture.

And such actions fly in the face of virtually every religious tradition on the planet. And most secular traditions as well. But here we are.

Back in 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt declared a “second Bill of Rights” for all Americans, including the right to a decent home. We still have a long way to go on that front. In 1948, the U.S. signed on to the United Nation’s Declaration of Human Rights, in which Article 25 states that: *“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family including...housing.”*

Yet the problem persists, and is currently growing at an alarming rate.

This wouldn’t be a very good sermon if I didn’t end on a more positive note than this. What are we supposed to do about this issue? How do we undo multiple millennia of scriptural misinterpretation, twisted logic and magical thinking about the Prosperity Gospel and the Secret Law of Attraction that has given birth to such gross levels of inequity in our society?

The current economic crisis and the pain and suffering that it has brought with it has no silver lining – there is probably no one in this room who doesn’t know someone who has lost a job and is struggling mightily to make ends meet. In fact, it is more than likely that there are people in this room that are homeless themselves – perhaps doubled up with relatives or couch surfing with friends. However, for precisely this reason, I believe that the painful economic crisis we are now experiencing has brought with it a powerful opportunity.

For far too long, we have been able to point to the homeless and say, with some level of confidence, that those people are not us. That whatever it is that separates them from us is distinctive, clear and measurable. We would not make such poor choices. We would not fall into such despair. We could never be one of them.

Well, the recession explodes this kind of denial. This particular version of magical thinking no longer works. These days, if you want to see the face of homelessness, you need nothing more than a mirror. Take a look at your own reflection – the people who are becoming homeless are just like us. Those who lose their jobs. Those who experience foreclosure. Those without health insurance. They are, in fact, us. And if they are us, then they are no more deserving of their life in shelters, cars, or the street

than any of us.

When we truly own that truth, it becomes beholden on us to respond in as basic and straightforward a way as the readings from Leviticus and Matthew have instructed us.

My brother-in-law – My husband’s brother – who was himself homeless, recently finished a year of living with us in our house. We took him in when he seemed pretty much at the end of his rope. Was it easy? No way. His deep clinical depression and high level of anxiety created an aura in the house that changed our way of life for duration of his stay.

His story does have a happy ending: He is now living comfortably in a fine unit operated by the Anacortes Housing Authority, and continuing to put the pieces of his life back together. But without the time and space we gave him, I wonder where or even if he would be alive today.

I tell that story not to show off, or to make it sound like I am doing everything within my power to end homelessness. I most certainly am not, and I fall short of the goals I should set for myself every day. But I am doing what I am able to do – what I can do – within the frailty of my own limitations.

Years ago, when I was in college, I attended the Quaker Meeting that was affiliated with the school. A wise old Quaker named Douglas Steere was a member of that meeting, and he rose with some frequency to speak on Sunday mornings. One Sunday, he got up to retell the story of Cain and Abel. When he got to the part where God asks Cain where Abel has gone, and Cain responds, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Douglas paused from the story a moment and said, “Of course he is.”

Back then, I wondered if the old Quaker was right, because that statement has the potential to be life altering. Although I’ve resisted it for years, I am beginning to accept that Douglas Steere was exactly on the money. The implications of that responsibility – if we are willing to accept it – means that in fact all women and men really are my sisters and brothers. And that, in this instance at least, the authors of Leviticus and Matthew were right. I continue to struggle with the profundity of that truth, and its most radical implications.