

**“Same Storm, Different Boats”**  
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
March 3, 2024

*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.*

About one month after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, one month into the shutdown that kept many of us locked away in our homes, unable to see family and friends, some of us unable to go to work, some of us deemed essential workers and forced to go to work, in April of 2020 a writer named Damian Barr went on social media and posted this commentary: “We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some of us are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar.”

This statement went viral all across the Internet. It was picked up in an article in the Wall Street Journal and accompanying that article was this illustration called “Ships,” by Barbara Kelley.<sup>1</sup> In this illustration, Kelley depicts a sea full of light blue waves with dramatic crests and several different kinds of vessels: a single passenger in a canoe, a small sail boat, a yacht, and a naval ship looming above them all.

As we travel along on life's journey, some of the storms that we encounter affect us all. Covid was one of these storms and boy was it a big one leaving almost no one untouched. A natural disaster like the flood that we experienced this past summer is another one of those storms. The impacts of that disaster were felt across the community. Yet, these storms can affect us in different ways. We may not all be in the same boat. We are equipped with differing resources to face these storms.

We can see this difference all these months later after that July flood. The flood had different impacts depending on whether your home or business was in the flood plain, which may have depended on whether you could afford to buy or rent anywhere else. And, one's ability to recover from that disaster has also depended upon differences in circumstance and resources. Some people were able to clean up quickly and move on while some are still struggling to regain or rebuild what was lost.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.barbarakelley.com/ngg\\_tag/ships-at-sea/#gallery/ships-at-sea/184](https://www.barbarakelley.com/ngg_tag/ships-at-sea/#gallery/ships-at-sea/184)

“We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some of us are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar.”

Transformation is our worship theme this month. And, I believe that being able to treat one another with compassion is key to transformation, and especially the kind of social and economic transformation that it would take to address the inequities that exist among us.

Compassion is rooted in our ability to see and feel outside of our own personal experience, to be able to recognize and believe that another person’s story and life experience is valid, even if it might be different from our own. Compassion is what enables us to recognize differences in resource and circumstance and to want to do something to change the unequal outcomes that such differences lead to. I believe that class-based inequities are the source of great inequality and an area needing transformation, starting from within our own hearts.

One of the people I think about most when thinking about issues of class is my father-in-law, Bill. We miss Bill. He died in January of 2015. Bill was one of ten children, a third generation Vermonter of French-Canadian descent.

Towards the end of his life, Bill had turned to being a handyman for most of his livelihood after a massive heart attack had prematurely ended his career as a chef. He struggled for many years after that, making what little money he could selling things at flea markets and antique shops. But then, with the help of a friend who had the wealth to lend him a good sum of money, he bought a small fixer-upper and settled into handyman and other domestic work for a few better off clients.

He not only worked for, but became friends with, an economist who would make regular trips across the Atlantic. Bill would drive him down to Boston for his flights and then pick him up. He also worked for a renowned professor of religion who attended his memorial service which we held outside in the yard of his home on the Waits River.

Bill was able to maintain these friendships with people of very different educational backgrounds and economic status - people of an entirely different class - partly because Bill was a very easy-going kind of guy, but also I think because something of their humanity became known to the other.

Now Bill wasn't the kind of person to talk much about how he ended up in his economic situation nor too question it, at least out loud. I think this silence about class is reflective of the general attitude many people have regarding class. Better not to see it or talk about it, let alone challenge it.

Within Unitarian Universalism, we have often struggled with any kind of conversations about class or in addressing class difference within our religious community. At times, we have recognized the tension between the generally more educated, cultural elite status of our Unitarian branch and the more egalitarian, working class status of our Universalist branch. But generally speaking, we, UUs, have not always been comfortable talking about the class difference and bias that exists in our pulpits and in our pews.

In an attempt to address this discomfort head on, here at UCM several years ago now, we held a workshop with a Unitarian Universalist initiative called UU Class Conversations. How many of you remember that workshop held in the vestry? There were about 30, almost 40 people, present for that workshop.

During the course of the day, we explored what class means and how different class groupings are defined. We explored our own class origins and changes of economic circumstance that have happened throughout our own lives. We explored the kinds of stereotypes that might be attached to different class identities and our own feelings about the class identity that each of us claimed in the moment. It was a very rich and engaging day.

(And for those interested in engaging in this kind of dialogue with other UUs, at the virtual General Assembly this year, UU Class Conversations will be hosting a cohort for discussion called "Meaningful Class Conversations" which you might want to check out.)

One of the most important takeaways for me from the workshop we held here back in 2017 was just how much shame can be attached to our class identities. This goes across the board. The expectations and stereotypes that are associated with class can cause us to feel as though there is something wrong with us. Whether it is the shame of someone who feels they have too little, or the shame of someone who feels they have too much, this feeling of being flawed and unworthy of love and connection can exist for people who are poor and people who are wealthy. People are demonized and othered because of their class status and can then start to

believe they don't belong or might not even be worthy of belonging. Maybe some of you have felt this way at one time or another.

Yet, the more we acknowledge our class differences and talk about them, the more possible it becomes for dignity and respect to push away the shame.

And so, let's talk about the economic and class diversity that is present within this congregation. There are people in our community, some of you who struggle to have enough to cover the basics of what's needed day to day, who might have gone to college but maybe not, and who are essentially one emergency away from poverty. There are some of you who are college-educated and probably also hold graduate degrees who are doing pretty well economically, but it could be otherwise if you lost your job or your spouse lost their job. And there are others, also educationally privileged, who have inherited wealth, or who own assets that continue to generate wealth, who are quite comfortable, who have resources that can be relied upon in case of emergency or unexpected major expenses and would still have plenty to draw on to cover basic needs and more.

Here in our community there are a diversity of means and resources and none of these circumstances define or dictate the worthiness or sacredness of any of us.

This diversity is one of the reasons that in our pledge drive we emphasize that the amount that you might choose to pledge and to contribute to this congregation doesn't matter. What matters is the generosity with which you offer those financial contributions, based on your own financial circumstances. There are generous pledges made of \$50 a year, and there are generous pledges made in the thousands of dollars a year. We recognize that our gifts to this community come in many forms and in many different dollar amounts, but it is the pooling of our resources and it is the sharing of our gifts with one another that makes this community possible.

There are other ways that we can continue to develop class-informed and economically just practices within our loving community. From ensuring that leadership roles are accessible regardless of educational background to continuing to strive towards fair and equitable compensation for all our staff. And, spiritually, we can continue to grow our compassion so that our relationships with one another might be transformed as might the bigger systems that cause inequities among us.

As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said to the congregation at Riverside Church in New York City in 1967, “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

At the end of his life, King began calling for a radical solidarity across race and class. And, I believe this is one of the most transformative stances we can take. With this kind of solidarity, we reject the belief that those with fewer economic resources are less deserving of dignity and compassion as well as the belief that those with the most economic resources are inherently evil and do not care about others’ financial struggles. We reject the belief that we must be divided.

When we stop demonizing one another, then perhaps we can focus instead on the bigger forces at play that dehumanize us all.

Perhaps then we can truly honor the sacred dignity within each of us.  
Perhaps then we can transform unjust systems and also our own hearts and minds.

Perhaps we can learn that, though we may be in different boats, we need not sail alone.  
We can reach out to one another with compassion and with a commitment to our shared destiny.

One in which all of us make it through the storm as safe, whole, and well as possible.

So may it be.