

Sermon/homily UUCR Aug 31:

Without struggle, there is no progress. These words from Frederick Douglass are simple yet powerful; they are absolute. They are words that are far easier to hold in our heads, as an intellectual concept, than to feel in our hearts, or better, to use as inspiration for action.

The forces of the status quo, of apathy, of too much to do, and too little time pull on us. We don't want to struggle. We often resent the need to act, to step forward, to devote time and resources and energy to make change in the world around us.

But there are lessons all around us about the change we can affect when we do struggle, when we fight, when we push for what we know is right, and will contribute to a better world. Some of those lessons have happened right here, in our community.

Last fall, several members of this congregation spent time and energy to go out and collect signatures for the campaign to get a minimum wage increase and earned sick time on the ballot. Together, we collected over 400 signatures and contributed, along with other faith, labor, and community organizations to the 285,000 signatures collected. Because of the hard work of members here, as part of the state-wide campaign, the legislature felt the pressure and approved a measure to increase the Massachusetts minimum wage to \$11 by 2015.

When we struggle, we make progress.

This summer brought a struggle fascinating for many of us. The employees of Market Basket, standing in solidarity with their beloved CEO, Artie T, took a stand when he was ousted in a power play by the company Board of Directors. Many refused to go to work, more protested outside of stores, and employees asked customers to boycott Market Basket to support their efforts.

The way in which this groundswell of activity occurred was amazing. The power of workers standing together, in the absence even of any formal organization like a union, to organize a strike and boycott was impressive. Stores posted signs in the window. Employees and friends or relatives of employees set up camp outside. Rallies were organized. Shelves were empty and stores were virtual ghost towns, throughout Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

At first glance or upon speaking with those protesting, the issue seemed to be about Artie T. "We love Artie T!!" signs proclaimed. Employees shared stories with customers and the media about the kindness and concern he expressed for workers at the chain.

But dig a little deeper, and familiar themes emerge. Other than the personal connection with Artie T, employees spoke about the working conditions. Being at a job you could

turn into a career, with good benefits. Being able to earn a decent level of pay as a cashier or assistant manager and actually stay in the middle class, versus joining the ranks of the working poor. Promotion from within, and years of service being recognized and valued. A business model that says “I can pay my employees well, give my customers good prices, and still make a good chunk of money.”

In a world where the corporate motto often seems to be “take all you can, squeeze out as much profitability as you can, and leave your moral compass at the door”, Market Basket appeared as an oasis. With a change in management, employees and customers alike feared the shift would be the way of other grocery chains – prices going up, wages and benefits going down, valuing the almighty dollar over people.

Against all odds, Market Basket employees, aided by customers, prevailed. As the revenue losses ticked away day after day, as the drumbeat of “Bring Back Artie T” refused to be muted, as the call of politicians urging employees to return to work went unheeded, as fundraising goals to support Market Basket workers were exceeded in a matter of days, a deal was cut to return Artie T to his position.

The workers of Market Basket embodied the idea that without struggle there is no progress. Even when progress may mean preserving the existing system, keeping the benefits of a people-centered business model in place.

As many of you knew already (or if you didn't, you heard it in the introduction!), I work for a labor union. I have worked for unions in Connecticut, Maryland, and for the past 10 years, here in Massachusetts. And that has given me the privilege of witnessing some pretty amazing struggles. In the past couple years, I've seen some of the toughest struggles any worker can engage in – including a recent strike.

Close by, on August 21 and 22, workers at Lifelinks in Chelmsford, a residential and day program for individuals with developmental disabilities, went on strike. A strike is one of the toughest work actions any union member will ever face. Strikes bring uncertainty, fear, lack of pay, and in this case, concern over the care of the individuals in the program. It is a decision not undertaken lightly, but with seriousness and much deliberation. Yet this measure, extreme as it is, is the final step at the end of a long process, and is often the only way to have some semblance of a balance of power between workers and employers.

