

## Equality and Equity

A sermon by Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

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I grew up in a suburb of New York city. I had one black friend in school that had maybe five families in the whole town. It wasn't until we had a "fresh air kid" come to live with us from Harlem that I realized how different I was. I remember asking my mother, "doesn't he have woods where he lives?" She said "No, not really. That's why he came to spend a week with us. So he could enjoy the woods." She talked about equal opportunity and how important it was to give black kids a chance to know that. However, it would be years later that I realized how unfair that really was. After all, while he came to live in the beauty of nature for a week, he went back to the hard streets of Harlem afterwards. Equality wasn't enough.

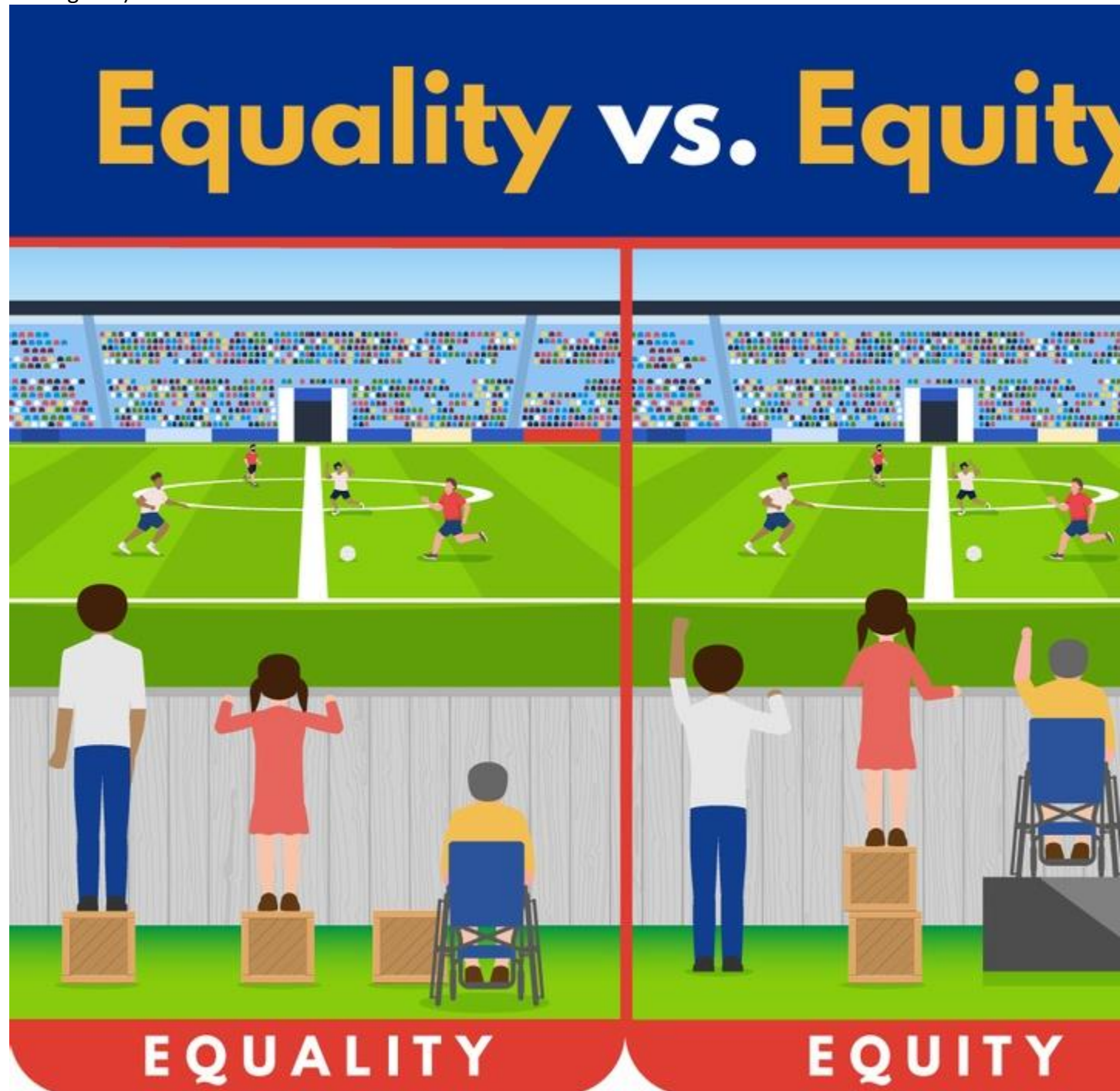
So first a question: When did you realize that the world was unequal?

