

“Stewards of Change”

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As we heard in today’s storyⁱ, the Buddha’s life began full of wealth and comfort. Protected and sheltered, when he encountered the suffering of the hungry, the sick, and the dying, he began a journey in search of a new understanding of the world. That journey led to his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree on December 8—to a vision of the interconnectedness of all.

While I did not grow up as royalty or in wealth, I did grow up in relative comfort in a single-family home with two cars and at least one annual vacation. However, to afford that mortgage and the car payments, my parents followed a strict budget. From growing and canning food to sewing clothes or buying only generic jeans rather than name brand, saving money was a necessity in our household. I never went to bed hungry; and I always understood money was limited.

In middle school, my parents began to give me a larger monthly allowance. With this additional money, I was expected to budget for my own personal expenses—clothing, gifts, etc. (Although my parents wisely said they’d buy my winter coat and boots in case I foolishly failed to budget for these necessities in a Michigan winter!) I valued this control over my spending. Yet, I was not paying any critical bills. Not the heat or phone or electricity. Not the roof over our head or the cars I began to drive at 16. Like the Buddha, I had a certain illusion of freedom within gentle walls of support and protection.

One of my first journeys beyond these walls came during high school. Our church youth group piled into a bus and drove from Michigan to Philadelphia for spring break. While staying in a dilapidated commercial building, each day we eagerly showed up at the local Christian mission for that day’s work projects—such as painting or cleaning. One day they needed several of us to ride in a U-Haul truck to pick up some bed frames that a college was donating to the mission following a dorm renovation. Raising my hand, I climbed aboard.

We began in this poor, urban area of Philly where we had been working and living all week. After a few blocks, the truck turned onto a major thoroughfare. Over the next 30 or 40 minutes, as we traveled this one road, I watched as the landscape shifted from dirty sidewalks of urban density to a more spacious, polished commercial district to a leafy green canopy of elegant, brick homes and the campus of an elite university. We loaded the beds, which were trash here and treasure to the mission, then repeated the journey in reverse.

That half-day trip changed something in me. Having grown up in a middle-class life, this drive not only reflected two economic extremes of wealth and poverty; the drive also showed how those two different communities were connected.

Since that late 1980's trip to Philly, income inequality has only skyrocketed. According to a report last month from Oxfam America, over the past 35 years *"the richest 1% of households in the United States have accumulated almost 1,000 times more wealth than the poorest 20%."* This report, entitled, "[UNEQUAL](#): The rise of a new American oligarchy and the agenda we need," also states:

- *Over 40% of the U.S. population—including 48.9% of children—is considered poor or low income.*
- *Between 1989 and 2022, a U.S. household at the 99th percentile (the cutoff for the top 1%) gained 101 times more wealth than the median household and 987 times more wealth than a household at the 20th percentile.*
- *A modest wealth tax on multimillionaires and billionaires could raise an estimated \$414 billion to invest in social programs and fighting poverty.*

Responding to the report, Abby Maxman, president and CEO of Oxfam America said, *"The data confirms what people across our nation already know instinctively: the new American oligarchy is here. Billionaires and mega-corporations are booming while working families struggle to afford housing, healthcare, and groceries."*

And here we are beneath the steel roof of a historic church beside the brick sidewalks of Marlborough Street in Boston's Back Bay. In significant ways, we benefit from systems of wealth and inequality. Our historic endowments provide income we rely on to sustain this campus and our staff—including a large part of my compensation as minister. And yet, I repeatedly find myself explaining to people that First Church in Boston is remarkably economically diverse. Yes, we have members with resources that enable them to live in the neighborhood—and sometime the key resource may be "luck" ... having bought a place many decades ago in a more affordable era. Yet, even as we have members with comfortable financial resources—some who may even identify as "wealthy", we also have members on very low fixed incomes. And, not infrequently, some folks sit here on a Sunday that spent the night before on the street or on a friend's couch. The nearness of economic difference within this room is far closer than that long ago drive.

