

**(Note:** In response to several requests, appended to this sermon text are links to books, research, websites and commentary on economic inequality, some of which were cited in the sermon. Also included is the handout with lyrics to songs sung by Rochelle Lockridge and Rod Kinny.)

## **CHEAP LABOR, MERITOCRACY AND INHERENT WORTH**

(Sermon text for Labor Day Sunday service, by Unity Church member Dane Smith, president of Growth & Justice, Sept. 4, 2011)

This sacred place and time is usually reserved for spiritual reflection and recuperation, offering a refuge from bad news and the rat race, from business as usual and our daily overdose of micro-economics and macro-economics. I love the description of economics as “the dismal science,” as it’s about the study of competition, and that means losers and winners, over who gets how much of the earth’s allegedly scarce resources, and which of God’s children ends up with the most stuff. And that whole realm is plenty dismal, especially these days.

But if there’s a time in church to get serious and concerned and worked up about economics, it would be this day before Labor Day, the one national holiday that celebrates the working stiff, those of us who mostly work for wages rather than mostly own or manage things. And of course mostly this fact is forgotten in favor of Labor Day retail sales events celebrating lower prices, made possible in large part by

relentless global market pressure to reduce compensation for human labor.

Let's drift back to the mists of pre-history for a minute, and consider our original human economics, and our deepest primeval values when it comes to winners and losers.

Among the hunter-gatherers even today in eastern Paraguay, healthy adults with no dependent offspring are expected to donate as much as 70 to 90 percent of the food they forage to the needier members of the group. And as these more successful and productive suppliers themselves fall ill, give birth or grow old, they know they can count on the tribe to provide.

This example and others of so-called pre-civilized humanity were offered in a fascinating New York Times article by science writer Natalie Angier earlier this summer. She summarized a growing body of sociological research showing that there is indeed a deep fairness impulse in all human societies and an innate distaste for hierarchical extremes.

And although we also may value a *rough* meritocracy, and I mean very rough, that gives credit and compensation to the best and the brightest, to the heroic hunter who brings down the meat, our deepest human instinct is to expect and demand sharing by and for all members of the tribe that produced that heroic hunter. We expect all to benefit in rough proportions from the success of the organic whole, and we know the tribe will not do well in the long run if we shortchange those whose labors and whose allotted roles do not put them at the site of the big kill, or of the big deal, or in the board-rooms, or among

the entrepreneurial elites, or on the trading floor reaping hedge-fund profits.

According to Angier, among the Kung bushmen of the Kalahari in Africa, a successful hunter who may be inclined to swagger is kept in check by his compatriots through a ritualized game called “insulting the meat.” Tribal folk will say to the swaggering hunter who has just brought down some big game, “You asked us out here to help you carry that pitiful carcass? What is it, some kind of rabbit?”

One is reminded of billionaire Warren Buffet’s “insulting of the meat” a couple weeks ago, in reference to the loot brought home by his fellow billionaires. Buffet courageously declared that America’s wealthiest tribesmen were being coddled, worshipped out of proportion to their worth, and could afford and should put a lot more in to the common pot. Paraguayan hunter-gatherers, like Buffet, would find the effective bottom-line tax rates for our most successful hunter-gatherers to be unfair, if not obscene.

That being said, let’s get analytical about economic inequality that has developed since we evolved from hunting and gathering, and built civilizations, which I personally prefer to hunting and gathering, being near-sighted and slow-footed, also short of stature. I grew up in Alaska, and tried to fit in to the hunting and fishing culture. I can report that, ummm, none of God’s creatures, except for a few small fish, were harmed by my efforts. I’ve done much better in this much more civilized and much more progressive state, although I do like to point out to the swaggering Alaskan individualists and libertarians that their entire state economy is much more dependent on federal taxes and federal spending than almost any state.

But I digress. And now I'll continue with my humble theory as to why we traded our innate small-tribe inequality instinct for civilized progress and growth and a meritocracy and inequality, and how it made some sense. Our universal religious myths of primordial Eden and paradise may recollect a time of pre-civilized equality and plenty, but anthropologists generally agree that life was actually nasty, brutish and short for everybody. With the rush to civilization some 10,000 years ago, we created agriculture, permanent settlements, a more efficient and useful specialization and division of labor, literacy at first restricted to elites, enabling technology transfer, abundance and technological progress, currency and money, often more than enough in the granaries and treasuries for all to have enough, many miracles of art and science and human creativity, increased longevity and quality of life for most.

Good stuff.

