

Human Beings, not Hu-machines

Sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered 12/11/2016

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Among the various items of news I saw this week, here's an interesting one: The online retailer Amazon dot com opened its very own grocery store this week on its Seattle-based campus, which – for the time being – is only open to employees. That's not what's interesting or newsworthy about it, though. What's interesting is the store doesn't have any cashiers, nor does it have cash registers or checkout lines. I'm not quite clear on precisely how it works technologically, but the upshot is people – employees, and maybe, eventually, others with proper accounts set up – can walk into the store, pull things off the shelf, and walk out. Some network of sensors and transcribers and wireless doohickeys makes sure that each customer gets correctly billed for all items he or she put in his or her ecologically sound reusable grocery bag after each visit.

Ain't technology grand?

Yes, this is newsworthy, it seems from reading about it, because it might represent the next step in the ongoing automation of traditional labor, and might lead to the elimination of one of the more visible employee categories in the retail sector. This broader pattern causes many of us concern, for many good reasons. It very well might contribute to reduced wages and opportunities for working class people, and probably contributes to our ongoing increase in economic inequality.

But beyond the practical, economic questions it raises, this new store and its technology is also disturbing on what I'll call a spiritual plane, for it

is a reminder about all the little baby steps we take year after year making our world more mechanized, and, in the process, less human.

(Self-checkout, internal conflict)

Economists – who I believe are the true lords of the modern world, for they are given credence far beyond that which they deserve, not because of their inherent abilities or disabilities but because there is so much fear driving interest in their profession's outcomes – economists have a tendency to distill the humanity of every person down to two functions: that of producer and that of consumer. And since producers need consumers, and consumers need producers, we all get caught in an endless cycle of produce, consume, produce more, consume more. This tends to kill the spiritual aspect of human existence – the spiritual aspect that is well articulated in the second principle of the Unitarian Universalist covenant – to affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

As most of you know, I've just started offering a series of sermons on the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism, and this Sunday we're on this second one. A series like this is a good thing for a Minister like me to do every so often, but I admit – as I said a few weeks ago following our national election – that this winter seems like the time is right to do this now. As we're recovering from this election season and preparing to inaugurate a new administration, one that, as I also articulated a few weeks ago, seems at this point to be in outright opposition to the spiritual values promoted in our UU Covenant, it is more important than ever to visit these principles, underscore them, and find new and innovative ways that we practice them in both our personal and public lives. And that is no

more true than it is for this second principle – that we are to affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Or we might say – again, as I hinted at a few weeks ago when I talked about our first principle – justice, equity, and compassion in *all our* relations. But more on that detail in a minute.

In tying these principles to the political environment of today, I should note that religious liberalism, like that practiced by Unitarian Universalists, is not the same thing as political liberalism. As a religious liberal, I fully recognize that *political* conservatism – at least a brand of it I once knew – is not necessarily in conflict with the values of a *religious* liberal. There are very good arguments to be made about the proper role of government, the most effective ways to alleviate poverty both inside and outside of government programs, and potential negative side effects of offering too many entitlements. Even though I admit to personally not agreeing with most of them, I recognize that they are not inconsistent with things like the second principle of Unitarian Universalism. But what we're facing today from the incoming administration and many of their supporters is not so much a position that says the best way to promote justice, equity, and compassion is outside of government programs; what we're seeing is an outright rejection of justice, equity, and compassion as virtues at all. This should be worrisome for *all* religious people, liberal and conservative alike. For the very core of religion is to bind together that which has been broken, and the tools we use to bind together the human family are values such as justice, equity, and compassion.

Without these values, there isn't much to say about human relations at all; for without them, we wind up treating each other more like machines

than real human beings – like we really all are just producers and consumers. This is easy to see when we look at the worldview envisioned by the one person who probably as much as anyone else is responsible for elevating this compassion-less attitude to such popularity: the mid-twentieth century novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand. Ms. Rand, an émigré of Stalin’s Soviet Union who undoubtedly saw much injustice as well as the perils of unrestrained collectivism, became popular in the United States for writing a few very long second-rate novels and some third-rate philosophy that explicitly advocated *against* things like justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Her philosophy was called “objectivism,” and she argued that these values were immoral because, in her view, human beings basically *are* machines. We each seek out our own safety, comfort, and enjoyments, and when we do so unencumbered by any sentimental attachment to fairness, everybody wins. Some people maintain that her philosophy was a modern incarnation of classical *lassiez-faire* economics, which is not true. Most classical economists, including Adam Smith, maintain that the workings of the market and society *depend* on abundant human charity and compassion to complement what the market cannot deliver, which is substantial. Ms. Rand actually went so far as to say that charity was an evil in and of itself – whether it was through government or any other institution.

