

Got Rights?
--a service for UUSC Justice Weekend--
Rev. Mark Stringer
First Unitarian Church of Des Moines
May 2&3, 2009

"Give to every human being every right that you claim for yourself."—Famous orator,
agnostic and Illinois Attorney General, Robert Green Ingersoll.(1833-1899)

Call to Gather Rev. Mark Stringer

Welcome to your church.

Our freedom brought us here this morning.

Our freedom to believe as we wish.

Our freedom to worship as we wish.

Our freedom to engage with the world, or not, as we wish.

Welcome to your church.

May our gathering further enrich this freedom we share

This freedom to believe, to worship, to engage as we wish

so that this freedom might be more abundant for all.

Introducing the Theme UUSC Justice Weekend

This weekend marks our fourth annual UUSC Justice Weekend service.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is a nonsectarian organization that seeks to advance human rights and social justice in the United States and around the world. The mission of the UUSC is guided not only by the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism, but also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an extraordinary document adopted by the United Nations 60 years ago this past December, a document that has spawned more than 80 international human rights treaties and declarations. The focus of our Justice Weekend service has always been related, one way or another, to one or more of the rights expressed in this Declaration. So to introduce our theme today, we will read a simplified version of the Declaration responsively.

Responsive Reading "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights"
(simplified by Amnesty International)

We are all born free and equal. We all have our own thoughts and ideas. We should all be treated in the same way.

These rights belong to everybody, whatever our differences.

We all have the right to life and to live in freedom and safety.

Nobody has any right to make us a slave. We cannot make anyone else our slave.

Nobody has any right to hurt or to torture us.

Everyone has the right to be protected by the law.

The law is the same for everyone. It must treat us all fairly.

We can all ask for the law to help when we are not treated fairly.

Nobody has the right to put us in prison without a good reason to keep us there or to send us away from our country.

If we are put on trial, this should be in public. The people who try us should not let anyone tell them what to do.

If people say we did a bad thing we have the right to show it is not true.

Nobody should try to harm our good name. Nobody has the right to come into our home, open our letters, or bother us or our family without a good reason.

We all have the right to go where we want in our own country and to travel abroad as we wish.

If we are frightened of being badly treated in our own country, we all have the right to run away to another country to be safe.

We all have the right to belong to a country.

Every grown up has the right to marry and have a family if they want to. Men and women have the same rights when they are married, and when they are separated.

Everyone has the right to own things or share them. Nobody should take our things from us without a good reason.

We all have the right to believe in whatever we like, to have a religion, and to change it if we wish.

We all have the right to make up our own minds, to think what we like, to say what we think, and to share our ideas with other people.

We all have the right to meet our friends and to work together in peace to defend our rights. Nobody can make us join a group if we don't want to.

We all have the right to take part in the government of our country.

Every grown up should be allowed to choose their own leaders.

We all have the right to a home, enough money to live on and medical help if we are ill.

Music, art, craft and sport are for everyone to enjoy.

Every grown up has the right to a job, to a fair wage for their work, and to join a trade union.

We all have the right to rest from work and relax.

We all have the right to a good life. Mothers and children and people who are old, unemployed or disabled have the right to be cared for.

We all have a right to education and to finish primary school which should be free.

We should be able to learn a career or make use of all our skills.

Our parents have the right to choose how and what we learn.

We should learn about the United Nations and about how to get on with other people and respect their rights.

We all have the right to our own way of life, and to enjoy the good things that science and learning bring.

There must be proper order so we can all enjoy rights and freedoms in our country and all over the world.

We have a duty to other people and we should protect their rights and freedoms.

All: Nobody can take these rights and freedoms from us.

Reflection Robert Anderson

Thanks for the opportunity to speak this morning. And a special thank you to the several dozen individual members who have been involved with refugee support and other initiatives of the International Peace and Justice Task Force at First Unitarian.