But with these specializations and divisions, we developed hierarchies and elites who sought to maintain their advantage, creating gross and tragic inequalities, which were exploited by religious and political elites at any given time to confer divine status on themselves. The idea of inherited power and wealth as a corruption, subject to overthrow from the throngs below is pretty darn central to the human experience and the rise and fall of civilizations. Eventually, most recently in our Western world's rear-view mirror, from the Renaissance on, our ancestors revolted in stages or otherwise reformed our civilization in recent centuries, creating capitalist democracies that worked toward removing the divine right of kings and high priests, and then toward reducing the inequalities by class and race and gender. It's often been three steps forward, two steps back, and right now, for the last 30

years, we have regressed toward more inequality in this nation and state. And it may be reaching a crisis state that threatens the entire economy, with simply not enough purchasing power for the masses in the middle. In the confusion around globalization and a technological and digital revolution, we got unequal again. And let's just face the likely reality that the struggle against those who seek to preserve or expand their wealth and power, who deny the inherent equal worth of all humans, will probably never end. It will forever be part of the human condition, I think.

I and others in this church were treated to a much richer and detailed and more informed discussion of economics and theology and philosophy last spring, in a class stretching over several weeks and presided over by our ministerial intern Jason Seymour, entitled "Inherent Worth, A History of Unitarian Universalist Economic Thought."

Among the inspiring takeaways from that class: Founder Thomas Jefferson, who shared our theological philosophy, promoted a meritocracy which he called a "a natural aristocracy" and in which people would advance commensurate with their virtue, effort and talent, and not accidental circumstances, like inheritance or family connections. And Jefferson believed strongly in free public education, in which "worth and genius would be sought out from every condition of life." We learned about Theodore Parker, a brilliant Unitarian who said that "justice is the idea of God, the ideal of man, the rule of conduct writ in the nature of mankind. The ideal must become the actual." Parker was an optimist; it was he who first observed that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it points toward justice," later popularized by Martin Luther King. We learned lessons from much

lesser known figures such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who wrote delightfully mischievous poems in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century about the economic exploitation of women and who said: “whatever the economic value of the domestic industry of women is, they do not get it.” We have in our church history an amazing tradition of avant-garde, radical and prophetic positions taken in favor of economic justice, and which later miraculously became the law of the land. It behooves us to live up to this tradition.

But let’s get real about how much inequality we will tolerate and how much equality we really want. Few of us believe in perfectly egalitarian, government-dictated allotments of income and wealth, even if it were imposed within ranges of minimum and maximum income, by a perfect and ethical democratic process. Most of us also buy the idea of free markets where goods and labor are freely negotiated and exchanged between buyers and sellers, and we value these markets for efficiently allotting the proceeds of our economy according to merit, roughly.

It makes sense for a public-health professional with six years of advanced schooling in saving lives and making people healthy to get considerably more money per hour than say, a bartender. Investors who take real risks with their money ought to expect reasonable reward. I once had a business mogul tell me that a person should be paid according to how much damage can be done if they screw up. So not to give too much ground to the elites who insist they are persecuted or deserve every penny, but the top executive of Exxon or BP probably should make lot more money than that undocumented roofer from Mexico, even though the roofer may actually work harder

for longer hours in the sweltering heat, but the roofer probably does do far less damage to the planet when he screws up.

But does it make sense for the CEO of United Health Care, the highest paid executive of a publicly traded company in Minnesota, and which reaps enormous profits in part by raising premiums and sometimes denying treatment, to haul in \$50 million last year, and \$100 million the year before. And does it make sense for a hard-working mom on the minimum-wage to earn less than \$15,000 for a full year of minimum wage work. Does it make sense for the labors of her life to be worth 1/10,000 the labor of the United Health CEO, and for her not to have health-care on top of it. Does it make any sense for the top 1 percent of Americans to hold 40 percent of our nation's total wealth, and for the bottom 50 percent to hold 3 percent of that wealth, and for the top 1 percent continue to pay the lowest tax rates of any industrialized nation and lower rates than at any time in our recent history? Does it make sense for those in the top 1 percent to have tripled their share of income since 1980? Has their inherent worth and merit and virtue tripled in relation to the rest of us?

Some economists, proving beyond all doubt that theirs is the dismal science, will go to torturous lengths to prove this does make sense. The fundamentalist libertarian worshippers of Ayn Rand \_ who by the way had utter contempt for the altruism and sharing and selflessness taught by the world's great religious faiths \_ view any continuation or extension of our venerable social contract as an immoral affront to liberty itself.

