

GLOBAL INEQUALITIES, LOCAL REMEDIES

Based on presentation by the Rev. Dr. Norm Faramelli at the Community Church of Boston, May 6, 2018

It is good to be here today. I thank Dick Crowley for extending the invitation. I have had a long time interest and involvement in why inequalities across the globe have been widening. My interest is personal, professional and religious, since I am an Episcopal priest, and have taught social ethics at Boston University School of Theology and the Episcopal Divinity School. Also, for over 20 years I have been working with Mass Interfaith Worker Justice on economic justice and workers' rights issues.

Today we should focus on three areas: WHY the inequalities are growing worse, WHAT we can do about the issues and HOW our religious traditions inform and shape what we do.

The WHY—There are many reasons why income inequalities have widened throughout the world. By the way, the wealth gaps are even greater than the income gaps. Some of the reasons for growing inequalities are:

Globalization—the exporting of high paying manufacturing jobs out the industrialized to less industrialized nations. In the US, the new jobs created are less stable, pay less and usually have fewer benefits than the ones lost.

The Accelerating Pace of Automation—The increased pace of automation, the growth of robotics and artificial intelligence are having an enormous impact on the reduction of old style but, nevertheless, good paying jobs. This trend will continue in the future. Automation has been progressing for a long time, but many experts believe we at a new critical point in job displacement.

Public Policies—The tax structures in most countries favor the wealthy. For example, the recent tax bill enacted in the US, mistakenly called a “middle class tax cut”, will not only favor the rich, but over the next decade around 80% of all the tax benefits will go to the top 1%. That bill will expand the national debt by over \$1.5 trillion (over a decade), and that growing debt will be used as an excuse to reduce benefits to the working class and the poor. For instance, beware of further cuts in Medicaid.

Decline of Organized Labor—A big factor in worsening the wealth and income gaps is the decline in organized labor, especially in the industrial sector. There is currently a war being systematically waged against labor unions by the wealthy. Don't let anyone fool you, when they say “labor unions have outlived their usefulness”. They have not! There is a direct correlation between the stagnation of wages/benefits and the decline in union membership. We must remember that the rise of organized labor lifts up all workers!

There are other factors contributing to global inequalities such as historical and cultural conditions that we cannot explore here.

When one looks at the vastness and complexity of all of these issues, one can find them overwhelming. As one of my MIT economist friends told me some time ago, “Whenever I think of such big issues my mind turns to peanut butter”. The big question for us is: how do find handles on complicated issues? How do we keep from being overwhelmed by gigantic problems? How do we avoid paralysis by analysis?

Yes, there are things we can do to foster global changes, such as supporting various development efforts throughout the globe, but points of contact on global issues are not easy to find.

WHAT can we do to address growing inequalities?-- What about working at the national level?-- Given the situation in Washington, it seems unlikely that any progressive legislation will be forthcoming on the national level. There are,

however, many things that can be done on the state, regional and local levels. Finding handles is what led me to join the work of Dr. Jonathan Fine and the Rev. Father Ed Boyle, the founders of Mass Interfaith Worker Justice.

Mass Interfaith Worker Justice (MIWJ) joins low wage workers in their struggles for decent wages and good benefits. Many of these workers are people of color and immigrants. MIWJ connects people in religious institutions with the struggles of workers. Currently, there are many exciting things happening in Massachusetts. For instance, this November there are three important issues on the ballot sponsored by Raise Up Massachusetts of which MIWJ is a member. These ballot initiatives are

(1) Raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2022. (That is the Fight for 15.)

(2) Implement paid family medical leave up to 12 to 16 weeks, and up to 26 weeks for the worker.

(3) Enact a Fair Share Tax Amendment—an additional 4% tax on incomes over \$1 million to be used for transportation and education.

MIWJ is also engaged in a variety of labor struggles such as the efforts of SEIU 32BJ for better wages, benefits and working conditions for workers at Logan Airport. We will be hearing more about this campaign from two Logan Airport workers later on in this program.

One of the major MIWJ programs is Labor in the Pulpit. In this program, MIWJ engages members of local congregations in the local struggles of workers. MIWJ is convinced that Economic and Racial Justice is not an addendum in our religious traditions; it is at the heart of our traditions. That is a lesson that religious institutions need to understand and learn over and over again..

