

Justice at the Gates

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I am in love with Ernesto Cortez. It happened at *General Assembly* in Long Beach this year during *Professional Days*. This is the ministers' conference that precedes *General Assembly*. Ernesto is an organizer of people, an heir to the work of the great organizer Saul Alinsky. Saul spoke at our *General Assembly* about 35 years ago, giving the *Ware Lecture*. This year's *Ware* was given by Holly Near, who threw back her head and sang songs of change and justice. She wrote the song "We Are a Gentle Angry People" which is in our hymnal.

I love *Professional Days*. I love *General Assembly*. I come back all excited about being a member of this denomination and ready to roll up my sleeves in new and exciting ways. Then time passes and what I learned drifts out of focus and a few months later it is tough to re-create why it was so good to be at the conference and what was it that had me so excited? I hope this year to be very intentional about sharing my experience of these assemblies and why they matter. Here is a snippet from the main presentation of the minister's gathering. It was a very provocative and inspiring day for all of us there.

Ernesto Cortez spoke about our thirst for justice and how the real task, when it is stripped down to the core, is to help people see where their own interest is located. That is big. Let me say it again. To do the work of justice is to help people see where their own best interest is to be found. In other words, it is not to convince people of anything, but to help them sort out what serves their lives and their aliveness.

Ernesto is a Catholic but he had done his homework. He spoke to us in a way that did not require translation. Like many of you, I often spend lots of time translating from another

theology to the more humanistic ways in which I usually try to express myself. Ernesto spoke in our language. I was impressed.

He talked about developing the capacity of adults to see their own lives. He talked about the concentration of power and wealth in our time. He talked about having standing. "Having standing" is having the right to be heard. Who has standing in our society? Is it only the big corporations? Increasingly that seems true to me. Money talks, and what is good for big business seems to drive the government.

What comes next is the question, How do people get standing? How do we all have a claim on the process of decision-making in our own lives and in society? How do we make sure that all our interests are part of the decision? How do any of us have our voices heard in the marketplace of ideas?

What has happened to the idea of a common wealth?

There is a problem of access. Access is tied to power, and power in our society is tied to wealth. Wealth equals power and power equals wealth. It is not always so, but it seems true now in our society. Having wealth is the only sure way to have a voice. Ernesto said that currently our inability to tax capital is the root of the growing gulf between those who have capital/power and those who do not.

Consider one example of the drift in class opportunities that I didn't know about. The working poor used to have a pretty sure ticket to the middle class if they could get into community college. Community college was relatively cheap and relatively available. Now more middle class kids are being accepted to, say, University of California at Berkeley but are expected to spend their first two years at a junior college. That closes the door on the somewhat less able and less moneyed students.

The answer to this dilemma of having standing, of getting access, of getting heard, is to be organized into larger groups who stand together because they see that their common interests are served when they come together and form a constituency. Lots of people joined together can have standing even if they do not have big bucks.

How does this happen?

Well, by building relationships with a wider number of people. By talking with those outside our own familiar circle and finding out what they care about. It is about being in relationship with more folks, some of whom envision a world that is less driven by capital than by caring for one another. I would love to be with a community of people who want the world to be organized around mutual care rather than financial prosperity. In fact, I think most of us right here in this Fellowship probably fit that model.

Am I saying that it is wrong to be prosperous? It is messier than a simple yes or no. In fact, I was raised to believe that richer people were better in some way. Oh, we might make fun of the super-wealthy, but there was a more powerful message that they were to be admired, treated like celebrities, and it was clear that they held power. They were, in spite of our jokes, more powerful than we were. If part of me acts as if that is true, then buried beneath that is a notion that poor people are not as good as me. They must not try as hard. They must not be willing to defer gratification. At the very least, I am smarter and therefore I deserve more. That is all pretty embarrassing to say out loud, but I think that it is part of the structure of this society. The biggest flaw in our system is that it depends on a "lower class." This is the part that I have not always seen. I was taught that if you were willing to work, anything was possible. I don't think it is still true, if it ever was.