I'm sure that many of you are listeners to National Public Radio. I'd like to begin with a "this I believe" statement. If I picked a label I consider myself a Quaker-Unitarian.

I believe that God exists and the essence of that God is love. I believe that every human being has the capacity of love or the essence of God within them and we can see models of that love in Dr. Martin Luther King, Ghandi and Jesus, not in their tragic deaths, but in their lives.

I believe that our life is a gift and is very short. I have mentioned that my only child took his own life at the age of 20. A few years later both of my parents died in their early seventies. In one way we can say that my son's life was short. But when we consider a seventy or 100-year life compared to the 15 billion years of the universe, we have to understand that each of our lives will be very

short, but our spirit of love lives on in others. It doesn't live through our blood, but through the love that we have shared. That gives us a responsibility and an opportunity every day.

I believe that one role of a church is to help members carry out that responsibility. That's why I am grateful that First Unitarian Church is identifying so many opportunities for action here in Des Moines and around the world. Whether you get involved with the International Peace and Justice task force, Join the UU Service Committee, or one of the numerous other opportunities for action or focus on your family, I believe it is important to make the most of our short lives. I am 64, and I also believe that the next four years will be the most important time for our country and our world in my lifetime. I also believe that too many Americans are putting too much of the burden for change on President Obama and not enough on ourselves.

Among other areas, our task force is looking at issues affecting refugees and immigrants because that is one clear area where we can "Think Globally, and Act Locally." The national UU Service Committee has a similar local and global emphasis in its four focus areas Rights in Humanitarian Crises, Civil Liberties, Economic Justice and Environmental Justice.

I am focusing my personal energy on connecting Iowa with the world because that has been my career for more than twenty years. The work has increased meaning in my own life and increased my chance to learn. I hope more members and non-members will get involved in our effort.

If you want to be informed, sign a contact information sheet at the table outside.

There are many ways to support financially, including joining the UU Service Committee.

Help us recruit others to assist the refugee or immigration effort or to find host families for African high school students who have an opportunity to come to Des Moines next year. Their program was developed by Senator Kennedy and Senator Luger to help young persons in countries with significant Muslim populations learn about the United States.

I have found that as I learn more about the world, I also learn more about myself and my own country and culture. Consider joining First Unitarian Church in Des Moines and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee to make a difference in your own life and the world.

Sermon

"Got Rights?"

Rev. Stringer

Many of you know one of our members, Stephen Lauer, and if you don't, you should, though you'll have to wait at least a month or two to have a chance, as he is currently studying in South Africa, as part of his work as a Drake University undergraduate student. Stephen is a thoughtful young man interested in international advocacy and human rights, and his time spent in South Africa has only further advanced his passion around these issues. During his time overseas, Stephen has been e-mailing me and others with thoughts and reflections that have bubbled up for him in his new surroundings. He will no doubt be sharing some of these ideas with you all when he offers a sermon for us on August 2nd. I trust I won't steal his thunder by sharing with you one of his discoveries. A few weeks back he wrote:

I've begun to re-conceptualize poverty in a way that allows me to explain to myself why I care. [A local man] at...a Children's Center event...mentioned to me how many people are unable to express their freedom because of the constraints of their poverty. As someone who has never liked the idea of dedicating my life to getting people more "stuff", [my friend's comment] provides me with an alternative explanation for my concern for the poor. Rather than seeing myself as alleviating a deficiency of "stuff", I can see myself as helping to create an environment where people can be free.

Helping to create an environment where people can be free.

Stephen's reframing his own concern for the rights of others as a concern primarily based in the desire for people to be free hit home for me, especially as I studied the history of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which at its core, is all about freedom.

