

Isaiah 58:6-12
Matthew 25: 34-40

Spiritual Foundations

Thank you for the chance to share this time of worship with you. As some of you know, I spent a good portion of my adult life in a UU congregation in New York City. Being here today is a homecoming to a tradition I deeply admire.

I am also grateful to be here because of the long relationship between All Souls and the New London Homeless Hospitality Center. Since we jointly began this work in 2003 the All Souls/HHC partnership has grown deeper. We are now using both the lower and second level of your Huntington Street building to house our daytime hospitality center and our housing program. But our partnership doesn't end with space.

Dozens of All Souls members are regular volunteers at our day and night time programs. This congregation has offered an open welcome to our guests to join in your worship life. Members of this congregation have been remarkably generous in their financial support for our work. Members like Barbara and John Metz have shared their talents in programs that benefit our work. Several times each week groups of guests come over to this building to use the showers you so generously built into your new site. And last, but certainly not least, Carolyn Patierno has provided amazing leadership for our Board. On a personal level I can never thank Carolyn enough—without her guidance and support I'm not sure I would be standing here today.

The work we have done together has been remarkable. In our last fiscal year, we provided 20,550 person nights of emergency shelter. Over that year 500 different individuals were offered a place of safety and welcome instead of facing a night on the street, in their car or on a couch in a place they didn't feel safe.

At our daytime hospitality center here at All Souls we recorded 31,020 visits last year—on a busy day over 100 people visit our daytime hospitality center. 94 individuals returned to permanent housing with assistance from HHC. Many more, of course, found housing on their own, but for some, our financial and housing location assistance made the difference between a long shelter stay and a prompt return to the dignity and independence that permanent housing offers.

We cannot even image the human impact of these numbers. There were literally thousands of times last year that our homeless neighbors turned to us knowing that they would find welcome and help in finding the services they need.

I could go on to catalog the people who got help entering treatment, the people with serious mental health challenges who got help they would never have

been able to find on their own, the people with serious illnesses who got linked to health care, the people we helped apply for disability benefits, the people we helped get home to their families and so much more.

All these accomplishments are important. We will never, never know the suffering we helped avoid and the doorways we opened for people. I am so proud of the HHC staff and volunteers who do the difficult work of hospitality day in day out. I have not a moment hesitation in going out seeking financial support for what we are doing at HHC because I know we work hard to cost effectively address problems other people would turn away from.

As I work to raise money to support HHC, it is the tangible...measurable impacts that I highlight. But there are actually deeper reasons....what I can only call spiritual reasons, that I am so passionate about the work of HHC. I believe that our work at HHC matters not just for the practical good it does but also because it makes a spiritual statement about the way the world should work...because it affirms important spiritual truths. I'd like to take a few minutes to explore some of the spiritual implications that have been important to me.

Since my days in the UU, I have gradually fallen more and more in love with Jesus and the Christian tradition that seeks to follow him faithfully. While I do not take the bible literally, I do take the bible very seriously. I see myself as a person rooted in a scriptural tradition. Even in a progressive Christianity, we hold the bible as sacred word. I believe, therefore, that Christian faithfulness includes looking to scripture for guidance in living my day-to-day life.

Now, one does not need to be a biblical scholar to know that over and over and over scripture—both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament—tells us that we are to care for those who lack clothing, food and shelter... we are virtually commanded to watch out for the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the poor.

In our well known reading from Isaiah, God's will is made clear—feed the hungry, free the oppressed, house the homeless, reach out to the afflicted. In our even better known passage from Matthew, nothing is given higher importance for followers of Jesus than providing clothing, food and hospitality for “the least of these”.

I am always amazed at Christians who feel compelled to launch a virtual crusade in opposition to same sex relationships based on a few obscure words in bible but can, at the same time, feel comfortable leaving a sizable number of our brothers and sisters without food, clothing or a place to live. Christians who insist that government step in and regulate who someone can love but want a hands off government policy when it comes to the poor, the naked, the homeless or the hungry.

While the bible is not an infallible manual of appropriate behavior, I feel there is an important Christian spiritual discipline in trying to live out the core teachings of scripture. If being a Christian means something, for me it has to start with at least a longing to live out the clear scriptural dictates of charity and care. To me, our work at HHC falls squarely within the biblical mandate to provide for those who have nothing. Participating in this work is, therefore a form of faithfulness.

