

Without a social analysis, without solidarity, too many people feel they alone in their suffering and powerless to change it. I think of the women who have been hurt by unwelcome advances or groping from supervisors or harassment by male colleagues—feeling trapped in a system of sexualized violence. Against the system, and against the culture of patriarchy, the recent #MeToo movement is a sign of solidarity and courage.

I think of the young men of color who can recount being stopped nearly on a regular basis in their cars by law enforcement officers. Or the parents lecturing their sons with black or brown skin on what to do to avoid provoking a police officer if stopped. Or the family grieving the death of a son who was killed even though he was unarmed. The emergence of Black Lives Matter is an example of solidarity generated by a social analysis. It is an affirmation of black humanity within a social and economic system built on a system of racist hierarchy.

I think of the 40 million very poor people in this country who live in desperation and pain and hunger. *How many of them* could use a social analysis to avoid the shame that can burden the soul when you have to choose between paying the light bill and rent, or feeding your children and buying them shoes as their feet grow or the temperature falls in winter? With his eloquent oratory and prose, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. applied a social analysis, and a moral analysis, to this country and our cities not only regarding racist oppression and unequal treatment, but also to the grinding force of poverty. This is what led him to promote the Poor People's Campaign in 1967 and '68.

Dr. King's aim for that campaign was to build on the solidarity developed in the civil rights movement. Now he was promoting *human* rights—economic rights like fair pay, access to a stable income and a decent education. He envisioned linking together all kinds of people to demand fairness. This included poor white people from farm states and coal mining communities, and African Americans from segregated cities in the North as well as the South.

He said: "I'm not only concerned about the black poor. I'm concerned about the white poor. I'm concerned about the Puerto Rican poor, the

The Least of These:

A New Poor People's Campaign

~A sermon for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Sunday

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: Siyahamba: We Are Marching in the Light of God (#1030), The Soul of Martin (by Judy Fjell), We'll Build a Land (#121).

Reading: [Gospel of Matthew 25:31-45](#)

Sermon: A New Poor People's Campaign

The Unitarian minister James Luther Adams, one of our great activists and seminary professors of the middle-20th century, told the story of a man who came to him for pastoral counseling back in the 1930s. "Caught in a vice" of the global economic depression, and feeling shame as well as despair, the man had tried to kill himself but hadn't been successful. "Why shouldn't I have done it?" he asked the minister. "My family would have had money from the life insurance policy!" Adams heard the man's pain and worry. In response, he affirmed his worth and assured him of God's care and love.

Yet Adams went on to offer a social analysis. He described how the rapid economic expansion of the 1920s had lacked any sense of caution or legal safeguards. The financial bubble had been fueled by lies, denial, greed and false hopes. He showed this man he was not alone in his feelings. Indeed, after that financial bubble burst, many people were newly poor, and hurting. The pastor's insights about our system didn't help the guy find work, but they reduced his isolation and shame. A social analysis can give rise to a sense of solidarity, and solidarity can generate courage and hope.

Indian poor..., the Mexican-American poor. We are going to grapple with the *problem of poor people*.”ⁱ The plan was to mobilize tens of thousands to protest peaceably in Washington, and thereby throw a wrench in the machinery of government. Using civil disobedience, Dr. King wanted to force the country to address poverty and stop the costly, wasteful war machine.

Several factors made this vision slow to realize. It was just a few years after President Lyndon Johnson had supported and signed Civil Rights legislation. President Johnson took Dr. King’s public opposition to the ongoing U.S. war in Vietnam as a great betrayal. Government spying on Dr. King intensified—the FBI, Army Intelligence, and local police departments spied on civil rights leaders around the country. Governments and right-wing organizations waged misinformation campaigns to undermine their public support. The civil rights leaders near Dr. King were torn by arguments over goals and strategies. Moreover, most were black male ministers—educated and middle class. Organizing poor whites or Spanish speaking migrant workers was beyond their ability or experience.

In 1968 Dr. King went to Memphis to support city sanitation workers as they organized a union, and he helped workers in demanding fair treatment, livable pay, and safety on the job. During this journey, he was gunned down outside a motel in Memphis, 10 days before Easter. Much of the half century that followed the activism of the 1960s can be seen as an era of racist backlash in politics. The result is a loss of economic progress or stability for ordinary workers.

