

# Inherent Worth and Dignity

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During the Christmas holiday I spent time with some people I care very much for, and who share my values and perspectives. Although they don't attend church, they are UUs, and I have a feeling they don't understand very well my current involvement with the Episcopal Church. That's not relevant, though...what captured my attention was one person's distress over the fact that the pope was going to participate in the funeral service for the cardinal who reassigned priests that were allegedly molesting children. The cardinal's motive, evidently, was to protect the reputations of pedophile priests and the Catholic Church, and he did that at the expense of the children and families that the church serves. The conversation sounded somewhat bitter and resentful to me: "He's supposed to be such a liberal pope," one person said, and someone else said, "I don't see how he could do that and still say he supports the victims." I didn't know what to say, and I joined millions of people who gathered around holiday tables this year and disagreed with their loved ones and tried to avoid getting into arguments. Eventually I said, "Forgiveness is a really difficult thing."

"I understand that," somebody responded, "but the word forgiveness was not used."

I pulled out of the conversation. Confrontation over holiday dinner is not an area where I excel, and I had done all I was going to do. I thought later, though: does the word forgiveness *have* to be spoken? Isn't the act of forgiveness sufficient by itself? The pope participated in the funeral of a

man who committed what many people would call an appalling sin. The cardinal allowed terrible things to happen to children--the most vulnerable of the people he was supposed to care for. It can also be said that he failed the priests that he evidently enabled, and never called to repent. He betrayed the trust of children and families and the church, and the pope prayed at his funeral, prayed for mercy in his final judgment. How could that be?

Well, I suggest that it's because the pope knows what those who embrace all great religions know: every person has inherent worth and dignity. We find it easy to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of the people we like, the people we support, the people we feel sympathy for: the poor, the LGBTQ community, black people, people in prison, immigrants, downtrodden, mistreated people everywhere. What do we do, though, when we are called to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of people we despise—people who molest children, people who abuse others, racists, bigots, people who take guns into crowds and start shooting? Can we possibly affirm *their* inherent worth and dignity? Can we advocate for justice, equity, and compassion in our dealings with them? We have to, don't we? That's what we say. So either we have to do it, or we have to stop saying it.

This is one of the most difficult challenges that people of faith everywhere confront—how in the world do we treat people the way we think they should treat us and each other when they are genuinely evil, or maybe not genuinely evil, but so broken that they act in ways that are evil? Can our UU principles apply to the worst people we encounter? They have to, or else what's the point of having them.

These are dark times in our history. We can hardly believe the news we read day after day, and at times it's more than we can bear. Too many people suffering, too many people arrogant and oblivious in their responses to that suffering. Relentless talk about whose lives matter, who has rights, who belongs and who doesn't, who are the victims and who are the perpetrators...how can we make all this misery stop? Maybe we can't, not today, and maybe we have to consider putting aside our own suffering over so much that is wrong. Maybe our own suffering gets in the way of our participation in the shifting of the tides. I have talked to people who are adamant in their despair, definite in their conviction that they have every reason to feel hopeless. And maybe they do. But what use does hopelessness serve? My friends at the holiday dinner felt completely justified in despising the cardinal whose behavior was so deeply wrong, and they were sure the pope had made a mistake in participating in his funeral. But what would have been changed for the better if the pope had withheld his prayer for mercy?

Our task now, in these bitter times, is not to contribute to the world's suffering by participating in it. Grieving is an appropriate response to so much of the news we are hearing these days, and we can grieve as we feel that we need to. But we can't rest in our grief. We have affirmed the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and that means despicable people, too. We have affirmed that our relationships should be governed by justice, equity, and compassion. We have affirmed that we are all part of an interdependent web. That web includes people who believe black lives don't matter a bit, and people who believe women are their playthings, and

people who abuse the power they have over weaker people, and we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of those people who are so wrong, according to our very own principles. How in the world did we get into a mess like that?

But we did, and we did it on purpose, and that's where we are now. So how do we go forward, without too much suffering, without being weighed down or slowed down by our own despair? Most of you know me better than to expect I'm going to tell you the answer—I don't have answers, only questions. I heard a story not long ago, though, that helped me find a path through this maze.

The rector at the church I attend is named Gary Jones, and Gary recently told about a friend of his, a professor, who once said there were two ways of knowing: the Greek way of knowing and the Hebrew way of knowing. As you recall, those are the original biblical languages, Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament. Gary's old friend gave an example to illustrate the difference in what he called ways of knowing. The Greek way of knowing, he said, is academic, analytical, informational. The Hebrew way is more experiential, more intuitional. "Imagine this," the friend said. "Somebody asks, 'How high is that high diving board over there?' The Greek way of knowing would be to use some kind of measurement, some kind of math calculation, and arrive at an answer; that high diving board is 26 feet 7 inches high. The Hebrew way of knowing would be like this: go over to the foot of the ladder and close your eyes. Hold the hand rails and climb the ladder. Keep your eyes shut. As long as the hand rail is there, hold on to it. When there's no more hand rail,

keep your eyes shut and move slowly forward until your toes reach the very end of the board. Then stop, open your eyes, and look down. The feeling you get in your stomach when you look down--that's how high the high diving board is."

I don't know in the Greek way how we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of the people who are doing hateful things to those who are powerless to protect themselves. So I have to know in the Hebrew way, and that way makes more sense to me. When I think, for example, of the cardinal who betrayed everything he was supposed to love—the church, the priests he was supposed to support and guide, the children and families he was supposed to nurture, I have to imagine...did he experience suffering in his darkest private moments, when he understood the devastation that he was causing? Did he ever understand that? What sort of torment did his own brokenness cause him? Was it enough?

Maybe it wasn't enough for the families of the children who were molested. Maybe it wasn't enough for the faithful who believed that priests were always the good guys, always the ones you could count on. Maybe those people, and maybe some of us, can't find any inherent worth and dignity in a man who could do so much harm. So we do what we *can* do: we continue to affirm that it's there, even though we can't find it.

Now back to the Hebrew way of knowing--after the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville in August, a group of clergy organized a multi-faith worship service where one of the speakers was a rabbi named Michael

Knopf. He told about the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, who taught thirteen mitzvahs of the Jewish faith. One of the most difficult for us may be the one that says, "I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though he may delay, nevertheless I wait for his coming every day."

Rabbi Knopf said that there were people in the Nazi concentration camps would recite that mitzvah every day, even though they knew they were going to die. But they still recited, with their complete faith, that they were waiting for the coming of the Messiah.

Rabbi Knopf said it somewhat differently; he said, "I believe with complete faith in the coming of a perfected world, and though it may delay, nevertheless I wait every day for it to come."

Our complete faith lets us wait every day for the coming of a perfected world, even though it may be long in coming. In the Hebrew way of knowing, we know that there is inherent worth and dignity in every criminal, every bigot, every pervert, every racist, every abuser that we hear about daily. We can't prove it, we can't explain it, we can't demonstrate it, but though we may be delayed in our discovery of that inherent worth and dignity, nevertheless we make a decision to believe that it is there, and that some day, long in coming, it may emerge to save that damaged soul. We can't know it in the Greek way of knowing, but we affirm it, and promote it, and wait for it, no matter how long we have to wait.

And so may it be.