

Will We Ever Walk Justly?

Kathy Winings
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Headlines across the United States on June 18 blared the news of yet another shooting. The evening before, 21-year-old Dylann Roof walked into the historic Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, spoke with its pastor, Rev. Clementa Pinckney, and participated in the weekly Bible study that had just begun. Towards the end of the session, Roof rose uttering racist remarks, pulled out a gun and began firing. He killed nine people, including Pinckney; three survived. The shooting has been called a hate crime, and Roof reportedly left a manifesto indicating he wanted to foment a race war.

The shooting is just another example of acts of injustice that haunt us every day. One would think that in the 21st century, amid cries for greater peace and harmony, and with a more educated populace, that incidents of injustice would be lessened and efforts to bring about a more just society would be more successful. Yet we continue to live with a seemingly endless parade of justice issues coming to the fore on a daily basis. We read of religious radicalism and fanaticism, poverty, starvation, human trafficking, global warfare,

violence, sexual abuse, racial discrimination, internecine fighting — to name just a few. With all of our knowledge, wisdom, wealth, understanding of history, and our sophistication, why is it still so difficult to achieve a more just and loving world? What are we missing?



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As Unificationists, we turn to Unification thought and theology to try to make sense of injustice and to answer the question of what it takes to live justly in the 21st century. However, Unification thought and theology are limited in terms of presenting a practical answer as to why it is so difficult to create a just world. At best, Unification thought and theology use only broad strokes to meet this challenge by presenting theories concerning ontology, original human nature, universal values, ethics, order and equality. Therefore, our challenge is to take these theoretical concepts and develop them to give a more effective practical understanding of how to address injustice.

Unificationism's central concept is that we were created in the image of God, in whom heart, logos and creativity are the most important characteristics of His divine character. Heart, though, is the very core of God's divine character. As beings created in the image of God, we have the capability of not only understanding God in this way but of exhibiting these same characteristics.

The second major focus in Unificationism central to a discussion of justice is the issue of love itself. Unification thought sees social ethics as a projection and application of family ethics. It stresses that if God's love is fully actualized within the family, it can then be practiced and lived throughout our social relations. Again, it is based on the concept of our interconnectedness.

The question is where do we go from here? What do we need to know or do to make meaningful progress against injustice? Social justice is at the same time extremely difficult and extremely easy to address. It is extremely difficult because we have never fully experienced or understood who and what we are as men and women made in the image of God, people capable of such profound love. However, it is extremely easy because living justly and forming a more just world is based on one simple concept – love. Therein lies our dilemma.

First, we have not, as a society, fully experienced and lived God's unbounded love. Some of us may have had glimpses of that love at certain times in our life. But we have not experienced it 24/7 – and this includes when we were a small blip on the ultrasound screen. We know from neuroscience that all emotions and feelings experienced by the mother are continually passed to the fetus throughout the pregnancy as chemicals and electrical impulses in the fetus' brain. We know further that the nature and type of chemicals and the neural pathways formed in the fetal brain are greatly influenced by the type of love and emotions the mother is experiencing. These chemicals and neural pathways will either continue to develop in the same direction or be pruned after birth.

One challenge is if the mother has limited experience with altruistic love from God, then her child will

have limited exposure, neural pathways and understanding of such love as well. The older we are before experiencing and actualizing such profound love and the older we are before seeing a model demonstrating what kind of life force we were intended to be, the harder it will be to live justly. The challenge in meeting injustice head on is rooted in our ability or inability to love. If we traced the lives of individuals who have perpetrated some of the world's most heinous acts of injustice, their experience with and exposure to this type of unconditional love would be extremely limited or non-existent. Human development specialist, Dr. James Garbarino, has poignantly documented this point in his research.



The Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney (1973-2015) was Senior Pastor of "Mother Emanuel" A.M.E. Church in Charleston as well as a member of the South Carolina Senate. President Obama delivered the eulogy at his funeral service on June 26.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed it best when he spoke of the "beloved community." For King, a totally just community was a beloved community and the basis of such a community was the love of God operating in the human heart. It was the realization of divine love in lived relationships. The challenge of such love is that one has to be willing to be vulnerable and able to risk it all. King saw such *agape* love as an "outrageous venture of loving the other without conditions – a risk and a costly sacrifice," says religion professor Charles Marsh in *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today*. This is the basis of a socially just world.

We have begun to witness examples of this costly love in Charleston, nicknamed the "Holy City." During Roof's bail hearing, relatives of some of the Charleston shooting victims told Roof that, though they would never again see their mother,

son or loved one, they forgave him. The city has also been witnessing multiple interracial gatherings of people coming together in prayer and calling for racial peace, understanding and unity. These are beginning steps in the creation of a beloved community.

Even within my own social justice ministry, I realize I am not there yet. Justice is still felt as the right thing to do but the feeling of costly love is not always present. This is why Unification thought is limited in its understanding. The language used to present the concept of love is too broad and ethereal. We need to make such a view of love real and understandable if we are to address injustice.

Second, we do not recognize our interconnectedness. We grow up with labels that help us feel we belong, that make us feel we have a special identity and that protect us at times. We are part of a specific family, a particular faith group, culture, age group or nationality. However, such labels make it difficult for us to recognize our innate interconnectedness. Trying to see beyond our labels and boxes is made all the more difficult when we add an either/or thinking to the process. We like to think that either we are interconnected or we belong to certain groupings. Such thinking does not allow anything in between.

If subject and object consciousness were understood, though, it would help shift us away from our either/or thinking and toward understanding ourselves as being both interconnected and individuals with specific identities. This also goes to the love issue. Our ability to love has often been defined by our labels, not by a rich experience with God, making it difficult to genuinely love the other enough to act unselfishly. In my work, though I try to feel this interconnectedness, moments of separation and particularity still filter through. Again, this points to the need to rethink how Unification thought addresses our interconnectedness and our identity.

Social justice is easy and difficult at the same time. I hope, though, that the difficult part will not stop us from making the journey. Victims of injustice would certainly hope so as well. As one church banner said the Sunday morning after the shooting in Charleston, "Holy City. . . Let Us Be the Example of Love That Conquers Evil." Amen to that.

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Picture at top: *Flowers and balloons lined the fence of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC, where nine lost their lives in a June 17 shooting.*