

## #OccupyFirstParish

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small

First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist

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Inside the Faith & Spirituality Tent in the heart of the Occupy Boston encampment at Dewey Square, there's a reflection journal where anyone can record their thoughts.

An entry on October 2<sup>nd</sup> reads: "We are the fingers of the hands, finally working together."

October 7<sup>th</sup>: "There is such an energy here—of dissatisfaction, of urgency, of hope, of connectedness, and of action. Bless this all!"

October 21<sup>st</sup>: "I can't wait for everyone to agree. We have waited our whole lives for this global awakening."

October 27<sup>th</sup>: "May everyone fighting for justice know the path of love. If we fight power with anger and hatred NO positive gain will be realized."

October 30<sup>th</sup>: "It's cold. Last night was terrible. How can I stay positive during this? I'm tired. I'm cold. I am going to church this morning."

Occupy Boston is one of hundreds of demonstrations that have sprung up around the world almost overnight inspired by Occupy Wall Street, which began less than two months ago in Manhattan's Financial District.

The inequities protested by the Occupy Movement are stark.

From 1979 to 2007, the average real income of the top 1 percent of Americans grew by an astounding 275 percent. The richest 400 people in the country now have more assets than the poorest 150 million of their fellow citizens combined.

The average CEO is paid 185 times what the average worker is paid. 10% of Americans own over 80% of the stock market. Between 2007 and 2009, while the unemployment rate increased by 102% and home equity fell by 35%, Wall Street profits soared 720%. Meanwhile, the numbers of America's poorest poor have climbed to a record high—1 in 15 people.

Shocking as these numbers are, they're still just numbers. The human suffering behind them is painful to contemplate and agonizing to endure.

The contrast between the high-living corporate titan with his penthouse apartment, vacation estates, and lavish parties and the homeless veteran, the worker pink-slipped after thirty years, the family evicted from their home, the sick mother refused health coverage, the drug addict denied treatment, the children playing in toxic waste is obscene and unacceptable.

Yet somehow we've accepted it.

One reason—maybe the only reason—we've accepted it is that the power of concentrated wealth has made meaningful change through the democratic process all but impossible.

Consider the Koch brothers, Charles and David. In the United States, only Bill Gates and Warren Buffett are richer. According to a UMass study, Koch Industries, the world's second-largest privately held company with annual revenues estimated at \$100 billion, is one of the top ten air polluters in America. The Koch brothers, among the primary benefactors of the Tea Party, are believed to have given more than \$100 million to right-wing and anti-regulatory causes, most of it to discredit climate change. The

Kochs donated to 62 of the 87 Republicans elected for the first time to Congress last fall. Since 2003, the brothers have spent \$5.2 million on candidates and ballot measures in 34 states. They've given more than \$17 million to anti-union lobbying groups and are among the largest corporate supporters of Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin.

The Koch brothers are just the tip of the iceberg. For every member of Congress, there are now five oil industry lobbyists knocking on their doors. And with the power of money to buy elections, you can bet those doors will open.

People have had enough.

Enough sacrifice by the poor and middle-class so the rich can get richer. Enough fighting over the scraps that fall from the banquet table of the well-fed. Enough petitioning for redress of grievances a government in the grip of the perpetrators of those grievances.

Last month, filmmaker Michael Moore told the crowd at Occupy Oakland, "If you want to know who organized this, they organized it! The people on Wall Street organized this! Bank of America organized this! ExxonMobil, BP organized this! They did [it] by simply putting their boot on the necks of millions of Americans."

Peter Marcuse, Professor of Urban Planning at Columbia University and Herbert Marcuse's son, exults: "The whole essence of the movement is to reject the game's rules as it is being played, to produce change that includes [particular] demands but goes much further to question the structures that make those demands necessary."

The Occupy Movement, of course, is a work in progress, a constantly evolving organism, an ongoing experiment in the improbable.

South Asian activist Harsha Walia calls the movement "brilliantly transitional. . . . Decentralized gatherings with democratic decision-making processes and autonomous space for people to gather and dialogue based on their interests—such as through reading circles or art zones or guerrilla gardening—create a sense of purpose, connectedness, and emancipation in a society that otherwise breeds apathy, disenchantment, and isolation. This type of pre-figurative politics—a living symbol of refusal—is a significant success that should continue so we can actively come together to create and live the alternatives to this system."

Despite her "virulent optimism" about the Occupy Movement, Walia, like many people of color, has deep concerns about it. "To be honest, it has been a space of turmoil for me," she admits. "[W]e must understand that the tentacles of corporate control have roots in the processes of colonization and enslavement. . . . [T]he growing economic inequality . . . across this country is nothing new for low-income racialized communities. . . . [T]he 99% is not a homogenous group but a web of inter-related communities in struggle. . . . Ignoring the hierarchies of power [within the 99%] does not make them magically disappear. It actually does the opposite—it entrenches those inequalities."

St. Louis activists John Chasnoff and Sandra Tamari ask, "Will this movement, like so many before it, succeed in getting whites back in the door and once again leave people of color behind? Without working out our social conditioning, we recreate in our 'revolutionary' space the same problems we are opposed to in the current structures. . . . [S]exism and homophobia have crept into the General Assemblies. Women are reporting that white males often dominate discussions. White males tend to gravitate toward being media spokespersons, possibly because they have a greater sense of empowerment and less fear of having their identity revealed."

Indigenous people point out that the land the Occupy movement is “occupying” has been occupied for centuries, ever since European conquest.

