

What Are You Worth?

What Are You?

Who Decides?

Rev. Roger Jones, September 18, 2016
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

HYMNS

Come, Come, Whoever You Are.
Wake Now, My Senses.

SERMON

What are you worth? When I think of that question, the image I get is from those technicolor movies or TV shows of decades ago-- scenes in which white men in blue suits and button down shirts are trying to one-up each other, as they sip cocktails and smoke cigarettes. "What are *you* worth?"

Even if they don't ask it, they're still sizing-up one another to figure that out. What are you *worth*? It means what is your net worth, financial worth: all your assets minus your debts. *Forbes* and *Fortune* magazines have their lists of the wealthiest people in the world, every year. Those magazines don't have their lists of the poorest people in the world. That wouldn't sell. That's where we come in, as a religious community. We remember what is too easily forgotten in the larger society. We keep in mind those who are in poverty, and we strive to respond as a force for healing in the world.

Someone else who thinks a lot about poverty is Joan Chittister. She is a nun based in Minnesota, a prolific author, a spiritual director and an activist. In her vows as a nun, she has entered into voluntary poverty, but in her Benedictine community, Sister Joan has all she needs. So she is thinking about people who do not always have all they need.

Sister Joan says does not wish to glorify poverty, and she does not recommend it. However, she says the reality of it can strip things down and show what matters. It raises the question how much is enough. The existence of poverty "keeps us real," she writes. If the world could understand the difference between what is necessary in our lives

and what is excessive, most of our society would consider themselves rich. Poverty, she says, "reminds us of what is necessary and what is nothing but fluff, nothing but indulgence, nothing but consumption for the sake of show. Poverty keeps us real."ⁱ

Poverty raises another question too. Are some people worth more than others? The downside of looking at worth as money or property held, or as the market value of our financial investments—the downside risk of *this* is that we can't ever be sure how much is enough.

When all a person measures, or all a country measures, is constant accumulation, we may never believe we have enough money or security. Market values do fluctuate, down as well as up. When we are uncertain about how much is enough, market fluctuations can threaten our sense of security, our capacity to see our possibilities, our well-being and our worth.

The Buddha and Jesus of Nazareth led lives of simple poverty. They said to not worry about worldly measures of worth, for such things are fleeting. Of course, Jesus and the Buddha didn't choose to rear children, live in one place, pay bills, or buy much of their own food at the store. Perhaps there is a middle way. There must be a path between grabbing more and more, and leaving it all behind. There must be a path between counting it all, every day, and letting it all go.

What are you worth? Perhaps that depends on another question: What are you? A human being, of course. And what is a human being? First, here's what you are not, and by you, I mean everyone. You are not a means to an end, but an end in yourself. You are not an interchangeable input for a manufacturing process, not a cost factor for a coal mining company. You are not collateral damage from a war. You are not a cog in the wheel of a communist government or a forgettable name among the many disappeared people under a military dictatorship. You are a member of the human family.

In “a society of sparkles and plastic,” as Sister Joan says, you are not merely a consumer. You cannot be reduced to a target with money to spend, not merely a shopper whose longings could be spun into sales figures by our vast advertising and merchandizing machinery.

Perhaps, since the beginning of our time on this planet, we human beings have calculated the worth of one another, depending on what we could get out of them or what they might take away from us. But we can hear how this is wrong, and harmful to our dignity.

The book of Genesis proclaims that human beings are made in God’s image. Many have said that this divine image, the divine spark in each of us, is the source our worth. That spark holds our potential for mercy and generosity, for creativity and kindness. In the 1820s, the Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing said the goal of human life is to realize that spark and express it. He gave a sermon entitled *Likeness to God*. It’s famous and very good, but it’s long. So you don’t have to take the time to read it, here is a summary. Channing encouraged people to see that we belong to a life larger than any one of us. We can embrace our worth. We can express our likeness to the divine life by the ways we live and speak and act in the world. This is the task of spiritual growth, he said. From this idea of the early 1820s, this idea of William Ellery Channing, comes the first affirmation on our list of Unitarian Universalist principles: we affirm and promote the inherent worth and the dignity of every person.

Echoing that message are a couple of sentences of modern scripture I’d like to mention. It’s from someone very well known to the 44 million people who have read a recent book. It’s called *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. In that book, by J. K. Rowling, the wise character of Dumbledore says: “We’re all human, aren’t we? Every human life is worth the same, and worth saving.”

