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Sermon  
**TANJ**

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant  
Hope Unitarian Church  
February 7, 2010

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First Reading: 1 Kings 3:16-27 (NRSV)

Later, two women who were prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. One woman said, 'Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house. Then this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne.' But the other woman said, 'No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours.' The first said, 'No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine.' So they argued before the king.

Then the king said, 'One says, "This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead"; while the other says, "Not so! Your son is dead, and my son is the living one."' So the king said, 'Bring me a sword', and they brought a sword before the king. The king said, 'Divide the living boy in two; then give half to one, and half to the other.' But the woman whose son was alive said to the king—because compassion for her son burned within her—'Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!' The other said, 'It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it.' Then the king responded: 'Give the first woman the living boy; do not kill him. She is his mother.'

Second Reading: VOA news report. February 4, 2010.

Haitian authorities have charged 10 American missionaries with child kidnapping and criminal association for allegedly trying to take 33 Haitian children out of the country illegally. Haiti's government has suggested the case could be transferred to the United States but, for the moment, the ten have been returned to a jail in the capital Port-au-Prince where they have been held since their arrest last Friday.

These American missionaries never expected to find themselves in a Haitian jail. They are members of a Christian charity called New Life Children's Refuge. They say they are in Haiti to help orphans.

Third Reading: Ephesians 6:5-9 (NRSV)

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.

## Sermon

The last two years have been tough for me. I've watched two people I love die, my youngest son – Michael, and my friend and colleague, Suzanne Meyer. What makes it especially bitter is that both are dead because of a failure of early diagnosis. Both of them would be alive today if they had received that early diagnosis. In the case of Suzanne Meyer it is a reminder that having a routine colonoscopy can save your life. I'm not going to pull a full blown Katie Couric on you, but if you're over fifty you should get one. It might save your life. But that's not what I want to talk about this morning – not in particular, anyway. It's just a starting point, a reminder of how often we are confronted with a world that is indifferent to the demands of justice. Thinking about it has reminded me of something that Larry Niven has done.

Some of you will recognize that name. Larry Niven is one of the best selling science fiction writers of the last forty years. It's a genre I've always enjoyed – and one that I think is often misunderstood. The heart of good science fiction is not about starships or time machines or any other kind of fictional scientific developments. Those sorts of things are usually present – and I freely admit that I enjoy them. But they aren't what makes for good science fiction. That requires a thoughtful examination of the human condition. It's not what we will invent, but how we – as human beings – will evolve, both individually and collectively. That's why the best science fiction is always about people. Larry Niven writes that kind of science fiction. And in doing so he has done something that I don't think anyone else has done. In addition to creating imaginary scientific advances he has created a new word – a curse word. That word is TANJ – T – A – N – J. It's an acronym that stands for, "There ain't no justice."

It hasn't caught on in general usage. I don't think it will. There are already more than enough perfectly good curse words in the English language. There's . . . . .

This is where you're thinking, "Is he really going to say that?" I don't need to list them. Maybe with some groups, but I'm sure everyone here already knows all of them – and has often heard them – even used a few of them. But I do want you to think about them and the circumstances in which they are said. Often – not always, but often – I believe curse words are a way of lamenting the lack of justice. And that's why TANJ will never catch on. There is already an abundance of four letter words for shouting out there isn't any justice in the world. I also believe that's why there are so many different religions in the world. It's not the only reason. Forest Church had a good argument when he said religion was the human response to being alive and knowing you are going to die. But I believe that's often a subset of the larger problem of justice. Looking at the world I see so much injustice. Is there any place and any time where there has not been injustice? Is it just an accident that people think of God as a cosmic judge dispensing perfect justice? I grew up in a Methodist church and each Sunday recited the Apostles creed with its words about Jesus sitting at the right hand of God and judging the "quick and the dead". I heard the story of Solomon and the baby over and over. I heard a variation of it last week. It was one of the stories coming out of Haiti. I'm talking about the church group that tried to take the children from Haiti into the Dominican Republic and were arrested for kidnapping the children. They said they were trying to save the children. Some of the children were orphans, but others were not. There was an interview with a set of parents who said they voluntarily gave their

children to them to take to America for adoption because they saw it as a way to give their children opportunities they would never have in Haiti. It wasn't cutting a child in two, it was a decision to cut their family in half. What were those Americans doing? I don't know. I think there's reason to be concerned about some of the what and how and why they were doing what they were. But it seems probable to me that to the children who were orphans and to the parents who voluntarily gave up their children, that a group of Americans in those circumstances may have looked like angels from heaven come to rescue the children. Why shouldn't children in Haiti have the same opportunities as the children in this church and in the big houses next door to us? Why shouldn't children on the north side of Tulsa have the same opportunities as the children on the south side of town? Where's the justice? Why isn't there justice?