At the conclusion of World War II, as the world was still reeling from the atrocities of that brutal conflict, and even the nations who had been allied against the rise of fascism were suspicious of one another, uncertainties over how to deal with the perpetrators of war crimes and questions about the sovereignty of nations blended with an underlying need for nations to work together to create a climate of responsibility for the worth and dignity of all peoples. These were complicated times when the victors were jostling for positions of power and influence in a new world order. And yet, the rallying cries that had driven the Allies to victory, in particular Franklin Roosevelt's 1941 "four freedoms" speech, which proclaimed that a secure world would depend on freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear, had inspired the citizens of the world to yearn not only for peace, but for a more free and dignified existence. The wartime rhetoric of the allies was more than just words to people who had been held down for so long. It became the impetus for action. So when the first steps towards a UN Charter were taken by the major world powers, and the conversations were focused more on measures aimed at what we might call surface-level maintenance of international peace and security, representatives from the less powerful nations pushed back, demanding that the wartime rhetoric of freedom be reaffirmed with statements in the Charter that would proactively address the real reasons for aggression and conflict, which always had at their root the trampling of human rights, the withholding of human freedom and dignity.¹

The concept of human rights was not unknown at the time of the Charter's drafting, but the definition of the term was variable depending on who was doing the defining. Human rights have always been more subjective than not, and most often defined by the powerful as a means to maintain the status quo, a fact clearly articulated as long ago as 416 BC: As the Athenian navy prepared to invade and conquer the island of Melos, and the islanders pleaded for

¹ Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001) pp. 15-16.

mercy, the reported Athenian response was: "You know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."²

And yet, the destruction of World War II had not just leveled much of Europe and parts of Japan, it had leveled the playing field in how the world would view human rights. By the time the UN Charter was signed in June of 1945, principles of human rights were present in several places, including in the Preamble, which articulated "faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large or small...".

This prominent placement of human rights as an overarching value and expectation of the world community's desire to promote and protect peace was thankfully only the beginning. For in December of 1948, under the chairmanship of Eleanor Roosevelt, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was completed and adopted by the UN General Assembly in Paris. The drafters of the Declaration had received input and had been thereby influenced by belief systems and political and religious traditions from all over the globe. Because of this breadth of input and the Declaration's design toward universal application, it is a unique document in history, the "international Magna Carta" of humanity, as Eleanor Roosevelt proclaimed upon its adoption. It is intended to stand above political ideologies, cultural tendencies, and provincial pre-dispositions. It exists to give the world community a tool by which to seek and protect justice, to call each other into account, and to remind ourselves that human dignity transcends religious differences or even our understandings of natural law. As articulated in the Declaration, human rights are a necessary component of our very aliveness, and must be promoted and preserved at all costs.

Hernan Santa Cruz, a Chilean member of the sub-committee that helped draft the Declaration wrote:

"I perceived clearly that I was participating in a truly significant historic event in which a consensus had been reached as to the supreme value of the human person, a value that did not originate in the decision of a worldly power, but rather in the fact of existing—which gave rise to the inalienable right to live free from want and oppression and to fully develop one's personality.

² Ibid., p. xv

In the Great Hall, there was an atmosphere of genuine solidarity and brotherhood among men and women from all latitudes, the like of which I have not seen again in any international setting."³