Again, the themes of dignity and respect were at the forefront. Prior to the strike, staff received only 3 paid holidays per year. 3! This would be troubling in any field, but particularly in the human services field, where the standard is closer to 10 holidays per year, this employer fell very short. Also, in an agency where many employees have family overseas, the company was attempting to impose limits on how much time off at

any one period could be taken. The dignity of those wanting or needing to visit family abroad was not being taken seriously.

I'm happy to say workers at Lifelinks prevailed in many of their goals, including increasing to 5 paid holidays per year and improved wages, and the contract was settled late on the second day of the strike.

Without struggle, there is no progress.

At times it seems like so much is bearing down on working people. Wages have not kept pace with inflation. Dignity and respect can be elusive in many workplaces. Corporate titans and the obscenely wealthy in this country expend resources to buy politicians and pass legislation that will allow them to do whatever they want to make more money. It can feel overwhelming. It can feel as if we are powerless to make change.

But we are not. I look at the situations I highlighted and know that these victories are only a few among many. I know that when we struggle, when we fight for what is right, we win, we make progress.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people. We believe in the use of the democratic process. We believe in justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

I'm reminded of a quote from Martin Luther King Jr.: "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

It bends toward justice when we take action. When we know that struggle must happen for progress to exist.

It can be difficult in some ways to take action. Besides the weight of the status quo, of the pressure of our daily lives, we each have our own unique challenges we struggle with.

During the signature collection efforts for the minimum wage increase and earned sick time ballot questions I mentioned earlier, one congregant described to me how she had a hard time approaching strangers to ask them to sign, despite her passion for the issue and belief in the work we were doing. Fortunately a solution emerged when she and another member of the congregation paired up, joining forces to collect signatures. The other member would initially approach and ask for someone's signature, and then she would help them sign correctly. An amazing example of teamwork and the ways in which we can share our strengths and challenges to accomplish our goals.

I know personally, despite the probably thousands of doors I have knocked on in my career, I still have a little bit of internal recoil and resistance when I need to do this. Whether it's reminding someone to vote, asking for support for a candidate, or even the lengthy discussions about efforts to form a union in someone's workplace, I still have a little bit of a hard time knocking on doors. It's no doubt partly what is instilled in us from an early age, the valuing of privacy over community, and the fear of disturbing someone, fear of getting an angry response at the door, or just being impolite in some way. Even though I know that absolutely the best way to have a conversation with someone about elections, or joining the union is at their home, I still struggle with it.

But without struggle there is no progress.

So I push through it. I think about how important it is to get better politicians elected. I think about how much we need to talk to every worker at a workplace if they are going to be successful in organizing themselves, and those conversations are not going to happen at the employer worksite, that's for sure!

For some of you, the challenge to taking action may be talking to strangers. For others it may be the busy schedule of a working parent. For still others it may be a belief that you won't really make a difference, or your single voice is not going to matter.

Maybe other objections are grounded in the lessons we absorb from the society around us.

In the debate over the efforts to increase the minimum wage, some interesting sentiments surfaced. Whether reading the swamp of comments attached to online news articles, or simply the remarks of Facebook friends (for those on social media), there are some repeated themes.

"The minimum wage is for teenagers."

"If you are working at a job that pays too little, you should quit it and find a better paying one."

"If you want to earn more, go to college!"

At their collective core, the most distressing piece of these views is that some people are inherently unworthy of receiving a living wage. That some work is not worthy of fair pay. Or, that "that's just the way it is" and we must accept economic conditions as if they are immovable. As the Unitarian Universalist Association President Peter Morales stated, "We tend to treat changes in the economy as if they were like the weather – natural phenomena governed by forces beyond our control. Nothing could be further from the truth. We have chosen to live in a society with high unemployment and with

income distribution that is becoming medieval. A tiny percentage of Americans owns most of the wealth...This did not just happen. We created this situation.”

Yet, because we created this situation, we can change it. We can struggle and make progress on the economic inequality in our society. We can struggle with our own challenges and assumptions, so we can grow and progress to living out the principles we embrace.

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.