I believe traditional Christian dogmas and theologies are attractive to many people because they offer the promise of ultimate justice. You may not get it in this life, but if you don't, you will get it in another life. I think that's a powerful idea. I believe it has enough power to make people want to believe in it. It may not be the way the world is, but isn't it the way the world ought to be? I don't believe it – but I wish it were. I wish that despite all the heartache and sorrow that happens in this world, despite the lack of justice, that somehow all would ultimately be made right. But I don't believe it. It is too much wishful thinking in the face of an indifferent world. God is supposed to be the heart of the world – but as I look at the external world I see no evidence that the world has any concern for justice. The world – to my eyes – is not opposed to justice, it is not unjust, it is not evil – it is something far worse: it is indifferent. I cannot see that justice is a concern of anything out there. That's why Larry Niven's made up word – TANJ – isn't adequate. Something deeper and coarser is needed, something with a visceral quality.

And there's another problem implicit in orthodox theologies and dogmas about a God who is going to bring us justice. A belief in justice in an afterlife may become the justification for condoning and accepting injustice in this life. Slaves should obey their masters. That's what the bible says. A woman should not worry if her husband beats her – that kind of suffering brings her closer to Jesus. And Gays and Lesbians just need to keep quiet in the military.

I am not the first person to notice the world's indifference. It's an issue in the bible. Hear these words from the book of Ecclesiastes. "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." The author of Ecclesiastes – a man remembered today as the "Teacher" – knew what he was talking about. It is vain to think you can sit back and wait for justice. But in the end the Teacher did not surrender. Nor do I.

Because of its name the Unitarian religious tradition is usually identified with rejection of the Trinity. That is an important part of our history. But it is not the most important. Of far greater significance was the rejection of original sin – a doctrine that said human beings were inherently flawed, inherently incapable of being righteous on their own. According to original sin human beings were wholly dependent upon the grace of God. The early Unitarians came to a different conclusion. They believed human beings were not inherently flawed. They believed human beings could be

righteous on their own. They believed human beings could be makers of justice. It is why Unitarianism is often described today as a religion of deeds not creeds.

I do not believe there is a God in the conventional sense of that word. I don't believe there is an external out there somewhere God who is going to bring justice to the world. I don't believe in the supernatural; I see no evidence for it. But I do see evidence that there exists in this world something worthy of the name God. I don't know how to define it. I'm not sure what it is. It is that something, that mystery, that gives birth to a desire for justice in human hearts. In a world that is otherwise cold and indifferent, a world in which there ain't no justice, there is something miraculous that has created human hearts that long for justice. That is a genuine miracle. Stories of virgin births and the resurrection of the dead pale into insignificance before the miracle of the human hunger for justice.

Yes, there ain't no justice. The terrible truth is that the world is worse than evil, it is indifferent. But there is a divine spark alive in human hearts. It is the desire for justice. We will not get justice by waiting for it. It isn't out there. No one's going to make it happen for us. Justice only happens when people decide to work for it. It is why these words by Margaret Mead are true:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

It is why the true measure of our lives is not length of days, but the light we give to the world. It is why we are called to live life as if we are to die before the day ends and to learn as if we should live forever. It is why the everyday purpose of our lives is to grow a soul. It is why the only true religion is real living; living with all one's soul, with all one's goodness and righteousness - because life is to be lived, not controlled, not dictated by an unseen hand.

It is not for us to sit passively and wait for justice to be delivered. It is for us to be makers of justice. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes said, "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven." It is always the season and the time to work for justice. That is why I believe it is time to end the military's policy of "Don't ask, don't tell." As Admiral Mullen said,

"No matter how I look at the issue...I cannot escape being troubled by the fact that we have in place a policy which forces young men and women to lie about who they are in order to defend their fellow citizens...For me, it comes down to integrity — theirs as individuals and ours as an institution."

I hear in his words a hunger for justice in his heart. I believe such a hunger for justice is what makes us come alive. The proper response to injustice is not to curse God. The proper response is to go to work to change the world. We will not fix everything. The race will not always go the swiftest, nor the contest to the strongest. The good will die too young, the wicked will prosper too much. That is not reason to despair. It is reason to redouble our efforts. As Edward Everett Hale said, "I am only one, but I am one. I can't do everything, but I can do something. The something I ought to do, I can do. And by the grace of God, I will."

Amen.