I think, as of today, that I am still a capitalist, but a restrained one. A modified one. I do believe in reward for effort and applause for creativity. If the middle class were supported by government to be the biggest segment of society, if the government would support the needs of the middle class over those of big business, if the poor had good social supports and could have a reasonable shot at getting educated and moving up, and if everyone had shelter and food and medical care: if that were how capitalism imagined itself, I would be happy as a capitalist. What scares me now is the concentration of wealth in the hands of so few and the growing number of suffering poor and the policies and whole systems that are widening the gulf between us.

Ernesto says that the beginning of the work of creating a better society is in building relationships outside of our comfort zone and listening. This will be my theme here this year. Listening to one another, and to others who think differently. And being deeply respectful.

How do we deal with the tensions outside when we have plenty of tension inside — even a group like us which essentially enjoys one another? How do we learn to hold power relationally and allow others to act on us? I hope our “Mind-Shift Cafes” and our classes in the fall will give us opportunities to experiment with being truthful with one another and respectful in our differences. How do we figure out what we believe and want, how do we even notice what we yearn for, if we can’t talk?

How do we figure out what we want when we are bombarded by ads that tell us what we want? Most of us hardly know what our best interest is about any more. We suffer from luxury fever. Did you know that our kids by age 18 have spent three years of their lives watching ads? How are their values shaped? Schools teach skill development. Where do we learn the skills for a moral life? How do we learn to sort out what our position is? How do we learn to act from our vision and enlightened self-interest? We live inside structures that make us doubt our own experience. How do we begin to peel away all the layers of being shaped by values that are not our own but painted over us? How do we begin to recover and uncover our true values?

We talk.

The title of this sermon is taken from Ernesto Cortez’s talk, “Justice at the Gates of the City.” At the gate of every city in ancient Israel there was a municipal court that made decisions for the city and its inhabitants. Everyone participated in the “shalom” of community, particularly those who were at the margins.

When I stand back and look at my world and try to be present to a wider spectrum of life experience and allow feelings to come, I am overwhelmed and frozen. How can I sort out where I stand when the media has shaped me too? What is my own point of view? I see despair and tremendous unfairness and I get scared because I do live in privilege and what will I be called to give up?

Walter Bruggeman says that the first act of liberation is to cry. That seems true to me. The first act is to look without turning away, and that should make each of us cry for all the pain and hurt that surrounds us, even here in this place of beauty.

Ernesto says that the process begins in our imagination, and that our human curiosity will lead us to celebration. OK. I'll stick with it, this inquiry about what is true and where justice is. I will acknowledge that I need more courage. I trust that we will find it together. I have said before that if I stand up with others for values that I believe in, there is a joy in the work. A great joy, even if the result are not predictable or even satisfying. Just the working for values we believe in, within community, is a great joy. I think truthfully, I do not really expect to see great change. I don't expect to make a noticeable difference, but the only way to live is to try. The arc of the world may be too long for me to see results. But if I don't try, I know I will live in despair.

Let us look some more at who are disinherited. Who are not receiving their birthright. Who are without status or standing or connection.

Let me take us on a flashback to the oldest writing that I am familiar with. The Hebrew Testament of the Bible. I spent a month reading for a course on the Bible this summer. It is the oldest record available to me that tells me stories about human history. And how humans have wrestled with the great questions of meaning. It was amazing and fascinating. I didn't grow up with the Bible as a holy book, though I was taught the more familiar stories. I actually understand now how folks can not only enjoy studying it but spend their lives reading and studying archeology and contemporary sources. It is just juicy. I will be trying to bring you some of what I learned over the year, especially since our kids will be studying Judaism and Christianity this year. We want them to be well grounded in our cultural roots. I believe it is important for them to know Bible stories and to be able to articulate our Unitarian Universalist faith through a general knowledge of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim world we live in. All three of these major faiths share writings and the same stories of our beginnings.

The Hebrews became a people when they made a covenant to one another and were explicit about how they were obligated to one another. We here now are in covenant together. Our mission is to support one another in our spiritual explorations as we work for justice and care for the earth. Notice that our mission statement is posted around the church. "Welcome all," it says. "Welcome All! We nurture each other on our personal and spiritual journeys as we work for peace, compassionate justice and a healthy planet."