Reverend Brian “BK” Woodson of the Bay Area Christian Connection is trying to bring more African-American clergy into Occupy Oakland. “I think a lot of people here have been praying and crying for this moment for a long time,” he says, but “I think [African American ministers are] suspicious of it. Our entire history teaches us to be suspicious, and this movement came without asking their permission. But in the scripture, people missed Christ because Christ came not like people expected him to.” He continues, “I don’t think they see this as the extension of the Civil Rights movement. Yet.”

Racism, classism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia are all systemic oppressions endemic in the larger society. Because the Occupy movement is intentionally decentralized and radically democratic—in a way, intentionally non-intentional—it’s especially challenging for the movement to be intentional in addressing and countering these oppressions, which is the only way it can be done. While Occupy must be accountable to marginalized communities, we probably should not have unrealistic expectations of a fledgling movement taking shape before our eyes.

But as Karin Lin of our First Parish Transformation Team reminds us, “When we talk about ‘We’—be it ‘We the 99%’ or ‘We Americans’ or ‘We Unitarian Universalists’ we must constantly ask ourselves who is included in that ‘we,’ which voices we are hearing, whose stories we are telling.” Canadian immigration activist Syed Hussan puts it succinctly: “[T]o truly be free, to truly include the entire 99 per cent, you have to say today, and say every day: We will leave no one behind.”

Another challenge the Occupy Movement faces is violence, whether physical or spiritual. As the encampments grow, they become micro-cities and, like any city, prone to crime and abuse. While the overwhelming majority of Occupiers are conscientiously nonviolent, a few enter the encampments embracing violence as a political tool, and a few is all it takes to turn a peaceful march into a melee that invites repression and alienates Americans watching. As the weather grows colder, city officials less patient, and police testier, the discipline of nonviolence will become even more demanding.

A movement that calls itself the 99% is understandably tempted to demonize the 1%, casting them outside the circle of connection and compassion. As Martin Luther King, Jr., taught us, the purpose of “non-violence is redemption and reconciliation.” Dr. King understood that the most vicious racist was not his enemy. His enemy was racism. Oppression traps the oppressor as surely as the oppressed. Deep in the heart of the oppressor is a yearning for liberation. Power and wealth are addictions that grip as fiercely as drugs and booze, and while the addicted 1% don’t sleep in alleyways, they too deserve to be healed.

The great question now is whether the Occupy movement can make the critical transition from a protest movement to a change movement, from an ephemeral rebellion that offers emotional catharsis to a revolution that brings political and economic transformation.

Whatever the outcome, the Occupy Movement has already succeeded.

In a few short weeks it has, to use Dr. King’s phrase, “hew[ed] out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.” It has summoned thousands from apathy into activism. It

has shifted the national conversation from the deficit, the debt ceiling, and “no new taxes” to inequality, corporate privilege, and tax equity.

Last month Michael Moore commented, “The media and the power establishment [are] having a hard time figuring this [movement] out. . . . They are used to just a few people showing up with a few signs and then they go away and have a meeting in the basement of the Unitarian Church. God bless the Unitarians, by the way.”

A lot of my UU Facebook Friends were flattered by this shout-out from Michael Moore. Yeah! Michael Moore! All right!

I was appalled.

Moore says very clearly: the media expect this movement to go away to a Unitarian basement *to die*—or worse, to live a life of pathetic, powerless irrelevance. That’s how we show up to Michael Moore, his blessing notwithstanding.

Which leaves the troubling question: is he right?

Are Unitarian Universalists pathetic, powerless, and irrelevant? Do we spend too much time talking to each other and not enough engaging with other people and communities? Do we just talk about justice or do we have skin in the game?

Well, here’s another chance to find out.

This Thursday, November 17, at 4 pm, MoveOn Boston, Jobs with Justice, MassUniting, the Mass Building Trades, and the AFL-CIO have called a rally and march from Dewey Square to the North Washington Street Bridge in solidarity with the Occupy Movement. I invite you to join me there with the First Parish Social Justice banner.

With cold weather approaching, Occupy Boston needs donations of winter clothes, wool socks, and rubber boots. They need blankets and zero-degree sleeping bags. They need rope and ultra-durable tarp. Our Social Justice Council is setting up a collection bin here at First Parish.

If you haven’t yet visited Occupy Boston, come to Dewey Square to talk and sing and pray and learn and show your support. It’s a straight shot on the Red Line. Every Sunday afternoon at 5:30, Unitarian Universalists are leading vespers worship there.

But please don’t let the Occupy Movement be another flavor of the month. There are so many needs for justice— let’s not flit from one to another. Our Immigration Task Force needs your help. Our Environmental Justice Task Force needs your help. There are important elections coming up. Find something that calls your conscience and enter deeply into it with integrity and humility and devotion.

“Taking shape on our city streets,” says Unitarian Universalist minister Parisa Parsa, “is a practice of building a new way—a beloved community in which all are welcome. It is messy, joyful, deep and true work that we can’t afford not to be part of. Standing with Occupy *is* standing on the side of love, because the practice of Occupy itself is love in motion in our world.”

Amen and Blessed Be.

**Benediction**

The words of the Rev. Parisa Parsa:

“We are the 99%” is the slogan of this movement, and we are there with it.

But our faith calls us to know deep in our bones what it means to be 100%.

100% born from a thread of goodness and hope

that is woven through 100% of beings on this planet.

100% capable of goodness. . . .

100% of us are in this boat together.

100% of us hold the power to turn the ship around, to mend its leaks,

and repair its sails to set it right again.

We need all our stories, all our hearts, all our spirits, all our anger and frustration,

all our hope and laughter to make it new.

Let us be together.

100%.

Amen and Blessed Be.