As you will hear from the Logan Airport workers, many of the jobs are now subcontracted out. For example, Jet Blue Airlines will subcontract its cleaning services to two groups. This subcontracting process is now par for the course. It is done by hospitals, universities and many other institutions. In many instances, the subcontractors do not follow to work place procedures of the company that hired them. MIWJ says: “This is your work—these are your workers. You have a direct responsibility for how the subcontractors treat your workers. You cannot get yourself off the hook by saying ‘it is not our responsibility’ It is your responsibility, and you cannot be absolved from that responsibility”.

Let us now move on.--HOW does our religious tradition inform and shape our beliefs and actions? That is a big and important question. In my Episcopal tradition, we pledge, as part of our Baptismal Covenant, to “strive for Justice and Peace and respect the dignity of every human being”.

In order to develop this, I would ask us to consider four important words--- “dignity”, “respect”, “compassion (and empathy) “ and finally “Justice”.

“Dignity”—We believe that all people are created in the divine image, and thereby possess an inherent value and worth (not because of what he or she does), but because ALL people are children of God. As children of God, they are worthy of respect. Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote: “Humanity is a reminder of God”. This belief in a “divine image” is central to our Judeo-Christian heritage.

“Respect’—to respect a person is to hold him or her in high esteem, to honor them. Respect means treating a person as a human being who possesses inherent worth and value, and can never be viewed as a replaceable cog in a machine. The human being is always much more than a functionary. Unfortunately, respect often gets absorbed or overshadowed by function.

“Compassion”—to be compassionate means that we need to be sensitive of the needs of others. The corollary to compassion is empathy, the ability to put ourselves in the position of others. To be compassionate means that we can attempt to understand the feelings of others. Again to quote Abraham Joshua Heschel; “As God is compassionate let humanity be compassionate”. Yes, our traditions teach us to love mercy and kindness.

“Justice” - This word has many definitions and there are many forms of justice. Here, however, we are referring to distributive justice. It means that we are to treat people fairly—a fair distribution of the costs and the benefits.

We must always ask that question: Who is paying the costs and who is receiving the benefits? In a just society, everyone does not necessarily receive the same amount of money, but it is clear that in a just society the income and wealth gaps will tend to NARROW and NOT expand as is the case today. Our God is a God of Justice! We need to remember that the God in the Bible champions the cause of the poor, the vulnerable and the dispossessed. That is why the prophets speak of “defending the widow and the orphan”. In the spirit of the prophet Micah, we should “Love mercy and DO justice.”.

To move forward we need a vision of what a decent workplace should look like. One the translations in the Book of Proverbs says that “without a vision, the people perish”. Let me list four important elements of that vision of a redeemed workplace:

- (1) decent wages for each worker, so a person need not hustle two or three jobs to make ends meet. That is why MIWJ supports the ‘Fight for 15” ballot initiative.
- (2) good benefits – adequate health insurance and also paid medical leave for the worker and his or her family. That is why we support the Paid Family Medical Leave ballot initiative.
- (3) excellent working conditions. That calls for a workplace that is free from ALL forms of harassment, including sexual harassment. No workplace should foster or tolerate an oppressive environment.
- (4) adequate job training, not only for the position one now holds, but also training for new job possibilities and advancement.

That vision of a redeemed workplace should always be kept in mind. It has to be fought for over and over again.

There are growing inequalities to be sure, but some of them can be responsibly addressed on the state, regional and local levels. Although we are not ignoring work on a global or national level, we at MIWJ find access to economic justice opportunities greater on the state, regional and local levels. That is our central message today. We urge you to join our efforts.

In short, all of this is consistent with what I noted earlier. We are to “strive for Justice and Peace and respect the dignity of every human being”. Our various religious traditions demand no less.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

During the presentation, we heard from two Logan Airport workers- Hipolito Castillo Matos and Victor Fortuna. They spoke of their work, work environment and struggles at Logan Airport. They noted the lack of respect they encounter in the workplace, as well as the extreme pressures they are under. For example, two workers are expected to clean a regular jet aircraft in seven minutes, and a smaller aircraft in four minutes. This is the case even if some of the passengers got air sick! The workers are not treated with dignity, rather they are viewed as cogs in the machine. This was a recurring theme throughout their presentations.