

Occupy the Common Good

Roger Jones, Family Minister
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Unitarian Universalist Society
Sacramento, CA

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*Justice will not be served until
those who are unaffected
are as outraged as those who are.*

--BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

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Hymns: We Sing Now Together (67), Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor (123), My Life Flows on in Endless Song (108). Reading: “The Limits of Tyrants,” by Frederick Douglass (579). All in *Singing the Living Tradition*. Music: A. Dvorak, Sonatina for violin & piano, 3 movements.

Sermon

Our scripture reading today comes from the Constitution of the United States of America. The First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” Here ends the reading.

Last spring a friend of mine began telling everyone of his dismay about the growth of income inequality over the past three decades. The middle class has shrunk. Tax rates favor the rich, changes in trade policy and labor laws have taken jobs and made low-wage workers vulnerable. Hunger and homelessness have grown. Public education is in trouble. Considering the devastation to communities, families and children, he said, “I don’t understand, why people are not taking to the streets.” Just a few months later, people did take to the streets.

In the summer, a 69-year-old Canadian man, writing on the web site adbusters.org, proposed “a leaderless people powered movement for democracy.”

Occupy Wall Street started on September 17, but it had a small and slow start. However, a

week later protestors marched from New York’s Zuccotti Park to Union Square, and 87 of them were arrested. The resulting attention jump-started the movement. It has spread to 900 cities and four continents. Adbusters’ website, and postings from local Occupy encampments, say the movement’s goal--and its vow--is to “end the monied corruption of our democracy.”

Bear with me for just a few numbers. Since 1982, the share of this country’s income held by the top 1 percent of our population has more than doubled. This top tier takes in one quarter of all income. “The top 1 percent of Americans holds 39 percent of the nations’ wealth.... [In the United States], the top 10 percent of the people hold more than 70 percent of the wealth, and the bottom 50 percent hold 2 percent of the wealth.”

In the words of Gary Dorrien, a minister and professor of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary, “Thirty years of stagnant wages and accelerating inequality offered an opening for a populist movement demanding a full-employment economy and a curtailment of Wall Street’s speculation and gouging.” Dorrien explains the “99 percent” slogan of Occupy Wall Street. The point, he says, “is that the top 1 percent plays by a different set of rules and has made fantastic gains while everyone else falls behind.”ⁱ

As we’ve heard from billionaire investor Warren Buffet, middle-income families often pay a larger share of their personal income as taxes of all kinds than those at the higher tiers of the income ladder. Tax breaks, capital-gains rates, complex deductions, and a ceiling on Social Security taxes all favor those whose incomes come from investments. They disadvantage those who get most of their income from working.

In Berkeley, Davis and other cities that are home to state-supported universities, students protest the steep hikes in fees and tuition costs of the past several years. College costs have risen several times faster than working family incomes have risen. More and more, college operations are financed by not by tax dollars, but with student debt.

Two Fridays ago in the middle of campus at the University of California, Davis, several young protestors are sitting in the quad, arms linked together, guarding their Occupy encampment.

Campus police approach in riot gear, with batons and rifles. The campus chancellor has sent them to dismantle the encampment, “for the health and safety of the whole campus.”ⁱⁱ

More students arrive and stand in a large circle, drawn there by phone calls, texts and other electronic messages. As university police approach with bottles of red-pepper spray, friends call out, “Cover your eyes! Cover your nose and mouth.” One person cries out from the crowd, pleading with a protestor to get up and get away. The larger circle chants, “The whole world is watching!” It *has* indeed been watching—thanks to videos on YouTube. You can hear a middle-aged woman scream to the police, “These are children! These are children.” You see the police lieutenant approach. He walks up and down the line, making big red clouds with his big red bottle. He sprays the seated students around the head, in the face. Chants rise up from the growing crowd: “Shame on you, shame on you!” It’s horrific, sickening scene.

Afterward, a young man calls out, with a hoarse voice: “You don’t have to do this. You don’t have to do this, officer. I swallowed pepper spray because of you. I didn’t bring any pepper spray. I brought no weapons. We have no weapons. Shame on you!” The police arrest 10 of the protestors, and back away in a group, holding their rifles along their chests.

This movement has been sparked by frustration and fear about what kind of nation we are becoming. Now it is fueled by outrage, growing solidarity, and passion for healing and restoring the common good of our country and our communities. This is a movement about the moral issues that shape our common life.