Here is how things look today:

One of the richest nations in the world—ever—this country spends more on the military than China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and several other countries, combined. Yet one out of every eight U.S. Americans lives in poverty, and many of our hungry, sick and poor people are children. United Nations monitor Philip Alston says this: “If you want to talk about the American Dream,” statistically, “a child born into poverty has almost no chance of getting out of poverty in today’s United States.” This is a moral issue.

Last year, in his role as the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights and extreme poverty, Philip Alston conducted a fact-finding mission, not in a poor country, but in THIS country. In California, Georgia, Alabama, Washington DC, Puerto Rico, and West Virginia, he found the results of growing economic inequality. The results look like this: “rotting teeth, crushing debt, homelessness, hunger, drug addiction, untreated illness and pollution.” He writes: ⁱⁱ“Americans can expect to live shorter and sicker lives, compared to people living in any other rich democracy.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This is a moral issue. Many people think of morality as an individual question. Yet morality also has to do with how *communities* treat people. Do communities support human flourishing, or provoke human suffering? Do we ignore the needs of the vulnerable?

The passage we heard from the Gospel of Matthew imagines the day of judgment as a time when God would separate the sheep from the goats, the saved from the damned. While it may not match the Universalist message we claim--of no hell for anyone--his famous passage demonstrates what the earliest followers of Jesus of Nazareth cared about.

In this passage from Chapter 25 of Matthew’s gospel, the measure of our souls on the day of judgment will be not religious belief, not baptism, not even churchgoing. The measure will be righteousness, justice, compassion. Jesus tells them: “I was hungry, and you gave me no food, I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”

“When did we not minister to you in those ways?” people will ask him. He says, “As surely as you hurt the least of these, who are my kindred, you hurt me.”

All the times when I’ve heard that famous passage, I never heard one key phrase in it, till now: *the nations*. Maybe I just overlooked it. When sorting the sheep from the goats, sorting the humble souls from the selfish ones, God will judge the *nations*.

God won't merely measure the compassion or mercy of individuals, but of how we act as a nation. Whole nations will be judged by how we treat the hurting and the vulnerable, on how we treat "the least of these." In other words, widespread and painful poverty in a nation of plenty is a moral issue.

Speaking of morality, last week many of us were disheartened by the public vulgarity of the current U.S. President (Donald Trump), in referring to immigrants from particular non-white nations using a profanity. One more example of one man's lack of morality, compassion or decency, which makes obvious the lack of morality, compassion or decency of the current national agenda.

Yet the Reverend William J. Barber II says it is a mistake to focus all our energy on Donald Trump. The immoral systems that weigh down on the least of these have been in the works for a long time. Injustice and oppression were on the march well before the 2016 election.

William Barber is a progressive Protestant minister and head of North Carolina's NAACP. In that state he launched the Moral Mondays campaign. Every week, mass demonstrations and civil disobedience protests brought attention to and pressure against state laws that would hurt public schools and basic health care, and laws designed to undermine democracy, especially by suppressing voter turnout in black and poor communities. Barber is an energetic and eloquent public speaker. Two months ago, some of us heard his lecture in Sacramento at St. Mark's United Methodist Church. He has spoken at Unitarian Universalist events and will preach at our denomination's regional assembly in Portland, Oregon. It will take place the last weekend in April.

Currently Barber is promoting the New Poor People's Campaign. The campaign will raise issues and put pressure on politicians in what is framed as *40 Days of Action*. Starting on Mother's Day and going through the first day of summer, June 21, a series of protests, prayer vigils and nonviolent civil disobedience events will take place in 25 states. The goal is to use that window of time to advance a moral agenda for public policy. The goal is to get politicians and the media to pay attention to the moral crisis of this nation.

When we pay attention to tweets and vulgarity and see only immoral personalities, we don't see immoral policies as clearly. For example, Barber points out, in the general and primary presidential campaigns of 2016: "We had 26 debates but not one hour [of them was] on poverty or the war economy or ecological devastation." Why not? "Because nothing forced it," he said. People of good faith must force this issue. It is a moral issue.

Rev. Barber places current events in a sweep of racial history going back to the end of the American Civil War. From this perspective, he says that the many setbacks in the work toward treating poor people fairly are the result of a political backlash. The backlash works this way. Politicians promote racialized policies and racist messages to gain traction among resentful white voters, some who are selfish or uncaring and many who are fearful and hurting. Racialized political tactics hide this nation's growing economic inequality. This is the case, in spite of the fact that immoral policies hurt more people than just people of color.

