

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

Rev. Andrew Frantz

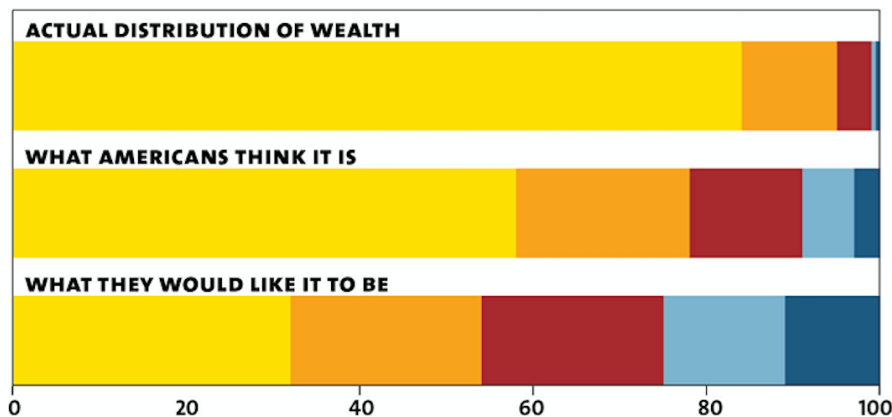
January 24, 2021

Imagine No Poverty

Thank you, Norma, for your message about poverty; I will now offer my reflection about poverty. Norma talked about the local picture. I will start with the national picture, and then I'm going to talk about what we do as individuals.

American wealth inequality

Here's an image that I hope you can see.¹



Source: Michael I. Norton, Harvard Business School; Dan Ariely, Duke University

This chart reflects research by the Harvard Business School and Duke University.² There are five different colored bands and each of the colors represents 20% of the U.S. population. The yellow band shows what the top 20% of Americans make, as a percentage of all the wealth in the United States. The orange band shows the next 20%. So as you can see, the top 40% together control more than 90% of the nation's wealth. The amount left over for the bottom 60% of the population is here, and as you can see—or can barely see—the slices of wealth for the bottom 20% and the next one up are tiny.

This top bar graph shows the actual wealth distribution. The next bar graph down shows what Americans *think* the wealth distribution really is, and the third bar graph shows what Americans say the wealth distribution *should be*. In other words, Americans, when surveyed, think that the top 20% of the most wealthy Americans own 60% of the wealth—but they really own 85%. And Americans think that a fair distribution of wealth would be if they had more like 30%.

Of course, with the wealthiest Americans controlling so much wealth, a lot less is left for the bottom 20%. Again, what most Americans think would be fair is on the bottom bar graph: that they would have about 10% of the wealth. In reality, it's less than 1%...can you even see it?

This is the research and these are the facts that show the actual distribution of wealth. The disparity between how it really is and the way people think it should be leads to moral outrage – or I think it should. It's way worse than how we think it should be. So it becomes a question of values.

¹Image of chart is attached, or you can look it up using the citation below.

² Norton, Michael I., and Dan Ariely. "[Building a Better America—One Wealth Quintile at a Time.](#)" Perspectives on Psychological Science 6, no. 1 (January 2011): 9–12.

Money and values

The research shows that people think there should be a much more equal distribution of wealth. But I see a competing value in our society: we think somehow that being rich is being good.

This is about morality. The way it is, is morally wrong—that's what I say. That's what Dr. King said. In his language, "God never intended for one group of people to live in superfluous inordinate wealth, while others live in abject deadening poverty."³ I agree! That's what Dr. King said, and toward the end of his life and work in the mid to late 1960's, he started the Poor People's Campaign. That's what he was on about as much as racial justice. Hand in hand with racial justice.

Poor People's Campaign

The work of the Poor People's Campaign is continued today by the two co-chairs of the current Poor People's Campaign: Rev. Dr. William Barber and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharris. These two leaders are leading a political movement based on Christian morality. There are two things that I love about the Poor People's Campaign when I have been to some of their events and online rallies. One is that they feature poor people as speakers. The ones who are living the life of poor people in this country are telling their stories at the rallies, marches, and events they have—including at statehouses where they lobby lawmakers.

The other thing that I find powerful about the Poor People's Campaign is the concept behind it: that poverty is part of a system that William Barber calls the 5 interlocking evils. One of the 5 interlocking evils is systemic poverty. Alongside that is systemic racism—these go hand in hand. And also, along with that goes environmental degradation. The fourth one is the war economy: we spend so much on the military that it leaves less for social services. And the fifth part of the interlocking evils is a false morality that ties all this together. The false morality says that wealth reflects ability or worth; that war is necessary; that the labor of Black Indigenous People of Color is worth less; that natural resources are there for us to use as fast as we like.

This is the concept behind the Poor People's Campaign. They have a comprehensive policy platform⁴ that they are pushing, and I encourage all of you to look at their work, to get involved, and to support the work of the Poor People's Campaign. As I said it's a political movement—or a social justice movement—based on Christian morality.