We could, of course, simply shrug our shoulders and say “Oh, well. She certainly tried hard to defend such a philosophy, but that’s just one person’s work.” But the thing is, Ayn Rand’s work remains amazingly popular and stubbornly persistent in America today. It is, I believe, largely implicit in the ascendancy of Donald Trump to the threshold of the oval

office. His entire campaign, and indeed the bulk of his public life, at its best, is simply a personification of the ethic that as long as you make money you're good, no matter who or what you trample upon to do so. Hence his casual dismissal of the accusation that he might not have paid any income taxes for quite a number of years by saying "That makes me smart." Any sense of civic responsibility is simply thrown out the window, a terrible shame for the one who has been chosen to be our civic leader. Indeed, I've heard the sentiment from a number of people who supported Trump that while they don't embrace his bigotry, misogyny, xenophobia or outright cruelty, they voted for him because they thought he'd turn the economy around. In other words, as a friend of mine said, your paycheck is more important than people's dignity.

One irony of Ms. Rand's work being popular is her avowed atheism, a stance that doesn't help her with many conservatives who are evangelistic Christians. I've been in conversation with some who quietly dismiss her atheism as her one flaw, even as they uphold her philosophy as a model for human relationships. This is one hundred and eighty degrees backwards. In rejecting God, she also rejected the best thing about God: that God compels people to act justly, equitably, and with compassion. I don't care that she rejects God per se – as I doubt many of you do, either. But if you're going to reject God, reject the worst aspects of patriarchal thinking, like compulsion or forced submission. Don't reject those aspects of God that all people of good conscience agree upon.

Ms. Rand's work takes one particular theory of economic behavior – the idea that people left to pursue their economic well-being in an open marketplace will generate the greatest productivity – and extrapolates that

model into all endeavors of human life. In a word, she assumes we're all machines, and our lives are worthy only doing those things that an economic machine would do: producing and consuming.

But we're not hu-machines; we're human beings.

This is where we come in to practice our principles, including this second one. One important way that we affirm and promote these values is simply in our coming together in this community. It is one reason we are here this morning. We seek religious community to find another way to be together in relationships based on justice, equity, and compassion. We seek to find a way for us not to be pitted one against the other, but to practice the classical definition of the word "religious", which is from the Latin *religia*, which is to bind together. To bind together is what we do.

To practice promoting justice, equity, and compassion in human relations implies that we have faith that these values make a difference. It means we don't treat each other like machines, but like human beings. Fragile, flawed, often illogical, sometimes downright crazy, and even – perish the thought – sometimes unproductive human beings. It is precisely because of our frailty and flaws that we affirm and promote these values. How do we do this?

First, we practice justice. To practice justice is to heed what Martin Luther King called for when he defined justice as being love and power working together. "Now, we've got to get this thing right," he said. "What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic." To promote justice in our relationships means we treat others as *loving* partners, and use the

power of our relationships to help bend arc of the world toward one that is more fair. When we come to church and practice just relationships, we are doing more than forming good friends. We are acting on faith. We are saying we can find an alternative to the mechanized world in which we're nothing but producers and consumers. Religious communities like this are great because we are not here to produce or consume, we are here to form and nurture human relationships that are worthy simply because they *are*. We are showing our children, and indeed, everyone, that there is another way – a way to be *with* each other, not against one another. We are affirming and promoting justice simply by being together – not to earn money or win friends or influence people, but being together simply to learn how to be better people, to affirm and promote the value of justice.

We also practice justice in the values we promote in our lives and community. This is the element of this practice that is so vital in our time and place. We advocate for policies and priorities that recognize the inherent injustice in a society in which many people, by nature of their birth or other circumstances, have far less power than others. We must continue to work to correct this imbalance by empowering the disinherited, to use Rev. Howard Thurman's phrase, and by being willing to curtail the exercise of our own power sometimes in deference to those less fortunate.