Barber notes there are many more poor whites than blacks in this country. "If you're black, if you're white, if you're brown, and you can't make enough to pay the light bill," there's little difference, Barber says: "We're all black in the dark."^{iv}

Though our system is founded on white supremacy, the system crushes more whites than people of color. Barber says: "America has never wanted to talk about race except [with regard to] interpersonal relationships" and what's in our heart. But "I'm not a heart surgeon," he says. "I don't want to see what's in your heart, I want to look at the heart of your policies." And what we can see, on matters of immigration, a living wage, affordable housing, access to health care, public school funding and the proliferation of guns—are policies that are heartless.

"One-third of our population is crippled by poverty," he says. We can buy unleaded gasoline, but children in poor communities can't consume unleaded water from their taps, Barber says, noting the toxic water in the pipes of Flint Michigan, and we might add the undrinkable water of some farmworker villages in Central California.

Suppression of African American voters is on the rise in many states. Yet it is important to see that voter suppression and other attacks on democratic participation happen in places where *poor people* live, Barber says. Furthermore, in places where the earth is harmed, he says, poor people suffer the worst. It was for wealth and power that political strategies have always generated and manipulated racial resentment.

Systemic racism is not about the dislike of people who aren't white, Barber says. It's about "the dislike of democracy." Yes, campaign strategies traffic in resentments against immigrants and people of color. Yet the result is policies that hurt all poor people, and policies that endanger all of our democracy. He says racism isn't about whether you use a slur or not, or have a black friend or not, it's about power and policy.

What can we do? If we wish to achieve a moral society, what can we do? One thing is to realize that the work is always continuing, yet it doesn't always look the way it used to. One example. In the 1950s and 60s, it was mostly black men of prominence who led the campaigns and ran the organizations of the Civil Rights Movement. With a few notable exceptions, women were kept on the margins of leadership structures. In our day, organizations like Black Lives Matter and community organizing efforts by poor people are led by women of color as well as by young people who identify *across the spectrum* of gender identity and sexual orientation. This is a welcome change. Who knows what further changes will come in the years ahead?

Another way to work toward a moral society is to learn from the leadership of people in vulnerable populations, and to follow their leadership. We can show up when they show up,

and respond when they show courage and creativity—like our leaders in Sacramento Black Lives Matter. They seek our solidarity in their alternative march tomorrow morning for Martin Luther King Day. We can show up for or otherwise support the Women's March next Saturday.

We can support local efforts to ease hunger and organize vulnerable communities. A great example comes from the volunteer leaders among the low-wage domestic workers in the Western Service Workers Association. They are creative problem solvers. In less than a year I've learned from them how precarious is life in poverty in this area. I've learned from their social analysis and their creativity.

Solidarity builds hope and courage. In every local community, there are many ways to draw attention to poverty and work to relieve it. We can learn from the leaders who put their lives into the work, the leaders who feel directly the force of an unjust social system.

Dr. King's legacy includes the vision of equality he articulated. The legacy includes the social progress brought about by his leadership. Yet progress came about also from the courage of thousands of black adults, youth and children in the civil rights movement, and the solidarity of others who have listened for the moral call of their conscience.

His legacy includes the hard work of building a land where morality means food for the hungry, health care for the hurting, safety for our kindred of all genders, a chance for children to thrive, and enough money to survive. So may we live and so may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Michael Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road* (New York, 2007: W.W. Norton & Co), p. 188.

ⁱⁱ Richard Kim, "The GOP Tax Bill and the Crisis of American Democracy." *The Nation*. January 13/22, 2018, p. 3. Accessed January 13, 2018. <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-gop-tax-bill-and-the-death-of-american-democracy/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Philip Alston, "Extreme Poverty in America: Read the UN Special Monitor's Report." *The Guardian* online, posted December 15, 2018. Accessed January 13, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/15/extreme-poverty-america-un-special-monitor-report>

^{iv} William J. Barber II, public lecture, Moon Lecture Series, St. Mark's United Methodist Church, Sacramento, November 3, 2017. Subsequent quotations come from the same lecture. Also see Barber's January 12, 2018, article in *The Nation*: <https://www.thenation.com/article/nothing-would-be-more-tragic-than-to-turn-back-now/>