Now, we Unitarian Universalists also celebrate individual freedom and liberty, especially freedom of spirit and mind and speech, and we use

the word almost as much as the average Tea Partier, although our T-shirts say “Don’t Fence the Spirit” not so much “Don’t Tread on Me” or “Leave us Alone”, or “Keep the Government Out of My Medicare”.

We don’t define liberty as the freedom NOT to share resources with our fellow tribe members, through the essential and legitimate and perfectly righteous, democratic, and Bible-approved mechanism known as taxes. We understand that for people with nothing left to lose, in the words of Janis Joplin, freedom is just another word. For me, the great appeal of our faith tradition, and that which, distinguishes us and lifts us, is a sense of balance, of deepest regard for both freedom and meritocracy, but also for that other great American value, often opposing and in tension, and this of course is equality, the inherent equal worth of each and every one of God’s children.

And we can wave the flag around this. Both the American and the French revolution it inspired were very much about *liberte’*, but also *egalite’* and *fraternite’*, equality and sisterhood and brotherhood, and radical challenges to the idea of inherited power and wealth. One of the very first self-evident truths stated in the Declaration of Independence posits the Universalist Unitarian bedrock premise that we are created equal. This rather sacred and ultra-liberal document of our formation could well have been labeled and marketed as a Declaration of Equality, or a Declaration of Independence from Inequality, and from the divine right of kings and aristocrats and plutocrats and theocrats.

Indeed, the secret to our progress and success as a nation and state has been equality before the law, equality before the Great Spirit, and maximum equality of ***opportunity***, at the very least, in economics.



An aside here. Although I am resigned to the fact that my fellow Americans are too enamored of liberty and not concerned enough about inequality, a recent study discovered some very encouraging things about what Americans mistakenly think about the state of inequality, and what they hopefully prefer, at least theoretically. Researchers for a recent study drew three pie charts, one showing the grossly unequal current distribution of wealth in the United States, another showing the somewhat more progressive distribution that would approximate that of Sweden, and another showing a perfectly egalitarian “socialist” distribution. When asked to estimate actual current wealth distribution in the U.S., most respondents grossly underestimated how much wealth is held by those at the top. And when asked to pick the distribution model they preferred, the overwhelming majority picked one of the more egalitarian pie charts over the one reflecting the status quo. When presented with accurate information and facts and context, people often make the right choices.

Meanwhile, despite the trends and the challenge before us, let’s not lose sight of the fact that, despite the mounting evidence of declining equity recently, that the arc of history is bending toward justice.

Although those at the top have a significantly larger piece of the pie over the last 30 years and especially in the last decade, since a high point of peak equality in the 1970s, there is less differentiation by race and gender between up and down, the top and the bottom. And it’s not just because Oprah Winfrey is one of the richest people in the world, and that a man of African descent is president, inconceivable notions just 30 years ago, or even 10 years ago. Pay equity for all women of all races has improved since the 1970s, from about 59 cents on the dollar, referenced in the 1970s song you heard earlier, to about

75 cents for white women. Whoop-ding, you might say, and I agree, but it's progress. Pay for African-American men rose from essentially zero in 1865, to 69 cents on the dollar for white men in the 70s, to 80 cents a decade ago, but has dropped back to 72 cents. And for Latino and Hispanic men and women, median annual earnings has actually declined relative to white males in 1970.

So what DO we do NEXT?

Most of us already are enlisted somehow in one or more of the great equality battles of our time. We need to do even more of that. If you are not involved in a cause that has greater equality as its goal, you should be, and membership in this church might not be enough. We really have a monumental political and a policy fight on our hands, over the next 14 months. We need to gird our loins, as the Bible says, for an epic battle and a relentless onslaught by libertarian zealots who are bolder than ever in openly embracing selfishness as the only important virtue, unchecked capitalism as the only legitimate dictator of economic results, and dismissing democracy and the common good and the wider community advanced by our own good governments as "inconsequential." For girding the mind, I'd highly recommend reading the works of Barbara Ehrenreich, Robert Reich, E.J. Dionne, and middle-grounders like David Brooks, who generally decries the new minimalism and calls for massive investment in human capital. I'd especially recommend reading the recent book "Inequality Matters" with a foreword by Bill Moyers. For refreshing new ideas on how to build new communities and new economies that turn away from consumerism and embrace an earth-friendly sustainability, check out the works of David Korten and Chuck Collins. In Minnesota we need to fight for public-sector sufficiency and efficiency, against new

arbitrary constitutional amendments that will make it nearly impossible to raise money for public purposes, and against the continued marginalization of immigrants. We need to work FOR the many things we need to do publicly, especially investment in education and human services, from birth to career-launch in young adulthood, for communities of color, now comprising more than one-fourth of our state's kindergartners. Some of these struggles are defensive battles. Again, progress has often been three steps forward two steps back, two forward, one back, and we move faster by limiting the reactionary forces to fewer or no steps back.