Like so many of us, I grew up with the literature of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson's essay on Self-Reliance moved me deeply in my late high school years; colluding as it did with my own adolescent emergence. Thoreau's classic work *On Walden Pond* became a touchstone for me in my twenties as a primer on the beauty of living simply. (Picture of Walden Pond) Indeed Thoreau, who was a brilliant writer and is worthy of reading for his prose alone, echoed my sentiments that the planet was in danger of over consumption and led me to my first career as purveyor of solar energy systems in the Midwest. I truly believed in the gospel of a sustainable future and near steady state economics.

The fault in this idea alone lay in how selfish it was. Imagining a society that lives in balance with nature and society ignores the social realities of inequity and struggle. Because as I later learned equity is not the same thing as equality. I believed into my forties that if every one had the same chance and we could all see the ideal of living in balance then our planet and our society would right itself. That was ignorant at best, self righteous at worse. My revelation came during my doctoral work in Chicago. A group of us religious professionals visited an urban farm dedicated to sustainable agriculture and helping to feed the south side of Chicago, a poor, largely black neighborhood suffering from what many call now food desertification, meaning that because of corporate policies on profit there were very few grocery stores that sold affordable food or, more importantly, fresh vegetables. (Photo of fresh vegetables) Fast food and junk food were not only starving children of fresh nutrition but leading to soaring rates of obesity and diabetes. The director of the farm explained that their mission was three-fold, reclaim the land through reprocessing the vacant lots with crops, providing agricultural jobs for unemployed youth and fresh food for a struggling and poor population. The director explained that despite their best efforts they were often not able to convince people to eat the fresh food which was inexpensive and plentiful.

My hand went up "Why? Can't they see that eating vegetables is in their best interest, after all they now have equal access to the food?" The director took a deep breath. Obviously she had been asked this question before by white well fed professionals. "It's not a matter of self interest. It's a matter of equity not equality. Yes, the food was their, but it wasn't consistently

there and eating fresh food was so far from the culture of these poor neighborhoods that while available the access to that food is not reliable. The equity required is not there. (slide of kids at a ball game).



Equality is the same thing offered to all. Good start but not enough because if you didn't have access to the possibility of earning that privilege before you are not always able to overcome the systemic reasons that keeps you down. Equity is balancing the opportunities so that those who are disadvantaged are able to access the opportunity on a more equal footing. When a well off professional tells me that they worked hard for their wealth and others just need to do the same, my response is always, "really? Because I am pretty sure your racial identity and accumulated family wealth, however modest, made it possible for you to succeed."

I learned that day in Chicago how privileged I was to even look at a complicated social problem like a food and race as a matter of equality. Environmental justice has everything to do with racial justice. What heals the land must also heal the people. Social scientist Arline Geronimus (Photo of her book "Weathering") in her groundbreaking study Weathering, explains that even with equal opportunity for people of color over more than one generation, the incidence of poor health among black Americans remains consistently high, even when they start eating well. Over decades of research she and other public health researches now know its not race per se, nor even the individual per se but the racialization of groups as inferior that has led to a genetic propensity to disease and mortality. In other words, hundreds of years of unequal access to healthy food for instance, coupled with a culture of racism, has led to a higher instance of disease among African Americans regardless to their access of health care. Poor rural whites suffer the same inequity. In Geronimus words "Racist and classist ideologies over generations activate stress markers that wear out the physical and mental health of people of color across all economic classes..." This is the hidden cost of inequity which I am only now begiing to really understand.

