

# “And How Are the Children”

*Sermon delivered by Rev. Sara LaWall at the Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship*

*Sunday, February 7, 2016*

“And how are the children?” Kasserian Ingera. This is a warrior greeting honoring the central role of **children** in the life of the community. “And how **are** the children?”

What might be different in our culture if we greeted one another with this question and waited for a true answer, not just a variation of “fine.”

What might change if our legislators and congressional representatives began every session, every committee meeting, every speech with, “And how are the children?”

And, really listed to the answer. How would that shift our policy making and orientation to our society. This is a powerful question to ask in this election year!

Because the children are not well. All over the world and right here in Idaho, the children are not well. 98,000 children in Idaho are food insecure. That is 1 in 4.

16.2 million children nationwide. And hunger certainly isn’t the only issue. Millions of children cannot afford early childhood education despite the many studies that show it being a huge factor in educational success and learning and staying in school (which we also know Idaho needs to work on).

The children are not well. We know this to be true but it is so easy to forget because we don’t often hold them at the center of our collective action. We don’t see them as a measuring tool for our society writ large. The belief in individualism, the drive for personal opportunity, freedom, and success is deeply rooted in our American cultural identity. The ideas of “Every man for himself” and “Pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” ignores any tie to the greater good, to humanity, to one’s community.

And while we may intellectually resist such sentiment, the rampant self-determinism still runs like a strong undercurrent in our social and political systems. It is in our blood.

And yet, for us as Unitarian Universalists this kind of hyper individualism runs counter to our theology and spirituality. It runs counter to our commitment to interconnection, to human dignity, to compassion and justice.

We feel the call that asks us to look beyond our own life and understand that the plight of another also exists within ourselves. And rather than look away, even though that force is strong too, especially when the despair of all the world needs sets in; rather than turn away, we turn toward the other, toward the brokenness, toward the injustice and ask, what am I called to do? Knowing what I know, having what I have, how am I called to live my life?

Great religious leaders have been lifting up this call for millennia. The ancient Jewish elder, Hillel, writing in 30 BCE asked this question examining the tension between serving the self and the other: “If I am not for myself who is for me? But if I am **only** for myself, who am ‘I’? And if not now, when?” **If not now, when?** Where our children are concerned the time is now.

Investing in their well-being, in their education, in their greatness and success may very well be

our greatest gift to the future of our country and the future of our planet. But, as sociologist Abraham Maslow so beautifully described, if we do not feed our children, if we do not ensure that their basic physiological needs and personal safety needs are met, we will never be able to support and grow their self-esteem, their learning, their connection to the world, their feeling of love and belonging and their full self-actualization.

Next week, the season of lent begins, when Catholics and Christians across the globe will honor Jesus' sacrifice and his own time of fasting, prayer and confronting temptation for 40 days and nights in the wilderness. The contemporary practice of lent invites people to give up something or to fast and pray for the 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter. Often we hear our friends and neighbors talk about giving up those pesky personal temptations like sugar, alcohol, television etc. But that practice does not connect us with any deep experience of sacrifice, it does not turn us toward the other as Jesus did throughout his ministry, it lacks spiritual depth.

In his 2015 Lenten message, Pope Francis urges people to make a new sacrifice or "fast" for lent. Rather than fasting from candy or alcohol, he suggests people fast from indifference to others. He describes the problem of the *globalization of indifference*, noting that those whose lives are relatively healthy and comfortable don't think about those whose lives are full of suffering and need. He suggests that Christians must confront this growing indifference. I believe this is a task for **all** of us.

Pope [Francis writes](#) this "whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, ***the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt***, and the desire to do good fades. We end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own."<sup>i</sup>

As though they were somebody else's responsibility and not our own. Our hungry children already sacrifice more than anyone should ever have to. Imagine if even for even one week (or one day) we put ourselves in the shoes of those children and gave up food as a luxury, eating only the kind of breakfast and lunch these children would receive in school and no dinner. How might we experience sacrifice then? How might we look at the world differently? Certainly we would open up a deep spiritual experience about our own social location and privilege, forcing us to think about food and hunger in a whole different way.

And I want to acknowledge that there are some of you in this community who do not have to "practice" this sacrifice, you live it on a regular basis. Let me take this quick moment to remind all of us that we have our own little food pantry in this closet right here. Anyone in need is welcome to take as much as you need. No questions asked. Just help yourself. This is one of the many gifts we offer to one another in this fellowship, born out of that call to turn toward another and ask, "What am I called to do." And, by the way, pantry contributions are also always welcome.