But the spiritual implications of addressing homelessness go even deeper. While the requirement to care for those on the margin is explicit in scripture, the reason for that injunction is subtler. I would propose this morning that at least one of the reasons we are called to care for those on the margin grows from a particular worldview. In this biblical—and more broadly spiritual—way of seeing the world, creation is understood as an interconnected web...a living organism...a unified system.

On the surface we see separation—poor/rich, white/black, woman/man, liberal/conservative, American/Mexican even human/non-human. But the deepest spiritual thinking—in Judaism, in Christianity, in Buddhism and many other traditions—says that separation is an illusion that disguises a fundamental unity and interconnection of all things. In the Buddhist tradition this insight is called “inter-being”. In Christianity we talk of all of creation existing within God. The UU tradition has a strong emphasis on the unity and interconnectedness of creation.

If creation really is an interconnected web, and I believe with all my heart that it is, then all of creation is diminished when some of our brothers and sisters are brought low by hunger and homelessness. If we are part of a web of creation, our own survival is placed in danger when we allow some of the threads of this web to be damaged by poverty.

When we build a safety net that keeps our brothers and sisters from utter despair we are doing the sacred work called Tikun Olam in the Jewish tradition—we are part of the healing of creation. When we say that each person’s good is connected to the good of all we are affirming a world view of interdependence instead of traditional rugged American self reliance. We are making a deeply spiritual statement about how any of us achieve the fullness of life—we are saying that it isn’t just individual effort that matters but that our own well being is inextricably bound up with the well being of our neighbors. We are saying that no one is an island...that we are in this together...that for our own good we need to consider the good of all.

When we care for our homeless neighbors we are also making a deeply spiritual statement about what it means to be a human being. We are saying something very biblical and also very radical—we are saying that every human being has inherent worth. The UU principles say this. In the Jewish and Christian

tradition we point to this understanding when we say that every human being is a child of God...made in the image of God.

If every human being has some God given inherent worth then, in my view, every human being deserves at least the minimal dignity of a place to sleep, food to eat, clothing to wear and care when they become ill. We offer very little at the shelter—a bed available from 7:00 at night to 7:00 in the morning in a room shared with 25 other people. Two bathrooms and a jerry-rigged shower shared with 50 or 60 or even 70 others. But as little as we do, there are still those who question if everyone deserves even this thread of human comfort and dignity. There are still those who want us to turn away people who have been in prison...people who want us to turn away those who are still struggling with substance abuse because they don't deserve the little we have to offer.

But if we take seriously the spiritual principle that every human being has worth...is loved by God...has within them the spirit of Christ even if it isn't easy to see, then how could we do anything but open our doors as wide as we can and offer the very best that we can? I am often heartbroken that we cannot yet offer a space that is better designed, cleaner and more welcoming. I am often discouraged that we have too many guests to provide the kind of one-on-one attention they need. But I am never concerned that people don't deserve the little we can do.

So if these are the principles, how are we doing in living them out?

Do we offer the expansive hospitality that scripture requires? No, we do not. There are days we run out of space. For the first time this spring we had to implement a waiting list. Sometimes people with very serious health or mental health challenges are beyond our capacity to safely serve. But perfection is not the measure, what we are doing is drawing this one community closer to the goal of caring hospitality for all.

Do we do enough to mend the tears in the web of creation that homelessness creates? No, we do not. Sometimes we don't know how to help bind up what is broken. We are painfully aware that shelter alone is not the answer. But perfection is not the measure, what we are doing is drawing this community closer to the goal of shalom where every part is in right relationship with every other part.

Do we treat everyone who passes through our doors with the dignity they deserve? No, we do not. Sometimes our patience fails. Sometimes we don't know the right thing to say. But perfection is not the measure, what we are doing is, I hope, helping hundreds of people hear that they are worthwhile, even precious, despite the fact that they have lost almost everything the world says makes people valuable.

At the First Congregational Church here in New London we just finished a part of the church year where our focus is directed to the letter of James. I would like to close with a few verses using the Message version which is a modern translation of this ancient text.

14 Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? **15** For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved **16** and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup - where does that get you? **17** Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

I am so grateful that every day the work of HHC helps keep my God-talk from becoming outrageous nonsense.

Amen

Rev. Catherine Zall
First Congregational Church in New London
Visiting at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Congregation

September 30, 2012