Beyond my naivety and innocence came the hollow fact that I realized in Chicago that cold winter: my individual impulses to create my own destiny and the generational privilege I had to create that destiny were not equally available to all.

This is why I think we have an obligation to move beyond just equality, to being moral actors in creating equity and ultimately liberation from the forces of the culture that holds us prisoner to a self delusion that we are doing enough. I am not asking you to feel guilty about your privilege but I am asking us to accept some responsibility in moving toward equity in our justice work. As Abraham Heschel said of genocide: Few are at fault but all are responsible.

We can move the needle my friends. It is possible and we are already on our way. This Sunday and most Sundays here after there will be information on a direct action you can take to work towards justice and equity. We are in the midst of On the Side of Love campaign (slide of On the Side of Love) to bring love and justice to those poor and disenfranchised in PA through our participation with our state wide advocacy partners, UU Justice PA. (Slide of UU Justice PA) Our current campaign is to write our legislators about the necessity of bodily autonomy in all matter including health and education. Stop by the table after the service and fill out a postcard. Be a part of the solution not just the problem. No, we won't create equity by this alone but we will join others over time to be the solution.

One of the things I learned over the years was how important it was to treat those who have been unjustly treated with more deference not just equal regard. Over the last several weeks I

have gotten to know a remarkable individual named Bob Beaty. Bob saves beautiful things and beautiful people who would otherwise be discarded. His business which reclaims architectural features from the many churches being demolished in Philadelphia (Slide of a old Philadelphia church) sells these items to the public out of a bright and fabulous co makers space in NE Philly. As we got talking I learned that he had been on a mission of equity his entire long life. While serving in Vietnam, he noticed how the Vietnamese despite incredible hardship not only took care of one another but wasted nothing. Returning from the war and settling the SF Bay area he started salvaging beautiful art from the Berkely dump. More importantly he started hiring ex-offenders who otherwise couldn't get a job, he would pay them cash. As he put it, "we through away beautiful things and beautiful people. I rescue both." I met one of this workers and he told me about how Bob had saved his life.

That proximity is critical if you can manage it. When we were remodeling the parsonage, Francis found a couple of guys through a non-profit that provided day work for ex offeneders. "Returning citizens" we call them now. We did a lot of the extra work there with two of these guys and paid them cash, hard to document and provide tax forms for, but Francis and I didn't care. We were just pleased to make a small difference. We paid them very well. And then when I learned one of them took two buses and a train to get here from Philly I offered to drive him back and forth.

Bryan Stevenson who has been working with the unjustly condemned on death row in the South said once: "I think sometimes, when you're trying to do justice work, when you're trying to make a difference, when you're trying to change the world, the thing you need to do is get close enough to people who are falling down, get close enough to people who are suffering, close enough to people who are in pain, who've been discarded and disfavored — to get close enough to wrap your arms around them and affirm their humanity and their dignity."

Beloveds, that is part of our calling: to affirm humanity and dignity. I see when we do it hosting a unhoused family here at the church. I see it when those of you who volunteer put out the good china in the fireside room and cook fabulous food for the families when they come to us at night. I see it when we welcome them warmly and without judgement. That is living our calling beyond equality, with equity towards liberation.

Working towards equity and justice means moving farther beyond the shore of our own self worth as vital as that is. Is it that "all will be well"? Or is it that we are to be fed and emboldened in order to go out into the world beyond this glass and take up the causes that our transcendentalist forbearers were actually calling us to? Ins it possible that we have gotten it wrong? Is it possible that what we thought was the purpose of our church to inspire has falsely entrapped us in the soothing balm of staving off the world and not engaging it? Not for all of us, but for some. In other words friends, perhaps this is the year for us to truly step out of our glass chapel and engage in the world of justice, votes and politics, to "UU The Vote" as the UUA President Susan Fredrick Grey has called on us A calling out as much or more than a calling in. Can you hear me on this?

