

First Unitarian Universalist Church
An All-Embracing Love: Principle 2
Rev. Sandra Fees
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One thing that always strikes me is the actual complexity of the second principle. It isn't just about justice or about equity or about compassion. It is about all three. This principle affirms and promotes justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

I could write a year's worth of sermons on any one of those topics alone. So why all three together? Surely the intent wasn't just to save space from having nine principles instead of the seven we currently have.

This reminds me of the situation in which Jacob the Baker was asked to decide which of two men was wise. The first man said, "I know what is right." The second man said, "I know what is wrong." Jacob said, "Good. Together you make one wise man." Perhaps together this trinity of justice, equity and compassion makes one wise principle. Maybe each knows something the others don't (Jacob the Baker: Gentle Wisdom for a Complicated World, Noah benShea).

What is it that justice knows? We UUs talk a lot about justice and being justice-seeking people. I have gotten used to using that word in a certain way. I remember once a few years ago speaking passionately to someone about the need for justice in the world. She got a really puzzled look on her face because to her justice is about retribution and even revenge.

For her, justice has something to do with the kind of judgment doled out by the courts or even by a wrathful God. It was clearly not what I was talking about, but she was struggling to reconcile her understanding and my intention.

Her reaction is a pretty common one in this country. We think first of punishment when it comes to justice. People pay for their crimes by serving time in prison, by paying fines, or doing community service.

But there is more to it than that. Justice is more than a matter of retribution having to do with the political state. The idea of justice also has to do with how we treat each other. It has to do with making sure everyone's rights are respected.

Consider this case in 1889. A man in Minnesota who was hanged from a tower for stealing. They say he took it rather well. The people were tired of him sneaking around lifting hardware off buggies, so they tied a rope to his belt and hoisted him up where they could keep an eye on him (Lake Wobegon Days, Garrison Keillor).

Is this what we mean by justice? It's preferable to hanging him by the neck or cutting off a hand.

In the Bible, justice has to do with living a righteous life. This means living in right relationship with God and others. It means obeying God – doing the will of God – and following the Ten Commandments ("What Do We Mean By Justice" (a sermon), Rev. James R. Bridges, UU

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Fellowship of the Poconos, Jan. 20, 2002). Justice has something to do with the commandment to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

I have sometimes heard people talk about justice in the Old Testament. The Old Testament God is often described as angry and warlike. His justice is the “eye for an eye” variety. There is another kind of justice found there. It is the justice of which the prophets spoke, the kind of justice that is committed to ending poverty and hunger.

Part of the role of prophets in any age is to give voice to those who have been silenced and those who are most vulnerable. Justice sides with the poor, the underprivileged, and the hungry. And justice-seeking people reach out to care for one another, and especially to care for those in greatest need.

Plato understood that justice is a matter of the heart. A just person has a certain balance of the principles of the soul (Our Seven Principles, Kenneth Collier). Only just people can create and maintain a just state.

There's a New Yorker cartoon in which there are three fish, each one swimming behind the next. The first smallest fish says “There is no justice.” The second in line, ready to devour the first says, “There is some justice in the world.” The third and largest fish, about to swallow the second one says, “The world is just” (With Purpose and Principle, Richard Gilbert).

Justice suggest a fair distribution of society's reward and responsibilities. Those who receive more rewards may interpret the world as more just. But is it? It is difficult to speak adequately of justice without also talking about equity.

What does equity know? Equity has to do with fairness and inclusion. I think of my grandmother who always bought all the grandchildren the same thing for Christmas. There were a lot of us. Everybody got the same thing, though in different sizes or colors. It was probably partly practical, but mostly this was intended to be fair. The thing is, mostly, we didn't all want the same thing.

I recognized my grandmother's attempts at treating us all the same. But the gifts she gave me were impersonal and I sometimes wondered if she knew how much I would have loved a gift that was just for me. You see, fairness isn't sameness or equality. It has more to do with filling actual needs that exist.

