“Hands Up! Don’t Shoot!”

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Readings

(1) I return to an old, perhaps familiar story. The "Parable of Good Works" dramatizes the potential conflict between different types of social concern. (Quoted in The Prophetic Imperative, Richard Gilbert, Skinner House, Boson, 2000, pp.14-15, from Must We Take Sides?, Interreligious Task Force for Social Analysis)

Once upon a time there was a small village on the edge of a river. The people there were good and the life in the village was good. One day a villager noticed a baby floating down the river. The villager quickly jumped into the river and swam out to save the baby from drowning.

The next day this same villager was walking along the river bank and noticed two babies in the river. He called for help, and both babies were rescued from the swift waters.

And the following day four babies were seen caught in the turbulent current. And then eight, then more, and still more.

The villagers organized themselves quickly, setting up watchtowers and training teams of swimmers who could resist the swift waters and rescue babies.

Rescue squads were soon working twenty-four hours a day. And each day the number of helpless babies floating down the river increased.

The villagers organized themselves efficiently. The rescue squads were now snatching many children each day. Groups were trained to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Others prepared formula and provided clothing for the chilled babies. Many.... were involved in making clothing and knitting blankets. Still others provided foster homes and placement.

While not all the babies, now very numerous, could be saved, the villagers felt they were doing well to good work.

And life in the village continued on that basis. One day, however, someone raised the question, "But where are all these babies coming from? Who is throwing them into the river? Why? Let's organize a team to go upstream and see who's doing it."

The seeming logic of the elders countered: "And if we go upstream, who will operate the rescue operations? We need every concerned person here."
"But don't you see," cried the one lone voice, "If we find out who is throwing them in, we can stop the problem and no babies will drown. By going upstream we can eliminate the cause of the problem."

"It is too risky." And so the numbers of babies in the river increased daily. Those saved increased, but those who drowned increased even more.

(2) A poem by Langston Hughes, a friend of our congregation.

Democracy will not come
Today, this year
Nor ever
Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own the land…
Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.
I live here, too.
I want freedom
Just as you.

"Hands Up! Don't Shoot!"
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"Hands Up! Don't Shoot!"

The Los Angeles Times in August reported on this cry for justice. Matt Pearce writes,

Yet again, the protesters took to the sidewalks and streets, facing a row of police guarding the St. Louis County prosecutor's office. "Hands up!" they chanted, their arms aloft. "Don't shoot."

"This is how the boy died!" Kendrick Strong, 42, hollered at police officers Tuesday morning. "This is how the boy died! With his hands up in the air!"

As St. Louis' predominantly black northern quarter has teetered toward chaos the last four days after police in the suburb of Ferguson
killed an unarmed black 18-year-old, the chant has been one inescapable constant amid the worry and confusion and clamor.

The hands-up – a sign of surrender and submission black men and boys here say they learn early on when dealing with police — has been transformed into a different kind of weapon.

(“Ferguson” becomes shorthand for the latest juncture in national conversation over race and policing matt.pearce@latimes.com; 8/12/14)

The reporter continued – and as we know, controversy remains about what happened in this police killing of another black young man who was left in the street for four hours, and about the military-style police response to the protests that followed...

Brown was shot and killed by an officer Saturday while Brown, according to witnesses, was running away with his hands up....

In the days since the shooting, riot police have been sweeping the streets in scenes that might be more recognizable in the Middle East....

Just as "Ferguson" has transformed into instantly recognizable shorthand signifying the latest juncture in an unsettled national conversation over race and policing, the "hands up, don't shoot" chant has joined a long line of activist slogans that crystallize the heart of a community's moral outrage: Hell no, we won't go. No justice, no peace.

One Ferguson resident observed that Michael Brown "knew to put his hands in the air, and they still killed him."

Hands Up United has sent a letter to the Republican Governors Association & Democratic Governors Association, which begins:

We are writing to request that you encourage your colleague, Governor Jay Nixon, to appoint a special prosecutor in the case of Darren Wilson for the murder of Michael Brown.

After a brief summary of the events, the letter declares, “There are too many irregularities to trust that the current process is impartial.”

This appeal represents a lack of confidence in the local prosecutor’s ability to present a fair and full case to a grand jury and a faith in a jury trial to offer transparency in the adjudication and resolution of this killing.

This morning I begin with this image – “Hands Up! Don't Shoot!” – that to my mind reflects again the systemic racism in our society, the increasing militarization of police, the inadequate training for much of our police, and more deeply the challenges we face as religious people to help create Beloved Community.
What are we to do, how might we respond, and what is the role of a church such as ours in social change to confront and transform oppressions and injustice that surround us? In our religious tradition, personal spiritual growth and social change have a profound, deep and exhilarating connection.

Theodore Parker in the 1840s and 1850s was an activist and abolitionist Unitarian Minister, who spoke of the church militant. He declared, regarding “the moral universe” that “the arc is long and... it bends toward justice,” as we take up our duties. (These words were adapted by Dr. King.) [Parker’s original: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”]

Harvard social ethicist and Unitarian Universalist James Luther Adams is annoying, and profoundly challenging when he says, “The meaning of life is fulfilled only by those who enter into the struggle for justice in history and community.” And in a moment, I will share five paths of social action that invite us into meaning-making.