Activist Grace Lee Boggs posed the question, "What time is it on the clock of the world?" There are many ways to interpret this question, but even just asking it pushes us to look beyond our own lives. Today we might answer, it is time to feed the children. Next week we might see

another answer, but whatever that answer is, it acknowledges our interconnection and asks us to see those that are suffering, those that are different and then to remember, we are they, they are us. We are bound up in this intricate web of existence together. We are the world.

If you've noticed, I've been saying "our children" to refer to the children of our state, our country, and our world. They are all **our** children. That is the way we must see them if we are to be moved to act. That African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," isn't a cliché, it is an orientation toward life—away from individualism and toward collectivism, or better yet toward beloved community.

You know the basic meaning of this proverb, rearing a child is the responsibility of the entire community. If we really are to be a global community and invest in our future, then **we** must be the village. We must share the burden and the joy. And it is joyful. It is this sentiment that brought me to church many years ago, and kept me coming back.

I had long felt the pull to be part of something larger, to be part of a community exploring matters of spiritual depth, and a community who strives to make the world a better place. That I found one who does this as a practice of faith stirs something deep within me. Then, when we started our family, I knew the church would become our village, stepping in to help and encourage us when we were at our wits end, giving extra hugs and high fives, dinners and playdates where our children could explore their progressive ideas together, teaching them about their bodies, sexuality, and healthy relationships, and sharing the heartbreak of the world with them while encouraging them to find the joy and imagine new possibilities for humanity.

*Child dedication reference*

It takes a village. And where child hunger is concerned Feed the Gap is embodying that proverb, stepping in as the village working with principals, school districts, and the USDA, complementing the other villagers working to feed the hungry in our state with the goal of ensuring every child in the state gets fed at school, especially if they don't qualify for nutrition assistance. Every single child who needs it. And this month you will be a significant part of that village. If we contribute \$1000 this month we will have provided breakfast and lunch for 300 days. We are the village.

So, when "We Are the World" was first released, I was 10 years old. We had the vinyl album and I played it so much I wore it out. I had the t-shirt and watched the video over and over again. And while some felt the effort did not do enough to explore the causes of famine in Africa, it was the first single in history to go multi-platinum. For me, it was more than just a song that featured every popular artist of the time, it was the moment when I began to connect with the brokenness of the world. "*There comes a time when we heed a certain call, when the world must come together as one.*"<sup>ii</sup>

What I saw were people of great influence, status, and privilege; people I admired (okay maybe obsessed over I mean Michael Jackson and Cyndi Lauper, come on!). These celebrities were using their status and privilege for good in the world, to bring attention to the plight of starving people on another continent and say, "Hey, pay attention, the world is calling us, we have to do something, we need to help one another."

*"We can't go on, pretending day by day, that someone somewhere will soon make a change.  
Let's realize that a change can only come when we stand together as one."*  
They were saying the change is us. The time is now.

The song raised \$63 million (equivalent to \$136 million today) for humanitarian aid in Africa and the US. And 25 years later, artists did it again for Haiti. This song and its message are so deeply ingrained in my childhood experience, every time I watch the video, I cry.

I got the message. As a young pre-teen, I felt this stirring in my soul. I saw my life in a new way, recognizing that the blessing of being born in this country and to my family meant I already had some privilege. I made a silent commitment to never let that feeling go; to always work to notice and help those in need, knowing deep in my soul that we are all connected.

**"We** are the world. **We** are the children. There's a choice we're making, we're saving our **own** lives. It's true we make a better day just you and me."

Living out the allegory of the long spoons, when we feed each other, all are fed.  
May it be so, Amen.

## SILENCE

**HYMN** – Maybe we could reprise We Are the World?

## BENEDICTION

**As we extinguish the flame of our chalice we carry with us the light of love, compassion, and hope.**

The world is calling us  
Our children are calling us  
Let us fast from indifference and hear their cries  
Let us rise up to be the village  
And feed the hunger for justice within us all  
If not now, when?!  
We are the World.

May it be so. Go in peace.

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<sup>i</sup> "Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for Lent 2015"  
[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141004\\_messaggio-quaresima2015.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/papa-francesco_20141004_messaggio-quaresima2015.html)

<sup>ii</sup> Lyrics from "We Are the World" written by Quincy Jones and Michael Jackson.