But I am telling you today that political is also the spiritual. I am reminded of what a previous intern minister Julio Torres said after being criticized for being too political in his preaching. "To

deny the political in my preaching is to deny my identity as a preacher and man of color, the political is part of my spiritual identity.” Yes, of course I will still preach to our inner needs, but I will also be calling us into our greater needs as a people, and as a congregation. This is where our integrity lies. For what use is the worth of one another if we are not willing to stand up for other’s inherent worth; the worth of the homeless, the worth of the addicted, the worth of refugee and the immigrant, the worth of families and children, the worth of black and brown people, the worth of women and all those whose gender identities are not accepted by our society at large. Is this not our calling as well? A calling to go out beyond these walls, in the same spirit as our forbearers, Margaret Fuller (slide of Margaret Fuller) who died for her worth as a woman writer and mother, (Slide of Theodor Parker) Theodore Parker, who was the original author of the phrases echoed by others “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” or “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice” or Julia Ward Howe (slide of Julia) author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic but also the founder of Mother’s Day as a day of peace. These transcendental justice makers were more than the founders of the American Renaissance as John Buehrens writes but those who started a “second American Revolution –demanding an end to slavery, greater equality for women and greater social opportunity for all.” (Buehrens Conflagration)

Theirs to start and ours to do. Can you still hear their echoes? Because our work is not done; yes slavery is diminished but the enslavement of black and brown bodies into a system of poverty and criminalization is far from done. Yes, women can vote, but they are still subject to unequal pay, abuse, harassment and a glass ceiling that kept our first woman from the presidency. Yes, few people in America starve anymore, but the growing gap between the rich and the rest of us has grown twice the size of the last gilded age in the last centuries 20’s, homelessness is on the rise, and as I know all too well from what I give out of my discretionary fund, more than a few of us are just a paycheck away from being without a home ourselves. Do you hear what I am saying?

Beloveds, as John Buehrens reminds us, “many of us enjoy privilege....The question is always , “What do we do with that privilege?”...

I know I have failed in this. So today, I am calling on us and leading us towards the integrated whole of our faith; self-improvement and an appreciation of the sublime, but also, connection to one another and justice in our world. In other words I am calling us to our mission statement “to inspire” yes, and to “connect and act”. Can I get an amen?

Throughout the month of February we have been exploring the spiritual theme of justice and equity building on our previous work in January to understand the liberating power of love. In order to be liberated one must also love, even those who would keep them bound up. In order to find justice we must also find love. When Jesus said that we should “love your enemies” he wasn’t saying we should forgive our enemies, nor was he saying we should accept what our enemies do to us. What he was saying is in order to be truly free, you cannot return hate with hate. We must see the humanity of the other even though they may keep us in bondage.

One more story to bring this home from the great teacher of justice Walter Wink:

“His command to love our enemies reminds us that our first task toward oppressors is pastoral: to help them recover their humanity. Quite possibly the struggle, and the oppression that gave it rise, have dehumanized the oppressed as well, causing them to demonize their enemies. It is not enough to become politically free; we must also become human. Nonviolence presents a chance for all parties to rise above their present condition and become more of what God created them to be. Just such a story comes from Lincoln, Nebraska. On a Sunday morning in June 1991, Cantor Michael Weisser and his wife, Julie, were unpacking boxes in their new home, when the phone rang. “You will be sorry you ever moved into 5810 Randolph St., Jew boy,” the voice said, and hung up. Two days later, the Weissers received a manila packet in the mail. “The KKK is watching you, Scum,” read the note. Inside were pictures of Adolf Hitler, caricatures of Jews with hooked noses, blacks with gorilla heads, and graphic depictions of dead blacks and Jews. “The Holofoax was nothing compared to what’s going to happen to you,” read one note. The Weissers called the police, who said it looked like the work of Larry Trapp, the state leader, or “grand dragon,” of the Ku Klux Klan. A Nazi sympathizer, he led a cadre of skinheads and klansmen responsible for terrorizing black, Asian, and Jewish families in Nebraska and nearby Iowa. “He’s dangerous,” the police warned. “We know he makes explosives.” Although confined to a wheelchair because of late-stage diabetes, Trapp, forty-four, was a suspect in the firebombings of several African Americans’ homes around Lincoln and was responsible for what he called “Operation Gooks,” the March 1991 burning of the Indochinese Refugee Assistance Center in Omaha. (He later admitted to these crimes.)