William J. McDonough, formerly CEO of a large bank in Chicago, spoke about executive compensation to a group of that city’s business leaders:

“ ‘In 1980, the average large company chief executive officer made 40 times more than the average employee in his or her firm.’ [Twenty years later] the multiple had risen to at least 400 times [the average salary]. . . . In other words, [in] 20 years the multiple [of] CEO pay went up by 1,000 percent. ‘There is no economic theory, however farfetched, which can justify that increase,’ McDonough. ‘It is also grotesquely immoral.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Such inequity and immorality is perhaps as old as humanity. It’s certainly as old as the Bible. Over seven centuries before Christ, the Hebrew Prophet Amos attacked elite society’s dishonor of God’s law and the oppression of the poor. From Amos, chapter 2: “They sell honest people for money, and the needy are sold for the price of sandals. They smear the poor in the dirt, and push aside those who are helpless.”^{iv}

Since the early 1980s, on average, working people’s wages have stagnated, and investment incomes have skyrocketed. Except for those who invested their savings in the place where they live. In the past three years, the recession has wiped out eight trillion dollars of home values. Countless people have lost their homes due to foreclosures. Even some who rent have been evicted because they didn’t know that their landlords were going through foreclosures, and banks were reclaiming the rental properties.

Some of you, or those you love, have been hit—losing a home, losing a job, feeling confused and uncertain about the future. In every community, desperation lives just under the surface of our shared interactions. Many people are “under water,” which means they owe more on a mortgage loan than their house is worth—lots more.

Two couples I know made the painful decision to walk away from the houses they had loved and lived in, and which they had bought at the top of a market, when loans were plentiful and “collateralized debt obligations” seemed only a boring phrase of jargon and not a house of cards. Of course, some needed to walk away in order to move away to the only place they could get a job. Others, facing their own guilty feelings and a surely ruined credit score, decided to scale back expenses, get out from under mortgages that would never end, and go into default on their loans.

A necessary part of our money-driven political system is a propaganda machine. Run by many, and accepted by many more, for the benefit of a few, this machine tries to hide the growing injustice. It fills political discussions with myths and falsehoods. Here is the biggest myth: the idea that our economy is just a self-created, self-generating entity, just a force of nature, which we must learn to live with and obey. In fact, an economy is a structure that we build, shape and

change. The Greek root for the word *economy* means *household*, or *household management*.

We shape our common household by the common choices we make about our financial and commodity markets, laws dealing with labor, property and incorporation; and by our business, personal and government spending decisions. We shape our household by policies dealing with commerce, foreign trade, energy, natural resources, health care financing, transportation, pensions and Social Security, and educational and vocational training institutions. We structure our economy through regulations of investment and banking systems (or the dismantling of those regulations).

In other words, the mess we are in today didn't just happen. Laws, court rulings and policies allowed it to happen. The progress and prosperity we experienced from the 1940s to the 1970s didn't just happen. The emergence of a large middle class didn't just happen. People decided to make it happen.

The frenzy, the frauds and the convoluted real-estate financing bubble of the past decade or two have led us to the widespread upheaval known as the Great Recession. It's an outrage—and it has led people to take to the streets and college campus quadrangles. Fear of this outrage—fear of this eye-opening, pro-democracy movement—leads authorities in some places to unjust suppression and even violence. Mass outrage is understandable. Perhaps it's a necessary ingredient for our common courage. Yet we must resist the temptation to demonize or dehumanize police officers, and well-off people, even politicians. Demonizing undermines the principle that all people have dignity and worth. It undermines the value--and the reality--that we are all in this together.

A few ministerial colleagues in the East Bay have been to Occupy Oakland, including the march to the Port of Oakland. In contradiction of the depictions of Occupy Oakland by at least one of the Bay Area's daily papers, my friends reported a festive atmosphere, with people of all ages, ethnicities, and occupations walking together. One friend chatted with police officers as they waited in line together to use the porta-potty toilets.

Yesterday, on my noon visit to Occupy Sacramento at Cesar Chavez Park, I spoke to a retired woman standing at the corner of 10th and I

streets, by City Hall. She was holding her home-made sign. She belongs to an Episcopal church in a suburb. Beside her was another sign listing this region's Congressional representatives and U. S. senators, and urging us to contact them and insist on change, insist on justice and fairness.

After that conversation I crossed over to the Occupy encampment and spoke with two women at the information table. They told me about the General Assembly, open to everyone, every day at 5:30 p.m, except for Tuesdays, when they attend Sacramento City Council meetings.