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This year in this congregation we have chosen a theme to link together many of our social justice activities and service projects. Our theme is Confronting Economic Inequality. We will join

together to learn about the diverse issues connected by this theme. We will learn from books, films, Sunday services, guest speakers, and by getting involved in hands-on action beyond these walls. We strive to do this as a community of all ages and abilities.

We can build on the work we already do, like hosting homeless families for a week at a time for Family Promise, or cooking meals at a local shelter. In addition, we are joining in Habitat for Humanity’s Build for Unity project. We are supporting local refugee resettlement efforts of the International Rescue Committee. If you want to be involved, look for [updates on our website](#) and read our weekly Blue Sheet. Take home the white insert in your order of service today. Be in touch with our volunteer leaders. If you have some leadership to offer, contact Rev. Lucy or Scott or me.

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Confronting economic inequality means, among other things, confronting poverty--locally, nationally and on this earth. In considering different kinds of poverty Joan Chittister makes a distinction between the state of barely getting by, and the daily struggle for survival. “I live in a neighborhood,” she writes, where “the two are too close too often for me to be able to tell one from the other.”ⁱⁱ

In the United States of America, average household income has gone up in the past 35 years. However, the gains have been pocketed mainly by those already doing well. That means, after accounting for inflation, income for the majority of households has barely grown.

Some will say this is an inevitable result of a free society and a free-market system. It may not be fair, but that’s the way it is.

But let’s look beyond the question of fairness. Let’s look to matters of life and death. What is most serious about economic inequality is this: A majority of people in the world are so poor they are not able to meet their basic needs. One sixth of the world’s people right now are undernourished. One fourth of the world’s people don’t have adequate sanitation. Access to safe drinking water is widespread and growing, as agriculture needs and climate change, make safe

water scarce.ⁱⁱⁱ As a result, 29,000 children die of preventable causes every day. That is 11 million people around the world, every year, under the age of 5, dying. That is the pressing issue of the widening chasm of economic inequality.

In the Sacramento region, poverty can mean losing a place to live or being unsure of where you will be living next month, or being unsure of where your next meal is coming from. Poverty means doing without regular dental care, or suffering from an injury or sickness you can't afford to have treated. Yet more and more, even here, poverty means people die. The result of extreme and accelerating economic inequality is perishing human beings.

On the southeast coast of India is the city of Chennai, which was called Madras when the British Empire controlled India. Back in 2004, I spent a few days in this enormous, crowded, ancient and vibrant city. While enjoying a stroll on the beach, you could notice the sweet but foul smell of open sewage not far away: strong enough to bother you but faint enough to seem to be at a safe distance. For millions of people the smell and the dangerous bacteria causing it are not at a safe distance. Millions die there--and in other lands--from inadequate sanitation and a lack of clean safe water.

We can afford to prevent this. We, the human family, can stop human suffering. Preventable diseases and malnutrition can be reduced, if enough of us consider it to be worth it. If people are worth it.

Skeptics may fear an unrealistic scheme to redistribute wealth, or make fun of utopian ideas, as if we ever could make everybody equal, in practical terms. But the point is this: We would not need to make everyone equal financially to make everyone survive.^{iv} Thomas Pogge is a philosophy professor and scholar of world poverty. Consider this: Fifty-percent of the people in the world make only 3% of the world's annual income. Pogge has argued that if this poorer half of the world had only a bit more of the world's income, it would cover the costs of nutrition, disease prevention, sanitation and other needs. Specifically, if the poorest half of humanity's portion of global income went up from 3% to 5%, we could avoid much of the loss of human life.

He explains that "a shift of only 2% of global household income would not keep the richest from gaining in income, it would only slow the rate of their gain." Isn't this a small price to pay to avoid so much of the suffering that goes on? It would not alter the standard of living of the people at the top or of the countries that are the most wealthy and productive.

Writing in the *Routledge Companion to Ethics*, Pogge notes: "World poverty today causes death and suffering at over twice the rate of the Second World War at its worst." Ending that war took the lives of 15 million Allied service members, let alone the many other deaths. A gruesome cost for ending tyranny 70 years ago. The goal of ending poverty would *save* lives, not sacrifice them, and it would cost less money. Pogge says that severe poverty is not an avoidable disaster on the horizon. It is an avoidable disaster, and it's taking place right now. Tens of thousands die, every day, from preventable causes.^v

Earlier I gave you a glimpse of my visit to Chennai, a megacity in India: While there I stayed three days at the home of a retired government worker. On those very warm days he stayed inside in his pajamas all day while workers of all kinds filled the nearby streets. On my last night there, he went out on his balcony and called out to a taxi driver to arrange for my early morning ride to the train station. The traditional Indian taxis have one wheel in the front and two in the rear, and they are low to the ground. They *are* yellow, but their similarity with American taxicabs ends at that. Their sides are open to the air—open to the dust and exhaust. They don't have seat belts. You can slip in easily, and perhaps fall out, but I never did. Many Indians call them rickshaws, or auto rickshaws, since most are motorized now. They share the road with motorbikes, buses, trucks and cars. The driver sits in the front. The bench of the back seat is built for two, but more may crowd in.