Equity has to do with sharing resources. Still, it's complicated. How are we to distribute those resources? Isn't it just a matter of opinion? There's a great story about the two foolish cats. One was a large black cat. The other was a small tabby. They were best friends.

One day one each of them found a fresh sweet rice cake. They sat down to eat their cakes, and soon noticed they were very different in size. The big cat had a small cake and the small cat a much bigger one. “I'm big so I should have the big cake,” complained the black cat. Let's swap. But the little tabby hissed and said “I am small, so I need to eat the bigger one. I won't trade with you.”

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They soon got into a fight, calling each other names and snarling and scratching each other. Finally, unable to agree they turned to the wise monkey for help to make equal shares of the rice cakes. The wise monkey held a set of golden scales in his hands that he used to solve problems like this one. After hearing their problem, he promises that each cat will get an equal share.

He took the two cakes and put one on each side of the scales. Of course, the scales didn't balance. The wise monkey said, "Your quarrel is understandable. The big piece is much heavier. I will have to take a bite to even them out." And he did.

He took too big a bite and the other cake became the heavier one. "Oh no," said the monkey, "Now I will need to take another bite." And he did, but the cakes were once again unequal. The wise monkey kept taking bites back and forth as the cakes got smaller and smaller.

The cats finally cried out, "That's enough. They must be even now." But the monkey kept eating and weighing, eating and weighing, until he'd eaten both cakes. He concluded, "Well, you see, both cakes are equal now. That's what you came for, isn't it? There is nothing left for you to quarrel about." According to the story, the cats never did quarrel again (How the Children Became Stars, "The Two Foolish Cats," Aaron Zerah).

What does real fairness, real equity, look like? Well, not like this, certainly. There is a degree of wisdom needed to create fairness. At the very least equity can eliminate extremes – extremes of poverty, for example, extremes between those who have everything and those who have nothing, between those who go hungry every day and those who sit down to a sumptuous banquet each night. At the very least being fair seems to also ask us to be kind.

So what about kindness or compassion? What does compassion know? Compassion understands another person's suffering. This is empathy, our ability to feel deeply the pain, anguish, and unhappiness of another person. Compassion can serve as a catalyst for justice and equity.

Thich Nhat Hanh tells how he organized a retreat for American veterans of the Vietnam War. Many of the men and women felt tremendous guilt and shame for what they had done and witnessed during the war. One veteran told how almost everyone in his platoon had been killed by guerillas.

Those who survived were so angry they baked cookies with explosive in them and left them alongside the road. Some Vietnamese children came along and ate the cookies and the explosives went off. Their parents watched, helpless. The veteran carried the image of the children dying from those cookies for decades. The pain of that memory made it impossible for him to be in a room with children (Essential Writings, Thich Nhat Hanh).

The practice of compassion can help someone like this man. Rather than focusing solely on the children who died as a result of his actions, he can begin to think about the children who are dying now, due to malnutrition, to poverty, and war. And it is possible for that understanding to lead to doing work that will help children in the present.

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Justice, equity and compassion – each is so powerful in and of itself. What links these three then? What makes them all part of one principle?

Justice without fairness or compassion can be merely vengeful, punishing or harsh. Equity without justice and compassion can be reduced to sameness and conformity. Compassion without justice and equity can be paralyzing or blind.

But together, they are strong, resilient, and vulnerable. Together they make it possible to embrace life's joys and disappointments. Together they call us to an all-embracing love.

The kind of love that is at the very center of our Universalist heritage. Such a love dissolves divisions among people. This was the kind of love that led the Universalists to condemn slavery in 1790. It was the kind of love that led them to ordain the first woman Olympia Brown in 1863 (“Universalism: For Such a Time as This,” ed. Charles A. Howe).

This was what the Universalists meant when they spoke of God's all-inclusive love. It is what they meant when they placed the words “God is Love” on this pulpit. Yes, love is at the very heart of the second principle. God's love and the love of others calls us to justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

What greater love is there than this?

May it be so. Amen.