After wishing them well, and thanking them for being there, I went up to three police officers on bikes in the middle of the park, near the fountain. "How's it going?" I asked. One officer answered: "Lackluster." With only a few of the daytime-only tents and information tables in the background, he said that the big crowds of earlier days are not so regular now in Sacramento. When there's a big national event, more people will come out here. He said that if I go to Facebook and look up Occupy Sacramento, I can keep informed and then come to the park for special events. Before heading home, I said, "Thank you for being here."

I can feel the temptation to focus my wrath on particular politicians, or cops or security guards, but when I give into this temptation, I take energy and focus away from the systemic changes we need: changes in our campaign financing systems and changes on a Supreme Court whose majority has ruled that corporations are people, with the same rights to making campaign contributions as real people.

As I watched videos of the police pepper-spraying on the Davis campus, I couldn't imagine myself sitting there, staying seated as the assault began. After the spraying, an officer tried to lift a student by the arms. The boy went limp. In that same situation, I feel, I would have struck out at the officer—out of anger and pain. This student didn't move. Surely in agony, those protestors displayed the kind of discipline—and the kind of dignity—that I have seen in news footage from the American Civil Rights movement, the freedom struggle in India, the cause to end Apartheid laws in segregated South Africa, and recent scenes from Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and places all over the globe.

Another video takes place after the assault, with students confronting the officers. You can see confusion in the faces and movements of the officers. I have a tense fear that one will fire his rifle at the yelling crowd. One man—a Unitarian Universalist young adult and Religious Education volunteer in his church and in our district-- calls for a “mike check.” This term refers to a practice of the Occupy Wall Street movement. In lieu of using amplification, the crowd repeats each phrase after the speaker says it.

He calls for a mike check, and the crowd quiets. He shouts, and they repeat: “We are willing to give you... a brief moment of peace..., so you may take your weapons... and our friends... and turn and leave... You can go. Please do not come back.” The rows of campus officers begin to back away, holding their rifles across their chests. A few students walk toward them, some yelling with glee. I worry that the police will react with more violence. They keep going. Students cheer at their moral victory. They chant: “Whose University? *Our* university! Whose quad? *Our* quad!” This is a tension-filled 10-minute video.

It remains to be seen what kinds of changes Occupy Wall Street will initiate or deliver. It is a self-proclaimed “leaderless movement.” It’s not another political campaign or progressive organization—there are plenty of those already. It is a populist movement that deliberates, makes demands, and engenders new conversations all over the land.

It gives me hope. I’m glad people are talking about economic democracy again, finally. I am inspired at the courage of the protestors. They may be leaderless, but they are disciplined and committed to the principles of democracy and non-violence. And with such discipline, everyone can be a leader.

Another Davis video was taken the next day, after dark. It follows campus Chancellor Linda Katehi as she walks from her office to her SUV, with an escort by her side. Seated on both sides of the walkway are students, all the way down. You can see them from scattered flashlights, and from press photographers’ flashes. For three long minutes you hear only the click of the chancellor’s shoes on the concrete, and the snap of cameras. The students stay silent in their witness of her departure.

A few reporters ask her questions, and she responds, but the students remain silent. Are you afraid of the students, one asks. “No,” she says quietly, “no.”

None of those protestors is dangerous. They have no weapons. Well, they *are* a danger to the way things are, to the status quo and to our complacency about the decline of the common good in this country. Their courage speaks volumes. As this kind of courage becomes more common, change becomes visible. Change becomes visible, and it becomes real.

For me, the message of Occupy Wall Street is that we are all in this together. We have more in common than we used to think we do. We have each other in common. Your wellbeing is tied up in mine. My wellbeing is tied up in yours. You are my common good, and I am yours. The 99 percent is my common good, and the 1 percent as well. 100 percent of us.

We the people are the common good. That’s how the U. S. Constitution begins: “We the people....” We are all in this together. Amen.

ⁱ Gary Dorrien, “The Case Against Wall Street,” in *Christian Century*, November 15, 2011, p. 22. Most of ⁱⁱ “The Latest from UC Davis,” on Alas! A Blog, November 27, 2011. This posting includes a “frustrated student’s” annotation of/response to the chancellor’s letter after the police action. It also includes videos of the pepper spraying and the two episodes mentioned at the end of the sermon. See <http://www.amptoons.com/blog/2011/11/22/the-latest-from-uc-davis/-more-14503>

ⁱⁱⁱ John M. Buchanan, “Gross Inequity,” in *Christian Century*, November 15, 2011, p. 3.

^{iv} Amos 2.6-8. Contemporary English Version. Biblegateway.com.