

Sermon: “The Big Squeeze”
Rev. Martha Hodges March 28, 2010

In the reading we just heard, Martin Luther King was speaking of the early twentieth century when he said,

At that time economic status was considered the measure of the individual's ability and talents. And, in the thinking of that day, the absence of worldly goods indicated a want of industrious habits and moral fiber.

We've come a long way in our understanding of human motivation and of the blind operation of our economic system. Today the poor are less often dismissed, I hope, from our consciences by being branded as inferior or incompetent.

Do you think that's true? I wish it were, but I have to disagree with Dr. King. There are still plenty of us who dismiss the poor as inferior or incompetent... lacking industrious habits and moral fiber, ability and talent. How else to explain our collective outrage at so-called welfare mothers; our dismissal of the homeless as simply mentally ill or lazy misfits; our willingness to look the other way when low wage workers are treated like disposable commodities?

And how else to explain our own shame when we find ourselves unemployed or undergoing bankruptcy or foreclosure? How else to explain why we withdraw into ourselves rather than let our peers know we need their help, why we refuse to ask for help, even from family, except as a last resort? How else to explain our cultural taboo against telling even our good friends how much we earn, how much we pledge, how much we owe, how much we pay? We know that we will be judged. Judged on our ability to earn – not enough to be considered wealthy, nor too little to be considered middle class (it's a delicate balance that we seek); judged on our skill at finding bargains without being considered cheap; on our savvy about investments; judged on our self-discipline as demonstrated by our savings. The whole matter of money is fraught with judgments and we reveal the facts of our economic condition at our peril.

Or so we believe. In fact, don't we also conceal the facts at our peril? We are left to deal with our daily struggles with money largely on our own. We internalize the imagined disapproval of our peers and experience shame and feelings of incompetence when money is lacking, just when we most need the support of friends and family.

Feelings of self-worth; the wish to be generous; resentment of those with more, or with less; fears of not-enough; faith that there will be enough... our attitudes and behaviors around money reveal much about how we understand ourselves and the world. Is the world a basically benevolent place? To what degree are we responsible for ourselves, or for others? Are people capable of altruism? Can they be trusted? What is “mine” and what is “ours?” These are religious questions, really – theological ones.

How strange, then, that even in churches, we don't talk freely about money. Oh, we argue about economics and the state budget, we talk about the things money can buy, but when it comes to our personal finances and our deeply held values about how much we deserve, or our fears of want, or our pride in earning – on these matters, we remain silent as the tomb. This can't be healthy, can it?

A year ago, when I offered to facilitate a support group for church members who were anxious about the sinking economy's effects on themselves and their families, only one person expressed an interest in forming such a group. I was surprised, but I probably shouldn't have been. Our self-worth is so closely tied to our financial worth that it's small wonder that we find it deeply unsettling to even consider telling a friend what we earn, what we owe, or how we struggle with hard choices about what we can afford. We hold our pain and fears about money as close to our chests as we do money itself. It's a loaded topic, loaded with deep religious meanings. How we spend our money and how we feel about that shows us something about how we spend our lives, and how we feel about that.

I wonder if any of you would care to join me for one or two evenings of writing our financial autobiographies? Perhaps we'd start by looking at the economic status of our parents and what we learned from them about the value of money, whether we saw ourselves as rich or poor or somewhere in between; then we could construct financial profiles of our siblings and ourselves: who borrows; who scrapes by; who spends more than they have; who saves; who worries, who plans. I think the answers to such questions might help us understand ourselves better and why we make the choices we do, and whether we're satisfied with those choices. It would take a good deal of trust to be part of such a conversation – perhaps more trust than we have. But how wonderful if we could use such an opportunity to render the whole subject less dangerous, less shameful, less burdensome and less irrational.

Confronting our own money demons would also better prepare us to take on the work of moving closer to economic justice in our country and abroad. The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee offers much information and many resources on how we might work together to ensure that workers enjoy full human rights: a living wage; the right to organize into unions; a more worker-friendly National Labor Relations Board; more state labor inspectors to stop the practice of altering time cards and forcing employees to work off the clock.