The recent government shutdown and short-term failure to fund the SNAP food support program rattled the moral compass of many of us. And while that political crisis may have temporarily ended, it contributed to a rising clamor about the cost of things and the depth of economic struggle faced by too many. A particular political crisis may have ended, but the larger economic

reality of inequality remains. More to the point—the suffering of hunger, of cold, of uncertainty remains.

The journey which led to the Buddha's enlightenment on December 8 under the Bodhi tree began with his encounter with suffering. After his enlightenment, the Buddha began to teach an 8-way path by which others might also discover the freedom and peace he had found under that tree. While sometimes people may perceive the Buddhist path as a solitary endeavor of seeking inner peace, teacher [Bhikkhu Bodhi](#) cautioned against this approach in an essay entitled, "A Challenge to Buddhists," saying:

The Buddha's mission, the reason for his arising in the world, was to free beings from suffering by uprooting the evil roots of greed, hatred, and delusion. These sinister roots don't exist only in our own minds. Today they have acquired a collective dimension and have spread out over whole countries and continents. To help free beings from suffering today therefore requires that we counter the systemic embodiments of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Systems can cause suffering.

In a 2015, [economist Joseph Stiglitz](#) wrote, "Inequality is a choice—one that we make with the rules we create to structure our society and economy." As a Unitarian Universalist community, our shared values of interdependence, justice, and equity call us to engage in the work of changing these rules. As with a Buddhist vision of interconnectedness, we too affirm that we are neighbors in a shared world. The roads between houses of wealth and poverty, comfort and suffering are artificially distant. It is the greed, hatred, and delusion embodied in the rules of our economy that aim to keep us apart.

Throughout this month, we will be exploring the theme of "underdogs" as part of our year-long exploration of "Story." In a way, the Buddha's story is one of awakening to the plight of the underdog—of those suffering within an unjust system. At times, we may feel like we are the underdog as we struggle with any number of issues in our life. Other times, we may root for the underdog as they overcome odds that are stacked against them. And, perhaps in another moment, we might join with others to fight against a system of inequality that creates "underdogs" rather than promoting the welfare of the interconnected all.

One larger financial system that impacts all of us here today or watching later is the finances of this church. As a very old congregation, our institutional—and thus systemic—relationship to money is a longer story than I have time to tell today. And, frankly, I'm still learning! However, before I close, I want to share that there is an ongoing conversation among church leaders who handle our finances and fundraising about using more language of *stewardship* when we talk

about money. I like this language because it reminds us that money is a tool to be *stewarded* (or used) for larger purposes—it is not simply an end in itself. I also like *stewardship* language because it emphasizes the relational nature of our connections to the past, present, and future. People’s actions in the *past* enabled us to have the many resources available to us today. They also left various explicit and implicit rules about how to use these resources and how to talk about them. In the *present*, we are the ones filling the seats on the Finance committee, the Trustees, or the House committee to consider how to care for our resources. We are also those who respond to asks to contribute time or money in our fundraising efforts. And we are also in relationship to an imagined *future*—to those who may be seeking religious community in Boston in 25, 50, or 100 years. We are stewards in an ongoing chain of care.

As a nearly four-hundred-year-old institution, we know better than most that stewardship can also mean being a steward of change. We do not collect funds, manage the building, or pay staff in the same ways we did in 1635, 1865, or even in 2005. And, while I cannot be certain, I wonder if we may have more economic diversity within the congregation today than there has been in other moments of our history. Or, at least, I sometimes find that being an old “Back Bay” congregation means that some people assume a uniformity of wealth that simply does not reflect the beautiful diversity I experience here today. So where does that leave us *today* as we relate to the past, our present, and the possible futures before us?

There is no preordained answer, just an invitation into a shared conversation about how to manage our church finances as well as how to reimagine the rules that shape the economic systems of our society. At stake is not simply values of justice and equality, but the possibility of alleviating the suffering of people who are hungry, fearful, and cold.

I hope that as individuals and as a congregation, we might do our part to shorten the distances between us.

May it be so. Amen. Ashe.

ⁱ *Under the Bodhi Tree—A Story of the Buddha*, by Deborah Hopkinson with Kailey Whitman, (St Martin’s Essentials, 2018)