In contrast to this affirmation, I am reminded of the story of Russian Orthodox priests in the middle of the Russian Revolution in 1917 in St. Petersburg, who gathered to debate the proper color and style of vestments to be worn, rather than reading and responding to the signs of the times.

I also commend to you The Prophetic Imperative by Rev. Richard Gilbert, Minister Emeritus of the Rochester Unitarian Universalist Church. His volume is a powerful, concise, and compelling exploration of “spirituality and social action” as “a seamless garment – a coat of many colors.” (29)

Along the way, Dick Gilbert invokes George Bernard Shaw as an extreme example. Shaw apparently once declared that each person in any civilized society should periodically be required to stand before the bar of justice and to justify their existence. Those who could not, he said, should be summarily put to death. (5)

Notwithstanding the hyperbole, Gilbert suggests such an exercise is worthy of our personal spiritual reflection. Neither individualism, nor cynicism absolves us of our interdependence and mutual obligations.

In lifting up the Michael Brown case, (and to that of course here in New York, there is the police killing of Eric Garner by a chokehold), the issues of racism and white privilege infect us deeply in our nation.

Among the media pundits who commented on the Ferguson case, Bill O’Reilly “dismissed protestor’s concerns because (as he explained) the idea of
white privilege is a ‘big lie’, expounded by ‘race hustlers.” (Extra!, October 2014, p. 5)

O’Reilly, you may remember, upon dining a few years ago with Al Sharpton at Sylvia’s uptown, was astonished by the experience. He told his radio listeners, “I couldn’t get over the fact that there was no difference between Sylvia's restaurant and any other restaurant in New York City. It was exactly the same, even though it's run by blacks [and has a] primarily black patronship," O'Reilly said. "There wasn't one person in Sylvia's who was screaming, ... [obscenities to a waiter] saying, I want more iced tea!”

And O'Reilly it seems would have no – zero – understanding that racism is privilege plus power to sustain that privilege through institutions of commerce, finance, and even government too often.

Not only racism, but also corporate greed and materialism, consumerism and hedonism surround us and seek to tame us.

So what’s a church to do? What means of social action are open to help us grow our souls and summon us to the sacred within us? In 1973, the UUA published a small pamphlet by Thomas Price about the various types of social concern (“The Four Types of Social Concern”). Rev. Dick Gilbert expanded upon it and describes them this way:

Mode 1: Social Education: the process of studying issues and social dynamics.
Mode 2: Social Service: direct, “hands on” service work from person to person.
Mode 3: Public Witness: making known to the community a position on issues for the sake of being heard and seen.
Mode 4: Community Organizing: mobilizing social actors (religious and secular) in a given community (section of city, country, state, nation, world) to address a set of social problems.
Mode 5: Social Action – Systemic Change: working on changing policies and policy makers to effect whole systems. All of the above modes may be utilized in mode 5.

We here at Community are familiar with each of these.

In terms of Social Education, we have forums, presentations, and educational opportunities not only from the pulpit, but also from our Anti-Racism Team, Resistance Cinema, United Nations and Global Affairs Committee, Green Sanctuary, and Women's Association, to name a few.

Regarding Social Service, we have hosted a shelter for Homeless Men for over 30 years (and new volunteers are welcome to receive orientation and to host our guests). Our New Sanctuary team is very much hands-on with our family who receives...
strong support for some years now. There is a monthly interfaith feeding program, and from time to time we have food collections to share, for example with the Murray Hill Neighborhood Association’s efforts; and it would be impossible to count what so many individually do with hands-on help.

Regarding Public Witness, the Climate Change March in September galvanized many, and we have taken stands on Marriage Equality, Denouncing Torture by our government, as well supporting New Sanctuary rallies, better Police Training and changes in stop and frisk; interfaith cooperation, and the list goes on and on.

Looking at Community Organizing, we have at times had liaisons with groups like the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, with is anti-racist, multi-cultural organizing, as well as with a West Side Community action organization.

Then, there is Social Action, which “is distinguished from the other modes of social concern in that, as Price says, ‘(1) It is organized (implying group support for the objectives); (2) It attempts to influence policy makers and decision makers (implying a focus on structures rather than people).’” (quoted by Gilbert, p. 9) “Social action involves concentration on causes of injustice rather than symptoms - going ‘beyond the Band-Aid.’” (Gilbert, p. 9)

One of Jim Adams’ contributions as a social ethicist was his delineation of the role of voluntary associations that influence society… and many of us belong and work with many of these… the NAACP, the ACLU, and so many more…

Social Action, for example, includes activism in legislative change, issues like universal health care – not there yet; … or increased minimum wage policies or laws; and organizing around same sex marriage and marriage equality… resistance to conservative efforts to suppress voter registration… and efforts to combat what has been called the new Jim Crow with the racist prison-industrial complex that incarcerates young black males in vast numbers disproportionate to white males who commit the same offense.