Economic inequality, and growing economic insecurity for most of us, is THE issue of our times, up there with war and peace, and similar inequality and insecurity issues are affecting other tribes and nations all across world now, especially the developing world. The trends right now in Minnesota and the United States are unsustainable, ridiculous actually, and if we don't do something about it, even the rich and comfortable among us, and that's many of us in this room, or our children, will suffer for it. Jesus Christ, and Eleanor Roosevelt and Hubert H. Humphrey and most of our wise leaders and loving teachers back to hunter-gatherer days, say we should be judged by the condition of the least among us. So let's go forth and "insult the meat" and remember that the best antidote to liberal guilt is vigorous action. Let's remember the words of Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who declared at the 1963 civil right on Washington, in assessing the great stains of racism and anti-Semitism and inequality, that, quote, "while few are guilty, all are responsible." Unquote. And so be it.

## Links to Cited Works:

Book/Authors: “Inequality Matters: The Growing Economic Divide in America and Its Poisonous Consequences.”

(Anthology of best research and essays on the subject, a little dated (2005) but timeless) <http://www.amazon.com/Inequality-Matters-Economic-Poisonous-Consequences/dp/1565849957>

Book/Author: “Aftershock” (and many other books and articles by Robert Reich, all or most available on his website)

<http://robertreich.org/>

Book/Author: “Nickel and Dimed” (and others by Barbara Ehrenreich, provides not just macro-economics but compelling real-life detail on economic injustice.

Book/Author: “Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth” by David Korten (and links to other work)

Book/Author: “Wealth and Our Commonwealth: Why America Should Tax Accumulated Fortunes,” (by co-author Chuck Collins and Bill Gates Sr. and other work by Collins)

<http://inequality.org/author/chuck-collins/>

**Book/Author:** Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics after the Religious Right (by E.J. Dionne, Washington Post columnist and Brookings Institution fellow, often on the them or progressive spirituality) <http://www.brookings.edu/experts/dionnee.aspx>

Public Policy Research Websites: (A treasure trove of timely research studies, analyses, prescriptions and commentary are available from these non-partisan national organizations)

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities <http://www.cbpp.org/>; Demos <http://www.demos.org/index.cfm>; and the Economic Policy Institute <http://www.epi.org/>

And in Minnesota reliable non-partisan information and advocacy on economic inequality can be found at: The Minnesota Budget Project <http://www.mnbudgetproject.org/>; Growth & Justice <http://www.growthandjustice.org/>, and here's a link to a joint study with Demos and Growth & Justice on the decline of Minnesota's middle class: [http://growthandjustice.org/sites/2d9abd3a-10a9-47bf-ba1a-fe315d55be04/uploads/MN\\_Middle\\_Class\\_Report.pdf](http://growthandjustice.org/sites/2d9abd3a-10a9-47bf-ba1a-fe315d55be04/uploads/MN_Middle_Class_Report.pdf)

## Lyrics to Songs

### **I Don't Want Your Millions Mister** (© 1947)

Lyrics: Jim Garland (*new verse* Peter Blood)

Music: traditional "East Virginia"

I don't want your millions, Mister

I don't want your diamond ring

All I want is the right to live, Mister

Give me back my job again

I don't want your Rolls Royce, Mister

I don't want your pleasure Yacht

All I want is food for my babies

Give to me my old job back

I know you have the land deed, Mister

The money is all in your name

But where's the work that you did , Mister

I'm demanding back my job again

We worked to build this country, Mister  
While you enjoyed a life of ease  
You've stolen all that we built, Mister  
Now our children starve and freeze

Think me dumb if you wish, Mister  
Call me green or blue or red  
Just one think I sure know, Mister  
My hungry babies must be fed

Take the two old parties, Mister  
No difference in them I can see  
But with the Farmer-Labor Party  
We could set the people free

You never earned those millions, Mister  
They were produced by working hands  
We're taking back our own wealth, Mister  
Winning back our lives & lands

### **Don't Give Up**

(by Peter Gabriel)