Second, we practice equity – we seek relationships that are based on equity. That doesn't mean we're all the same, nor does it mean we're all "equal" necessarily. We're varied and diverse, as any natural human community is, but we affirm and promote equity as a way of saying that we all have the same *value*. Young and old, rich and poor, genius and not-so-genius, productive and not. If we leave our valuation to the mechanics of

the marketplace, we are far from equal, and we risk valuing human life based only on our work as producers and consumers. So we promote equity as a corrective, to affirm that in the end – in the eyes of God, some may say – we all have value; with that, our relationships become more inclined toward mutuality and trust rather than exploitation. Many Unitarian Universalist thinkers have expanded on this idea and developed an ethic of “right relationship”, which is a way of paying attention to relationship itself as a thing of value from an ethical standpoint. Much of classical theology and ethics places value on individual persons, and this is the foundation for the classical economic theories I talked about. But we are learning to see the value in relationships as something of equal importance. A “right” relationship is one in which the parties don’t dominate, but cooperate. Of course we don’t live in an ideal world – some of us are naturally more assertive than others, and in a complex web of relationships that is a community, some are bound to be more powerful than others. But what we do is strive to form relationships that are more equitable than they’d be without our effort.

And, finally, we practice compassion. We may sometimes think it is unnecessary to even mention compassion. Of course we strive to promote compassion, and we don’t really need a religious community to help us do that. But I caution us not to be lulled in to a simplistic idea of what compassion is – for in reality, it is perhaps the most difficult of these three principles to practice. To be compassionate is more than simply pitying people, feeling sorry for them, or trying to help them. Here again I draw on another classical definition – two, actually, to clarify what compassion asks of us. We have the Latin *passion*, which means to suffer, and the Greek

co-, which means together with. To have compassion is to suffer with someone, to really feel and know one's pain. To practice compassion in human relations is to not ignore injustice and inequality, nor simply give a few dollars to some nice charity and call ourselves compassionate. It means we are called to *live with* the suffering of others, to feel the pain it causes, and to resolve to work together with those in need to begin the process of healing.

(Importance of knowing the people in the shelter.)

As I said before, these values of justice, equity, and compassion wind up sounding – at least to hear me tell it – an awful lot like a political agenda these days. While I mean it when I believe we need to continue to discern the value of political conservatism alongside religious liberalism, I also believe it is a tragedy to let a domineering political dialogue squelch our calling to put into practice our religious values. The intensity and omnipresence of political “speech” these days threatens to drown out other needed voices, and to the extent that *any* political agenda actively diminishes the role of justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, it is our job as religious liberals to counteract that agenda. In a word, we need to respect differing political viewpoints, but we need not – and should not – be stifled by them.

I spoke briefly when I preached about our first principle a few weeks ago – “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” – of the idea that we might expand that principle to include all beings, not just persons. To that I responded that a far better idea, in my mind, would be to change this second principle to be “justice, equity, and compassion in *all my* relations,” rather than in just human relations. And one reason I advocate for this is

because I think differently about this second principle than I do the first, namely, in the sense that the second is far better seen as an objective principle, while I think the first should be held up more subjectively. In other words, the first principle has tremendous value not only prescribing how I treat others, but also by how I am treated myself, and how I feel about my identity. A religious community proclaiming that every person – you and me and everyone who walks in those doors – has inherent worth and dignity is a powerful and healing religious community. On the other hand, practicing this second principle is most valuable when it is done without regard to the object of my actions. I practice justice, equity, and compassion as a spiritual discipline for myself regardless of who or what I am interacting with, for it is a principle that is rooted in relationship rather than ontology. Even more than the first one, this is about what we do more than it is about what is. And just as our first principle gives us the biggest challenge when we try to see the inherent worth and dignity in people who seem dastardly, this second principle’s biggest challenge – and its most important imperative – is to practice justice, equity, and compassion no matter how I feel I’m being treated. This doesn’t mean we ever need to be trampled upon, for we should remember that justice is both power and love working together. But it does mean we call upon the deep wellsprings of our faith when we are challenged, and remember that what makes us human and not machine is our capacity for justice, equity, and compassion. That’s where our heart speaks.

This last point is well-made by the late Thomas Merton, who died forty-eight years ago yesterday. “Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in

fact, it's nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy."

May we continue to work with the great spirit of life which calls us to co-create a world in which justice, equity, and compassion in all our relations prevails.

That's what we're here to do. Let's do it together.



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