Just one other example is Senator Elizabeth Warren’s efforts on changing the way student loans are handled and reducing interest rates, which seems like a no-brainer, but still blocked in Congress.

Each of us finds our own path in one or more of these five arenas of changing the world, helping others, and living our better selves. Personal efforts in service, education, witness, organizing, and action… something for everybody.

And, of course, not all of it is church-based… so many coalitions and groups and causes and needs and justice work to be done.
Just a few quick words about one of our long-time efforts, which strikes me as too much behind the scenes, that will come up later today at our Congregational meeting. We are being asked to divest our endowment funds of fossil fuel companies, as part of a growing protest against carbon-based fuel suppliers, whose products create so much damage to our environment. Similarly, we divested of companies’ doing business in South Africa in the 1980s as part of the economic sanctions campaign to topple apartheid.

This is a form of public witness – divestment of certain stocks – that the Unitarian Universalist Association affirmed at the General Assembly meeting of delegates last June. I voted for it like most of those attending.

The UUA resolution also supports social action beyond witness: share-holder activism, namely working in coalition with others to propose actions at annual share-holder meetings; resolutions that might improve corporate governance, or workers’ rights within a company; or throw light on affirmative action, glass ceilings, etc., and the issues are many.

For more than 30 years here at Community, we have been engaged in socially responsible investing, a leader actually, as that movement has grown. We have worked especially closely with the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility, and have investment managers with leading edge practices.

For this afternoon, the Finance Committee is recommending that the initial resolution circulated include not only Social Witness but also additional action through participating in shareholder resolutions in the handful of fossil fuel companies in whom we might hold minimal stock.

I would add that Saul Alinsky in his Rules for Radicals published shortly before his death in 1972 foresaw and promoted what he called proxy tactics, such as this. One of President Nixon’s chief White House advisors warned him, “Proxies for People will mean a revolution. They’ll never let you get away with it.” And Alinsky agreed that it would mean “organization for power for previously silent people…. This could be one of the single most important breakthroughs in the revolutions of our times.” (183)

Alinsky described one of the primary modern challenges this way: “I suggest that America’s corporations are a spiritual slum, and their arrogance is the major threat to our future as a free society.” (182-3) And no doubt today, he might add the one tenth of one percent. Also, it is clear that Alinsky would be pleased but still unsatisfied with the successes today and would want to keep the pressure on with a seat at the table with shareholder directives to corporate management.

Reiterating the need for comforting the afflicted, we also need to afflict some of the comfortable as we seek systemic change. I think of our reading with the
Parable of Good Works… the babies being rescued as they come downstream and the need to go to the source of the problem and stop those doing the damage.

And, of course, the answer, at least to me, is that it is “Both/And” – not either/or.

With all that challenges us, seduces us, distracts us, wearies, and wears us down, what can a church do?

In addition to continually grounding us spiritually in our faith, in our beauty and creativity, in our freedom and possibilities, in our inherent worth and dignity, in our connectedness to Life, Spirit, God and one another…. In addition to spiritual nurture, in the area of social concern, in giving ourselves to matters larger than ourselves, at least part of the time, if not each moment of each day, we strengthen each other in social service, social education, social witness, organizing and action….

Who’s going to do this? There is a contemporary recasting of God’s call to Jeremiah and to Isaiah, the call of our hearts:

And God said, "Go!"
and I said, "Who, me?"
and God said, "Yes, you!"
and I said, "But I'm not ready yet.
I got a job, friends, school,
and mom needs my help with the kids;
you know there’s no one to take my place."
And God said, "You’re stalling."

Again … [Love] said, "Go!"
and I said, "But I don’t want to,"
and … [Love] said, "I didn’t ask if you wanted to."
and I said, "Listen, I'm not the kind of person
to get involved in controversy.
Besides, my family won’t like it,
and what will my friends think?"
And … [Love] said, "Baloney!"

And yet a third time God said, "Go!"
and I said, "Do I have to?"
and God said, "Do you love me?"
and I said, "Look, I'm scared.
People are going to hate me
and cut me into little pieces.
I can’t take it all by myself."
And God said, "Where do you think I'll be?"
And … [Love] said, "Go!"
and I sighed, "Here I am, send me!"
[And God said, "Go!" An adaptation of the call to Jeremiah and Isaiah (6:1-8) to be prophets.]

“Hands Up! Don’t Shoot!” Resistance, witness, moving forward to each other and moving together…. Seeking the best we have to offer….

This morning in these few moments left, I have a final brief text:

James Baldwin, four decades ago, in his book *The Fire Next Time* made this plea, “If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others – [if we] do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”

I like his modesty “(we need only be relatively conscious) and his daring vision (“to end the racial nightmare”), a vision applicable to all the nightmares around us and for all peoples. We – just maybe we here – truly can be among the “relatively conscious.” To be sure some of us are profoundly awake and conscious – but the vision of ending the nightmares depends on the work not of the fully enlightened, not of the powerful leader/teacher/messiah, not upon the pure, but only upon the “relatively conscious” – ordinary pilgrims of faith like you and me.

And we can, moving outward, handful that we are, “insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others” and by the work of our hands and hearts “change the history of the world.”