The UUSC partners with grass-roots organizations of women workers in Mexico, Kenya, Arkansas and Mississippi who are working for safer working conditions, higher wages and greater self-determination. With the interfaith coalition Let Justice Roll, it is working to increase the minimum wage to \$10.00 an hour in 2010.

At home and abroad, the wealth disparity between workers and owners grows and grows; globalization has brought about massive migration, creating new ethnic, racial and gender tensions; in the US and internationally, the “informal economy” – the precarious jobs that fall outside of legal and social protections – are rapidly displacing the formal sector that is subject to regulations and contracts.

Pre-existing problems have been exacerbated under pressure of the current recession. Pensions have disappeared; layoffs have forced remaining workers to take up the slack, working harder than ever; inexpensive temporary and part-time workers without benefits are replacing others who are laid off; undocumented workers desperate for work are subject to exploitation, receiving less than minimum wage, working long days without adequate breaks and days off, without recourse to the law for fear of deportation, while higher paying jobs are outsourced overseas; job security is a thing of the past. The covenant between workers and companies – do good work for us and you will have a job for life – as well as the unquestioned faith that our children will be better off than we – the faith in the American dream -- has been shattered for many.

So where does this leave us? I wish there were a clear answer. The economy does what it does, guided by forces over which you and I have no control. Profit is put before human need and economic inequality is inherent to our system. Globalization affects us all and is an unstoppable force with a life of its own. It feels like no one's in charge. It's easy to feel hopeless and helpless.

Yet the words of reformer and founder of *The Catholic Worker*, Dorothy Day, ring true and timeless. "People say, what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time... no one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do."

The question of economic reform is so vast, so complex, so tangled with other issues of race and competing local interests, and the advocates of different theories seem so sure of themselves and so inflexible. Yet, if we choose to, we can act. As individuals, we can lobby our congress to raise the minimum wage to one that will keep full time workers above the poverty line. We can work to fund public education so that the poorest neighborhoods need not have the poorest schools and the children of the poor need not be condemned to a life of poverty. We can buy fair trade and sweat-free products, that is, products that are not produced by exploiting workers, and when possible, buy union-made goods.

As a congregation, we can engage in respectful and compassionate listening to one another's stories. We can, if we choose, establish a short-term chalice circle to discuss money and our relationship to it, or another kind of group called a Common Security Club for the purpose of learning, mutual support and collective action. We can investigate partnerships with local worker justice coalitions. And, as Dorothy Day also said, we can remember that "a pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions; each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that."

Any work that we do to encourage justice, equity and compassion in our lives and in society has that ripple effect. Whether we choose as a congregation or as a denomination to work for worker justice or diversity or environmental justice or some other issue; whether we donate to food banks or disaster relief or the candidate of our choice, everything we do has that ripple effect. Seen in isolation, our small efforts seem

pointless; the need is so vast. Yet, this is how we make change, one step at a time, one brick at a time.

If any of you would like to work with me to engage this congregation in the area of economic justice – or to help establish a strong social action program that will focus on the issue of your choice -- talk to me. Whether you come to me or I come to you, you will be hearing more about this.

Our social justice efforts in the past have been sporadic. Survival and day to day concerns have pre-empted our work in this area. It has been difficult to create the necessary momentum when our numbers are so small and we all have so many demands on our time. Nevertheless, I feel we must keep trying, for our own sakes as well as the world's. I would like to help us define our church's mission to include a system of sustainable ongoing efforts, guided by our principles and fueled by a growing sense of a larger community. A program that satisfies our spirits and need to be of use as well as one that is effective and makes a difference to our neighbors.

I hope that in the months and years to come, this church will develop a social action program that will invite everyone to contribute to it in the manner and to the degree they find possible and satisfying. Some of us are most drawn to hands-on direct service to those in need. Others may engage in teaching and public witness, while still others will want to work for systemic change. Some will be able and willing to contribute one or two hours; others will want to commit to ongoing work as leaders.

There is room for all, and need for all. In the name of justice, we are called to share the roses and the bread – the good things of life and the necessities. “No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is too much work to do.” May we be, in the words of Isaiah, like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail,” whose ripples, our words, thoughts and deeds, spread far and wide, in the name of justice.

Amen.