While I was preparing for my course at the Graduate Theological Union in July, I read these passages from the time of King Jeroboam, about 800 BCE, written by the prophet Amos and amplified by John Dominick Crossan, my professor.

From the Book of Amos, on poverty and justice: "They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed."

And that is from 800 BCE. With a few embellishment by Dr. Crossan:

"It is not only that there are poor and that poverty is bad. It is that luxury increases at one end of society making poverty increase at the other. The rich get richer as the poor get poorer. 'They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.' Justice equals righteousness, to do what is just equals to do what is right. And that righteousness is not just individual but structural, not just personal but systemic, not just retributive but distributive."

And a little later in time, Amaziah, the high priest, warns Jeroboam, the king, that Amos was forming a conspiracy.

Amaziah said: "God demands worship and we obey."

Amos responds: "God demands justice and you do not obey."

Amaziah: "What you call injustice, we call commercial prosperity; what you call unrighteousness we call business acumen."

Amos: "You cannot worship a god of justice in a state of injustice."

This is a conversation nearly 3000 years old. Nearly 3000 years and we are having it today. Do I feel reassured or despairing?

The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas said that the material needs of others must become our spiritual needs. To grow spiritually, we need for the needs of others to stir us up. How else do we really come to feel that liberation for ourselves is all wrapped up in justice for us all? We do good work in the world when we stir each other up. We act for

goodness when we ask questions and get exposed to new ideas. We do good work when we help one another sort out what we need and what we lack and what we long for and what makes our hearts break and how things might be better not just in our small little frame of reference but for a broad band of us . . . especially those with less standing.

Another great distinction from Mr. Cortez: Our issue is not with power, but in how power or consent is obtained. If we all agree that someone hold power, it is good. If we are forced to comply, if we are coerced or lied to, obviously it is not good.

So here we are, most of us feeling edgy and distrustful and even afraid. I believe that we know in our hearts that things are not right. We see the result of economic unfairness here at home and across the globe. Now what? What will happen here if we do not trust the election process?

As I think about the government of this country, I want us to talk. I want you to teach me. I want us to teach each other. My belief is that we mostly want the same things. Mostly. It is how we plan to get there that we differ. What promises should we make to each other in this and what should the role of the church be? And what is the role of this community? How is the world different because we are here? What difference do we make? That should be our spiritual core as a church. Not how we are fed individually but how we choose to engage, together, in the world.

I only know for sure that we are all in this together more than we realize. That is my theology. We are all in this together. Our liberation is all bound up together. Who we are is formed by whom we affiliate with. You choose to be here. My goal in this ministry is to grow our ability to talk to one another and to talk with a wider and wider range of other folks struggling with what it is to be human in this place and time. I want to stimulate our interest in a wider network of people, the folks outside of our usual companions. Again as Levinas said, and sometimes I can glimpse, "their material needs (must become) my spiritual needs." Our category of usual companions doesn't even include everybody here. It includes only some of the people here. How can we expect the world to get along if we limit who we get along with respectfully? I deeply believe that if we truthfully share our stories, we may not always agree but there will be an understanding between us that will bind us. When we speak our own truths, something very important shifts. I say that something sacred happens.

I'm dreaming of getting together for conversation cafes. Please tell me what you think. Can we gather after services some Sundays? Come back Sunday evenings? Give me feedback. I don't know how this will look, but I do know you will challenge me. I want a broader conversation than just our social justice committee. I know from your feedback that some of you feel like outsiders there. You feel that you are too conservative to open up with us about how you feel. You are frankly the ones I believe that I can learn the most from if we can create a respectful way to engage. It will take courage but if we can't figure out here how to talk, how can we expect the world to come together?

I hope that I am up to the task of asking you new questions. That's the key. Asking new questions that bring us new ways of looking at our lives. Then being attentive to what we notice. And finding the courage, together, to engage the world.

I am happy to be back. I think we are poised for another wonderful year together.

Blessed be.