

## “Is Class in Session?” – November 6, 2016

Preached by Ministerial Intern D. Scott Cooper at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

**First Reading:** Excerpt from *The Austere Academy* by Lemony Snicket

**Second Reading:** Excerpt from the “Definition of Class” from the Routledge Encyclopedia of International Political Economy

### Sermon I: “May I Assume Class is in Session?”

“Class may be defined in terms of simple gradations based on material conditions.” In other words, class is a way to segment and differentiate people.

In the 19th century the bee was a popular symbol of industry and co-operation. If you look at the front of your order of service, you’ll see George Cruikshank’s *British Bee Hive*, which depicts a vast range of Britain’s professions within a strictly divided pyramid-based social hierarchy. It has fifty-four cells, a base and nine layers representing the classes and trades; the royalty at the top; the bank, armed services and volunteers as the foundation.

Some of you may view an org chart at work, a similar piece of artwork, as a roadmap for your plan to advancement and success. But in other cultures many assume these structures are not only undeniably descriptive of their lives but irrevocably prescriptive for the lives of their children. And it is often assumed that one can determine a great deal about a person by seeing where in the hierarchy that individual is found, but as we learned earlier from Lemony Snicket, “You can see that it is better not to make too many assumptions, particularly in the morning.”

Of course, there are no shortage of ways of categorizing and making assumptions about people. Age, race, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, political party. Ellen DeGeneres asked, “Do we have to know who’s gay and who’s straight? Can’t we just love everybody and judge them by the car they drive?”

Well, perhaps one of the most problematic and pervasive dividers of people is class. Since people of different classes may not look or behave that differently, in fact they may not even have very different beliefs, we may not even realize that we’re treating them differently. Or we may justify to ourselves the ways we do treat them differently, because we imagine they have done something to deserve where in that social stratification they are. For instance, a person of limited income may be assumed by some to be less intelligent or less industrious, both really misguided assumptions. We may even be led to question the legitimacy of their decisions, when we have no information about what their options were or what it took to make those decisions. “What kind of person would do that?”

It is no doubt more accurate to assume the lower one is in the social hierarchy, the fewer good options one has for education, employment, health care, or any number of decisions in their lives. Megan described seeing evidence of this first hand in her reflection this morning.

And inversely, but perhaps unconsciously, people may assume because someone has lots of money, they are somehow better, more clever, happier and more

successful in life than others, a better decision maker, even morally superior. But, again, my point is, we shouldn't make those assumptions.

And which reminds me, please vote Tuesday.

I'm quite sure you want to be understood for who you are, not as a collection of assumptions that others make about you. And so does everyone else.

It occurred to me: a way to understand people, instead of categorize them, instead of making assumptions about them, is to frame the questions you ask about them and their differences in a different way.

I invite you to not ask "What kind of person would do that?" but instead ask "What circumstances would lead a person to make that decision?" It's more difficult than it sounds, but makes all the difference.

**Third Reading:** "Siddhartha Gautama's Early Life" from the *About Religion* website

**Fourth Reading:** Excerpt from *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History* by Mark W. Harris

### **Sermon II: "Where is Class in Session?"**

Our mission, here at UUSS, is to come together to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world. Let's consider these two intentions through the lens of class, keeping assumptions in mind, and looking at places where these may happen.

If we are to be a force for healing in this world, we must recognize what is happening in the world. Like the Buddha, if we are not out in the world, we won't know the stark realities of the world. He saw old age, disease and death, but dare I say, there is even more for us to see, including kindness, if we are willing to look.

Just as we intend to be a force for healing in the world outside these walls, we intend to deepen our lives within these four walls.

Or really six walls, I've noticed all the rooms and windows around here are hexagons.

And here's something else I noticed: just as we are prone to assume people outside these walls are more different from us than they are, we may be prone to assume those inside these wall are more alike us than they are. And I paraphrase, "You can see that it is better not to make too many assumptions, particularly on a Sunday morning."

There are problems when we assume the person sitting near us in the Sanctuary is very much like us. There are lots of stereotypes about UUs. And lots of jokes based on those stereotypes: if you've heard the joke show on *Prairie Home Companion*, you've heard many of them. If you assume the person you greet during coffee hour is a white-collar upper-middle-class vegan humanist Democrat with at least one graduate degree and who shops for organic goat-milk soap at farmer's markets in Birkenstocks, you are missing a chance to deepen your life by interacting with a unique and fascinating individual. And you are cutting off people who do not fit that stereotype from fitting in with this vital and vibrant community. A community that has much to offer everyone. As we heard in our reading, "Maybe we are a thinking person's faith, but people in all classes think deeply and broadly."

You often hear UUs bemoan a lack of diversity in our congregations. I invite you to consider: how can we be more welcoming to a variety of people outside our walls, if we incorrectly assume there is very little variety of people already here inside our walls? It's more difficult than it sounds, and makes all the difference.

**Fifth Reading:** From a letter to Robert S. Marcus by Albert Einstein

**Sixth Reading:** Excerpt from "The End of iChurch" by Fredric Muir

### **Sermon III: "Is Class in Session in the Beloved Community?"**

American philosopher and poet Suzy Kassem wrote, "Eliminate the concept of division by class, skills, race, income, and nationality. We are all equals with a common pulse to survive. Every human requires food and water. Every human has a dream and desire to be happy. Every human responds to love, suffering and pain. Every human bleeds the same color and occupies the same world. Let us recognize that we are all part of each other. We are all human. We are all one."

As lovely as these words seem, I'm not convinced Suzy Kassem is completely correct. Yes, we all respond to love, suffering and pain. Yes, we all require food and water. But we are not one. We are not a melting pot, where we all become an indistinguishable goo. We are a salad of wonderful, individual, unique, tasty ingredients all thrown in together. We are a hodge-podge, a community in covenant; we are an interdependent web.

Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman wrote in *Liquid Modernity*, "The main point about civility is...the ability to interact with strangers without holding their strangeness against them and without pressing them to surrender it or to renounce some or all the traits that have made them strangers in the first place." And I might add, without finding ourselves asking, "What kind of person would do that?"

While pondering class, at one point I thought, we need to keep in mind our differences, because that way we know who we can reach out to and help. And then I realized, wow, that's pretty presumptuous assuming I can determine who needs and wants my help without even asking. Let me put on my super hero cape and fly around

saving people, whether they realize they need help or not. “Stand aside, I’m Patronizing Man!”

No, I need to take Einstein’s advice “to simply free myself from this [delusional] prison by widening my circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures.” I need to talk to people, not talk about people. I need to engage them in love and in community, without assuming they are very different from or very similar to me.

It later occurred to me, perhaps the opposite of assumptions based on socio-economic stratification is the Beloved Community. I know you’ve heard about this concept in sermons here at UUSS.

“In a July 13, 1966 article in Christian Century Magazine, Dr. King affirmed the ultimate goal inherent in the quest for the Beloved Community: “I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are ingredients in the objective that we seek in life. And I think the end of that objective is a truly [companionable] society, the creation of the beloved community””<sup>1</sup>

Our mission is to come together to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world. We can do this by building the Beloved Community. If we set aside assumptions and really get to know one another, inside and outside these six walls, regardless of class, in covenant, come together in love, compassion, responsibility and shared power, we can indeed radically transform individuals and restructure institutions.

There are those people who can deepen their lives and be a force for healing in the world. “What kind of person could do that?” *We can and we will.*

Amen and so be it.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sub4>