The next morning, I rose at sunrise. I walked to the balcony and looked out. There was my driver, curled up on the back seat. Not far away were four other open-air taxis, with their drivers asleep inside. I hadn't realized it, but many drivers live in their vehicles. Perhaps some of them have a family in a slum dwelling but no safe place to keep

their vehicle. Perhaps they want to sleep outside and not miss any potential fare in the morning.

I assume those drivers are poor. Are they barely getting by, or are they struggling to survive? Do they fall from the category of *poor* into the category of *precarious*... during the rainy season, when rushing water brings dangerous germs flowing through the streets?

Philosopher Thomas Pogge asks: Can we as a wealthy society “relieve life-threatening poverty without giving up anything really significant?” Yes, we can. We would not sacrifice any important purchases. And if we can, let’s do it! And so we have started, right here. We are engaged in work in this local area as part of our congregation’s theme: confronting economic inequality. We are learning and we are serving, and we are giving right here in this area.

Every suffering person is located in some specific place, so we begin by working on this issue in this place: this country, state, and region, our cities and counties. Every person has inherent worth, including you, including me.

J.K. Rowling writes that everyone is worth saving. The Bible celebrates that everyone is made in the image of God. Unitarian Universalism affirms that every person has inherent worth, no matter how much you have or how much you’ve lost. By our words and our deeds, we affirm our worth and keep the divine spark shining.

Have you noticed on the radio news, almost any station, every hour on the hour they announce the stock market value? And after the markets close they give the closing prices in every hourly news report. What if they revised that a bit? What if they said this: “Friday the S&P 500 index closed 8 points lower, a drop of one half of a percent. Also Friday, 7 billion people ended the day with as much precious worth as they had on the day they were born.” It may take some time. Together, let us

work toward that worthy goal: precious worth, recognized and realized everywhere in the world, in the whole human race. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

^#298 in *Singing the Living Tradition*. Lyrics by Thomas Mikelson; trad. Irish Melody “Slane.”

1. Wake, now, my senses, and hear the earth call;
Feel the deep power of being in all;
Keep, with the web of creation your vow,
Giving, receiving as love shows us how.

2. Wake, now my reason, reach out to the new;
Join with each pilgrim who quests for the true
Honor the beauty and wisdom of time;
Suffer thy limit, and praise the sublime.

3. Wake, now, compassion, give heed to the cry;
Voices of suffering fill the wide sky;
Take as your neighbor both stranger and friend,
Praying and striving their hardship to end.

4. Wake, now, my conscience, with justice thy guide
Join with all people whose rights are denied;
Take not for granted a privileged place;
God’s love embraces the whole human race.

5. Wake, now, my vision of ministry clear;
Brighten my pathway with radiance here;
Mingle my calling with all who will share;
Work toward a planet transformed by our care.
Wake, now, my senses and hear the earth call.

Being sung

ⁱⁱ Joan Chittister and Rowan Williams. *Uncommon Gratitude: Alleluia for all That Is*. Collegeville, Minn. (Liturgical Press, 2010), p. 28.

Ibid., p. 24.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Water for Food Security and Nutrition,” summary of report, High Level Panel of Experts/U. N. Food and Security Organization, May 6, 2015. Accessed Sept. 17, 2016.

http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/hlpe/hlpe_docu

[ments/HLPE S and R/HLPE 2015 Water for Food Security and Nutrition Summary-and-Recommendations.pdf](https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/hlpe/hlpe_docu/ments/HLPE_S_and_R/HLPE_2015_Water_for_Food_Security_and_Nutrition_Summary-and-Recommendations.pdf)

^{iv} Thomas Pogge, “World Poverty,” p. 797 in *The Routledge Companion to Ethics*. London and New York (Routledge, 2010).

^v Thomas Pogge, “World Poverty,” p. 805 in *The Routledge Companion to Ethics*. London and New York (Routledge, 2010).