“And Trapp was planning more. He was the spiritual leader. Trapp lived alone in a drab efficiency apartment. On one wall he kept a giant Nazi flag and a double-life-sized picture of Hitler. Next to these hung his white Klan robe, with its red belt and hood. He kept assault rifles, pistols, and shotguns within instant reach for the moment when his enemies might come crashing through his door to kill him. In the rear was a secret bunker he’d built for the coming “race wars.” When Trapp launched a white supremacist TV series on a local public-access cable channel—featuring men and women saluting a burning swastika and firing automatic weapons—Michael Weisser was incensed. He called Trapp’s KKK hotline and left a message on the answering machine. “Larry,” he said, “do you know that the very first laws that Hitler’s Nazis passed were against people like yourself who had no legs or who had physical deformities or physical handicaps?”

“Cantor Weisser continued the calls to the machine. Then one day Trapp picked up. “What the f\_\_\_ do you want?” he shouted, “I just want to talk to you,” said Weisser. “You black?” Trapp demanded. “Jewish,” Weisser replied. “Stop harassing me,” said Trapp, who demanded to know why he was calling. Weisser remembered a suggestion of his wife’s. “Well, I was thinking you might need a hand with something, and I wondered if I could help,” Weisser ventured. “I know you’re in a wheelchair and I thought maybe I could take you to the grocery store or something.” Trapp was too stunned to speak. Then he cleared his throat. “That’s okay,” he said. “That’s nice of you, but I’ve got that covered. Thanks anyway. But don’t call this number anymore.” “I’ll be in touch,” Weisser replied. During a later call, Trapp admitted that he was “rethinking a few things.” But then he went back on the radio spewing the same old hatreds. Furious, Weisser

picked up the phone. “It’s clear you’re not rethinking anything at all!” After calling Trapp a “liar” and “hypocrite,” Weisser demanded an explanation. In a surprisingly tremulous voice, Trapp said, “I’m sorry I did that. I’ve been talking like that all of my life... I can’t help it... I’ll apologize!” That evening the cantor led his congregation in prayers for the grand dragon. The next evening the phone rang at the Weissers’ home. “I want to get out,” Trapp said, “but I don’t know how.” The Weissers offered to go over to Trapp’s that night to “break bread.” Trapp hesitated, then agreed, telling them he lived in apartment number three. When the Weissers entered Trapp’s apartment, he burst into tears and tugged off his two swastika rings. Soon all three were crying, then laughing, then hugging.” — (The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium by Walter Wink)

I like to think I have come some distance from my naivete as a young man. I like to think that I am more conscious of how my very place in society keeps the system of inequity running. But I also know now that like all of us, I am not at fault but I am still responsible. In the great web of our interdependence I know that the prophets of our free faith still call to us to find the balance between the spiritual needs of our lives and the possibility of a live worth living for others. As the great black feminist adrienne marie brown once penned:

“E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G—is connected. The soil needs rain, organic matter, air, worms and life in order to do what it needs to do to give and receive life. Each element is an essential component. Organizing takes humility and selflessness and patience and rhythm while our ultimate goal of liberation will take many expert components. Some of us build and fight for land, healthy bodies, healthy relationships, clean air, water, homes, safety, dignity, and humanizing education. Others of us fight for food and political prisoners and abolition and environmental justice. Our work is intersectional and multifaceted. Nature teaches us that our work has to be nuanced and steadfast. And more than anything, that we need each other—at our highest natural glory—in order to get free.”

Freedom is still calling my friends, over the din and the noise of disinformation, love equity and compassion are still ours to pursue. So may it be. Amen.