

August 21, 2014

Good afternoon. I am Rabbi Jonathan Biatch, a member of Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice, and today we stand with our clergy partners and other moral leaders who wish to kick off the Moral Week of Action in celebration of the 1963 March of Washington.

Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice unites progressive people of faith toward creating an environment in our state where its people and government address the real needs, and raise the dignity of the hungry and poor; care for and heal the sick; and truly listen to the voices of all citizens. Drawing from the wisdom of our faith traditions, we accomplish this through educating our members and the broader community, and advocating with our legislators to advance the common good. We stand with one another here – and in many parts of the country – to renew the progressive voice that we find within our traditions, and to apply the values we learn and teach to everyday situations in our society.

We act from our religious belief, to affect moral practices in our society.

The biblical book of Genesis teaches us that humanity was created in the divine image. Therefore, each person on the planet possesses some aspect of the divine, and therefore we – as individuals and a society – must treat each person with justice, dignity, and kindness.

Further, in the New Testament book of Matthew (25:31-46) Jesus taught that how we care for the least well off in our society – children, the elderly, those who are sick and impoverished – directly reflects and affects our relationship with the Almighty. In other words, if we settle for inadequate schools; if we care little about how we care for the aged; if we eliminate or underfund medical care for those who are ill, we are literally abandoning our relationship with God.

All major religious traditions share the concept of the Golden Rule, that is, that we must act toward others, as we would want them to act toward us. This ethical directive, existing between and among all inhabitants of our world, forms a ‘social covenant,’ that holds not only between individuals, but also between the citizenry and our government.

It is this social covenant that we seek to uphold each day in our work as religious leaders. Yet we have seen many elements of this covenant shredded in our land recently, as real violence, verbal attacks and extremism, and polarized government bodies threaten to unravel the social contracts that we have struggled so long to establish. As religious leaders of Wisconsin who are heirs to the prophetic tradition of social justice, we call upon all citizens of our state to search deep in their souls to find a more moral pathway toward true equality and human dignity.

A truly democratic government acts in accordance with the wishes of the governed. It has, in the past, been the desire of the people of Wisconsin – through the social service, educational, and health care programs – to assist its citizens to maintain lives of dignity and honor. And many Wisconsinites pursue this goal because of the religious values to which they subscribe.

Yet in recent years, we have found widespread anger and discontent among the people. The people's will has been disregarded, citizens' voices have been silenced, the rich have benefited at the expense of the poor, the voice of business and industry has been allowed to trump that of the individual, and state budgets have been balanced on the backs of the impoverished, the sick, and our children.

It is, therefore, time to renew and promote the progressive religious values that have motivated the prophets of ancient Israel. It was Isaiah who said it best: the purpose of our social justice work is "to loosen the chains of injustice, to untie the cords of servitude, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke. It is to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter. When we see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from our own flesh and blood."

If we do these things, continues Isaiah, then "our light will break forth like the dawn, and our healing will quickly appear; our righteousness will go before us, and the glory of God will be our rear guard."

One of our human goals is to actualize the many ways in which we are made in God's image.
We are proud to stand with our moral partners during this important moral week of action.