In this proud land we grew up strong

We were wanted all along

I was taught to fight, taught to win

I never thought I could fail

No fight left or so it seems

I am a man whose dreams have all deserted

I've changed my face, I've changed my name

But no one wants you when you lose

**Chorus:** Don't give up - 'cos you have friends

Don't give up - you're not beaten yet

Don't give up - I know you can make it good

**Verse:**

Though I saw it all around

Never thought that I could be affected

Thought that we'd be the last to go

It is so strange the way things turn

Drove the night toward my home

The place that I was born, on the lakeside

As daylight broke, I saw the earth

The trees had burned down to the ground

**Chorus:** Don't give up – you still have us

Don't give up – we don't need much of anything

Don't give up – 'cos somewhere there's a place where we belong

**Bridge:**



Rest your head

You worry too much

It's gonna be alright

When times get rough, you can fall back on us,

Don't give up, please don't give up

Got to walk out of here, I can't take anymore

Going to stand on that bridge, keep my eyes down below

Whatever may come and whatever may go,

That river's flowing, that river's flowing

**Verse:**

Moved on to another town

Tried hard to settle down

For every job, so many men

So many men no-one needs

**Chorus:**

Don't give up - 'cos you have friends

Don't give up - you're not the only one

Don't give up - no reason to be ashamed

Don't give up - you still have us

Don't give up now - we're proud of who you are

Don't give up - you know it's never been easy

Don't give up - 'cos I believe there's a place

There's a place where we belong

## **That's The Way It Is**

(by Bruce Hornsby)

Standing in line marking time

Waiting for the welfare dime

'Cause they can't buy a job

The man in the silk suit hurries by

As he catches the poor ladies' eyes

Just for fun he says "get a job"

### **Chorus:**

That's just the way it is,

Somethings will never change,

That's just the way it is,

Ah, but don't you believe them.

### **Verse 2:**

They say, hey little boy you can't go where the others go

'Cause you don't look like they do

Said hey old man how can you stand to think that way

did you really think about it

Before you made the rules he said, Son

### **Chorus**

### **Verse 3:**

Well they passed a law in '64

To give those who ain't got a little more

But it only goes so far

Because the law don't change another's mind

When all it sees at the hiring time

Is the line on the color bar

**Chorus**

### **Fifty-Nine Cents**

By Fred Small (©1981 Pine Barrens Music (BMI))

High school daydreams come easy & free

When you're a working woman watcha gonna be?

A senator, a surgeon, aim for the heights

But the guidance office says lower your sights to:

**Chorus:**

59¢ for every man's dollar

59¢ it's a lowdown deal

59¢ makes a grown woman holler

They give you a | v1: diploma | v2: degree | v3: title

It's your paycheck they steal

V2:

She's off to college, the elite kind

To polish her manners, sharpen her mind

Honors in English, letter in lacrosse

Teaches her to type for her favorite boss at: *Chorus*

V3:

Junior executive on her way up

Special assistant to the man at the top

She's one in a million & all she found

Was her own secretary now to order around at: *Chorus*

V4:

But the word is being processed in the typing pool

A working woman ain't nobody's fool

She's telling the boss on Secretary's Day

You can keep your flowers, buddy, give me a raise more than

### **Last Chorus**

59¢ for every man's dollar

59¢ - oh the deal has changed

59¢ makes a grown woman holler

You can keep your flowers, buddy, give us a raise!

### **Bread and Roses**

By James Oppenheim – 1911

Music by Mimi Farina – 1976

As we go marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,

A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,

Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses

For the people hear us singing: Bread and Roses! Bread and Roses!

As we go marching, marching, we battle too for men,  
For they are women's children, and we mother them again.  
Or lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;  
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses.

As we go marching, marching, unnumbered women dead  
Go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread.  
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.  
Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too.

As we go marching, marching, we bring the greater days,  
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.  
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,  
But a sharing of life's glories: bread and roses, bread and roses.

### **I (We) Won't Back Down**

By Tom Petty (Singular pronouns changed to plural.)

Well we won't back down, no we won't back down  
You can stand us up at the gates of hell  
But we won't back down  
  
Gonna stand our ground, won't be turned around

And we'll keep this world from draggin' us down  
Gonna stand our ground and we won't back down

**Refrain:**

Hey baby, there ain't no easy way out  
Hey, we will.... Stand our ground and we won't back down

**Verse 2:**

Well we know what's right. We got just one life.  
In a world that keeps on pushin' us around  
But we'll stand our ground and we won't back down

**Refrain:**

Hey baby, there ain't no easy way out  
Hey we will... stand our ground and we won't back down  
And we won't back down  
No we won't back down