As Norma said a minute ago, as Unitarian Universalists we have our own morality that calls us to object to a system of poverty—to a society and a government that chooses to keep people in poverty.

Our first principle is that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Norma also lifted up the justice and equity principle that is our part of our shared belief system in Unitarian Universalism.

We are, or we should be, morally outraged as a religious movement by the inequity of wealth that we see in this country. Our first principle, *the inherent worth and dignity of every person*, says to me that a person with very little money has the same worthiness as a person with a lot of money. When the economic reality is so different, and when social conditions make it hard for a person at the low end of the economic spectrum to live with dignity, then our religious values call us to action.

Political action

What kind of action? Norma spoke about local action, which is individual action that you can take. I want to talk for a moment about political action because at the national level, poverty is a choice that we make by how we approach taxation.

³ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Strength to Love." 1963

⁴ The Poor People's Moral Justice Jubilee Policy Platform can be found here:

https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/June-20--Exec-Sum_PPC-Policy-Platform_.pdf

When it comes to redistributing wealth in society, of course, this is a matter of taxation and public policy. Policies that tend to increase taxes on the most wealthy, and tend to increase minimum wage for the least wealthy, are, in my opinion, more in line with our first principle.

Andrew Yang as candidate for president proposed universal basic income, bringing that idea to the mainstream. I heard on the news this morning that the Biden administration is pushing for a \$15 federal minimum wage

Direct anti-poverty action - individual

Voting and choosing leaders who will have humane economic policies is one kind of action. A much more direct form of action is to work to alleviate and reduce poverty directly in our community.

Norma already mentioned what else we can do as individuals locally: volunteering at the Isabella County Restoration House; or at the Strickler Center down on High Street (if you live here in Mount Pleasant).

We can also use our money, individually. This church collects monetary donations and household goods year-round for Isabella County Restoration House, including today's offering.

Finally, regarding what we can do individually with our money, what about these checks that we have been receiving? I received a \$600 check recently. I haven't lost my job in the pandemic, I haven't seen any reduction in my income; but I got the same \$600 as people who have lost their jobs and can't pay their rent. So those of us who are in that situation can act individually to redistribute that wealth. I know some people who are doing that within their own family: they got the check for \$600 and there's someone in their extended family who needs the money, and they can share it with them. There are ways that we can do that by donating all or part of that check to charities that will redistribute that wealth. If that's the situation that you're in, I invite you to consider that....and there may be a bigger check coming in the mail soon if the Biden administration gets its way.

From the practical to the spiritual

I want to move finally from the practical to the spiritual. What can we do to overcome this system of poverty? What can we do to imagine a world without poverty?

One of the spiritual tasks is to overcome classism. Like other "-isms" (racism, homophobia, transphobia, fatism), all of these "-isms" tend to divide us, to separate us, to see someone else as the "other" in a negative way. Classism is one of those "-isms". We can stereotype people with less money, or people who work with their hands, as being lesser than people who have more money and people who work with their heads. Some forms of work are more valued in our society than others, unfortunately. And let's not forget that we can have negative stereotypes about people with more money as well. Subconsciously we might judge rich people as greedy or immoral. Neither one of these judgments serves us well in this Fellowship.

Just as we recognize and seek to transcend our differences in gender, sexuality, age, and race; we can recognize and seek to transcend our differences in socio-economic class. These are ways we are different, but it doesn't make us better or worse.

Imagine

Finally, we sang this morning the words of John Lennon. His third verse says, "Imagine no possessions, I wonder if you can. No need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man."

I wonder if you can. No possessions! talk about a radical economic vision! I'm not even asking us to go that far, to imagine a world where nobody owns anything; but I think we can imagine a world of no poverty. And if we can imagine it, we can take the first step toward realizing it.

The chart that I showed at the beginning of my remarks today shows that Americans think there should be a much greater equity in the distribution of wealth. So we can imagine a world with no poverty, a world where the people at the

bottom economically still have enough. When we imagine a world that's fair economically, it looks like everyone having about the same wealth (some a little more, some a little less).

We have to have the moral imagination to say, Yes, I want that. Now, when I say "we" I really should speak for myself here. I identify as someone of higher wealth in this society, and those of us who are of higher wealth have to have the moral imagination to say, That's good for me to imagine this world. I want a world without people begging on the street. I want a world where the people in my extended family who are poor, I want a world where the people in this congregation that I serve who are poor, in my home congregation in Ohio the ones who are poor—I want them to have enough to eat. I want them to have good, free health care. I want them to have a place to live. That's better for them and for me and for all of us. That's a more joyful world. That's a more vibrant world, for them and for you and for me and for all of us. It's a more free world.

As I hold that image in my mind, and I invite you to do this also: what does that look like? Can we imagine a world where all of us are guaranteed the necessities of life: health care, food, a place to live. If we can imagine it, then I ask you and myself to imagine what's the first step I can take toward that far-off imagined place of no poverty--and can you commit to taking that first step.

I invite you to do so. I'm on this journey with you. We can accomplish great things together.