

The Goal of World Community
Remarks by Steven Epperson, Parish Minister
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UCV

It is fitting that today this congregation sponsors the John Gibbard Award. And we are pleased to see it extended to the YMCA Youth Peace Network. Congratulations! And I want all of you to know that across North America, hundreds of Unitarian Universalist congregations are commemorating UN Sunday in solidarity with the world-wide celebration of United Nations Day which takes place every year on October 24th. Dedicated support by Unitarian Universalists for the creation and flourishing of the United Nations goes back nearly a century. We were active in the creation and work of the League of Nations; we closely monitored and encouraged the formation of the United Nations, appointed an official delegate to the UN in 1946, and established a UU United Nations Office in the early 1960s. And in the past four years, this congregation has been pleased to twice sponsor and send members of our own Youth Group as delegates to the United Nations Youth Spring Seminars in New York City.

To give us all a picture for the reasons Unitarians have been connected to and supportive of the United Nations in these extensive and long-term ways, I want to quote some words by Adlai Stevenson, a past US Senator, presidential candidate, and a distinguished US Ambassador to the UN, who happened to also be a Unitarian. In April 1962, he wrote to the new President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, urging UU congregations to send envoys to the United Nations: "In this disastrous and shrinking world it is no longer possible—if it ever was—for local communities to be more secure than the surrounding world. Our...security lies in making the world more and more into a community....All of you have the opportunity to share in the answer, and thus help us to build a peaceful world."

Please note something I think is very important in these words. To be sure, Ambassador Stevenson talked about "making the world more and more into a community," and the world a more "peaceful" place. And to this day, across North America, Unitarians covenant to affirm and promote "the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all." That's a direct quote from the "Seven Principles and Sources of Our Religious Faith." It sounds very sweet doesn't it? Kind of sunny and optimistic; on my bad days, it rings more than a bit naïve. But look again with me at what Ambassador Stevenson said, and what stands behind that affirmation of principle. The goal of world community, the aspiration of a peaceful world, of which Stevenson spoke is vividly backlit by his stark assessment of the human condition: "In this disastrous and shrinking world," he said, it is no longer possible—if ever it was—to be secure.

We live in a perilous, troubled world, peopled by two legged mammals that embody enormous potential and power for malice and woe, as well as empathy and good. Neither we ourselves, nor the governments we create or under whose dominion we struggle, are paragons of virtue. Nor is it credibly written or guaranteed anywhere, *anywhere*, that we are marching collectively, progressively onward and upward into a bright future of felicity, abundance, and harmony.

"In this disastrous and shrinking world..." What else can one say in the wake of two world wars, post-colonial conflicts, naked strife over dwindling carbon based resources, and a world literally heating up? Gone are the halcyon days (which never really existed) back in the 1800s, when a prominent Unitarian confidently waxed rhapsodic about the "Progress of Mankind, onward and upward forever." (James Freeman Clarke)

Instead, travel with me, for a moment, further back into the past to consider another set of words as we near the end of this service.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit...
Blessed are those who mourn...

Blessed are the meek...
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..."
Blessed are the merciful...
Blessed are the pure in heart...
Blessed are the peacemakers."

Every once in a while, when I try to get beyond the habit of hearing the Beatitudes, I am struck by the fact that they were spoken some two thousand years ago; words spoken by a scruffy, thirty-something year old itinerant preacher in a back water Province of the Roman Empire; spoken with feeling and a worldview that express a conviction as relentlessly gentle, realistic, and angry today, as relevant as today's headlines, as they were two millennia ago. They are words that arise from the very heart of the perennial, undying insight and task of those who call themselves religious. Dry eyed realism, as well as heart-rending empathy abide in those words. They witness that two thousand years ago, and today, we live in a world beset by violent, heartless conditions that reduce children, women and men to chronic poverty, want, and sorrow; and thus, all the more, the words of Jesus and a host of prophetic voices from the world's religions, point unfailingly to and call out for kindness, compassion, and peacemaking from those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice.

Peacemaking is not easy; just ask that blue-helmeted thin line of UN Peacekeepers who put their bodies and lives in harm's way for the sake of bringing a measure of peace in places of conflict. Peacemaking can also be joyful, and I thank the members of the Youth Peace Network of the YMCA for sharing that experience of joy with us today.

Affirming and promoting the goal of world community blessed with peace, justice and liberty need not be mere cloyingly naive, sentimental rhetoric. We seek it; we hunger and thirst for it precisely because the alternative is so dreadful; and we know it. We know that within us reside both the will to violent, selfish power, and the glory of empathic mercy, compassion and justice. May we choose this day and always to heed the "angels of our better nature" and *thus* be a beatitude, a blessing to the world and to generations yet-to-come.