As wonderful as the vibe in the room when the Declaration was drafted, and as important as the worldwide influence the Declaration has had, a document that is not only the most translated piece of writing in the history of the world, we all know that the human rights outlined in the Declaration are not enjoyed by all our global sisters and brothers. In the past at this UUSC service, we have focused on humanitarian crises such as the genocide in Darfur, and the need for environmental justice in battles over the human right to water in various parts of the world. And it's not just so-called evildoers outside of the United States who have disregarded these universal human rights. One of the most striking things I have had to consider as I have prepared for this service, is how many of the rights read earlier have been compromised by our own nation's government and citizens in just the past few years alone. Accusations of torture perpetrated in our nation's name have not been adequately refuted, justice has not been brought nor restitution paid...and we cannot yet be assured that torture will not take place in our name again, regardless of the change of administrations. Particularly when we consider that a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center revealed that 54% of Americans who attend church weekly believe that torture against suspected terrorists is often or sometimes justified.⁴ How times have changed! When the Declaration was being drafted 60 years ago, religious voices on behalf of human rights were some of the loudest and most uncompromising. (The apparent change in the role of religion in this debate is even more reason why Unitarian Universalists and other progressive-minded religious people need to participate in the public dialogue as another voice of the faithful.) In other matters of human rights, it is not a secret that at least some of our civil liberties have been compromised in the name of security as we have allowed our fear of terrorism to trump the very freedoms our nation often claims to symbolize. And the right to a living wage is not yet attainable by millions of our fellow citizens; in fact, up until last year, our neighboring state of Kansas had a minimum wage of \$2.65 per hour, which meant a full-time worker in Wichita or Topeka could have made less than \$6,000 per year! These are just some of the issues that the UUSC works on here in the US.

³ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/60UDHR/HRD07infokitEN.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/04/30/religion.torture/index.html>

But there are more human rights issues for us to tackle here, too. There is the health care crisis in our country, [outlined for us this weekend when our congregation's task force for Universal Health Care convened a Health Care Symposium here], a crisis that has left millions of our citizens without adequate preventative health care options and has the US paying more than double for health care (per capita) than many of our global neighbors...without necessarily receiving better care.

And, let's not look past the newly won freedom to marry for all lowans, against which many in this state continue to fight. Shortly after the Supreme Court ruling, I celebrated this victory on my Facebook page, prompting a less progressive-minded acquaintance from high school to respond with the posting of Bible verses and an exhortation to "read the Word of God, not what men and courts say about what is right or wrong!" After I returned his volley with a friendly but pointed comment about not mixing up perceived religious dogma with civil rights, another minister friend joined in by referring back to article 16 of the Declaration we celebrate today, which articulates the "right to marriage and family." "Marriage," he wrote, "is not just a civil right. It is a human right."

As severe as the obvious infringements on human rights can be, we may have reason to wonder why we should be celebrating the Declaration. But think of where we would be without it. The fact is that the Declaration continues to influence opinion and legislation worldwide, and provides the kind of basis for action that drives not only the UUSC in its work, but which could inspire each of us, too, as we become more familiar and motivated by its clear articulation of the need for human worth and dignity to be nurtured and protected.

All that said, the circumstances remain complicated both here and abroad, as another church member Darcie Vandegrift recently explained to me. Darcie, a committed supporter of the UUSC, has spent the year on a Fulbright Fellowship with her husband and children in Venezuela. When she saw the theme of this year's UUSC service, she wrote:

"We think about the issue of human rights so much living in Venezuela this year, learning how our own interests and prejudices shape which rights we emphasize and which are downplayed. Economic rights such as education and health care are respected and prioritized here in a way we can only imagine in the US, but the student government president of a local

campus was shot in the head by police during a protest yesterday. ...[in this] country...the rights of Muslims (e.g., Palestine) are much more crucial, while issues of the Sudan and the Congo are silenced. The theological questions, for me, have been raised: how do we remove our blinders on human rights, especially since we cannot possibly know or act effectively about the entire world? What are we called to do? I am less certain of the answers now than I was in Des Moines."

Darcie's reflections and questions remind us of the complexities of any action on behalf of "the common good" that is not grounded in a willingness to see the world through the eyes of others, to engage with our fellow citizens with an expectation that we always have more to learn than to teach, and a desire to base all that we do in an ever-developing understanding of our common humanity, so powerfully expressed when we strive to alleviate misery and to build and nurture a world community with peace and justice for all. Perhaps impossible goals, but worth our devotion nonetheless. For as 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker said, in words later echoed by Martin Luther King, Jr., "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." May each of us, in the ways we can, be about that bending.

Closing Words From the Talmud

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.

Love mercy now. Do justly now. Walk humbly now.

You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.