

Of Love and Justice

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 14, 2024

Love. That which leads violence to redemption to transformation. That which guides animosity towards reconciliation towards Beloved Community. That which unifies the separated, that which changes hearts, changes souls, changes minds. That which turns the world completely upside down. What kind of love can do all of this, you may ask. Not eros, a romantic love. Not philia, a reciprocal love between one's cherished companions. There is nothing affectionate, reciprocal, tender, or romantic about it. It is agape, wishing goodwill toward all. It is what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. defined as "an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return."¹ It, I quote from theologian Anthony Bradley, "means loving people that don't love you back, because God commands love as a means by which the world is completely turned upside down."² This makes agape fundamental in the work of justice – nonviolent justice, specifically – unrelenting while wishing wellbeing for each living entity. It works because it is held towards, not only those in need- calling for justice and equity for all - but likewise our enemies – it is overflowing. It turns the world upside down, the disempowered become empowered, the least of these become the most beloved, those who hate become beacons of compassion, the disengaged become fearless leaders. So let us explore this powerful, sometimes counterintuitive love.

Love for the least of these amplifies the full humanity of each individual and demands equity which in turn shapes, creates, initiates, and sustains a call for justice. Those of any gender, sexual orientation, race, faith, ability, political affiliation – deserving of compassion, hope, meaning, and the ability to flourish. Justice often calls for love of one's enemy, a well-known theme of King's work. What I am about to propose may seem counterintuitive, and yet I invite you into reflection. We do not perpetuate and highlight our differences – those of various

¹ "Justice Without Violence" lecture at Brandeis by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

² Quoted in "How Martin Luther King Jr's Faith Drove His Activism" by Brandon Ambrosino

faiths, political ideologies, beliefs, actions, or values – but instead calmly approach with curiosity. We do not disengage but facilitate deliberate engagement, offering open ears and an open mind. We, through our words and our actions, bring love to the hearts of others so their actions change as they, too, see the urgent need to care for this aching world. We break the cycle of hate, animosity, and violence by introducing agape. King, deeply engrossed in his own Christian faith, encourages us to love our neighbors as we do ourselves, as articulated in the Gospel of Mark.

With our enemies we may have more in common than we would like to admit – and agape calls us to engage with this. We all work for our lives to have meaning, for our lives to matter, to be needed. We all desire for children to flourish, to live a purposeful life, to have made a difference.³ Each child is born of hope, promise, purity, and goodness. It is what happens in those intermediate years – childhood through youth through young adulthood – that makes the difference in a person choosing between hate and love, violence and peace, judgment and acceptance. And so, we wish for well-being, and actively work to bring compassion into these broken lives. Valarie Kaur, whose words we heard earlier, reflects that it is so very tempting to see our enemies as evil, yet truly they are wounded people immersed in insecurity, pain, or greed. This is what leads one to vote for a law or politician that perpetuates hate and violence, complicit in oppression. And yet if we lift the veil of slogans and sound bites, we hear stories – stories steeped in pain and woundedness. We see one another, not as enemies, not as evil, immoral opponents, but as people. As such we unearth important information – that which teaches us how to change the culture or power structures that seek to hurt us and disempower the oppressed and the marginalized.⁴

Philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich writes, “love is the drive towards unity of the separated.”⁵ Perhaps felt most poignantly now is political division. What if a liberal and a conservative, a democrat and a republican, sat down and engaged with one another with an

³ President Obama’s farewell address 2017

⁴ *Soul Matters Worship Research: January 2024*

⁵ *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analysis and Ethical Applications* by Paul Tillich.

intention of pure curiosity for one another's beliefs; seeing one another as people, not of political affiliation. Again, we return to agape. If our society was one of curiosity – not pitting one belief against another – fostering division and animosity that in turn fuels hate, judgment, prejudice and even violence, we could unite around common values and discuss the best way to achieve that which fosters more universal goodness. Social critic bell hooks writes, “we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive.”⁶ Likewise, we cannot claim to love if we allow for hurt and abuse. And so, we break the violence through our active, not passive, love. Initiating conversation, sharing in prayer, resisting any form of violence, educating our children and ourselves, uniting across differences, offering hope for a just and peaceful world.

I want to end our reflection on agape with a quote of Dr. King, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.” He continues, “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”⁷ If our politicians lack love, implementing laws and procedures that perpetuate racism, strip women of their rights, dehumanize immigrants, or punish the poor can be done with ease. And yet, if we love and lack power, we will never move beyond the sentimental to make structural change. We need both. So may we offer active love, voting, demonstrating, calling representatives so they can make laws and policies from these values and morals centered in, yes, love.

Let us pause for a moment and transition to a basic question: “Why justice?” King dared to dream while immersed in a nightmare. He dreamed that, in his words, with a common faith “we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”⁸ Together, we will be free. In King's Christian beliefs we are, each of us, a child of God, and should be treated as

⁶ *All About Love: New Visions* by bell hooks

⁷ The Southern Christian Leadership Conference Presidential Address By Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr

⁸ “I Have a Dream” by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

such. Not to be ostracized or even simply be tolerated but to be loved. His dream was one of community. Our society values the individual – individual pursuits, wealth, status, achievements. It encourages us to become immersed in ourselves, unaware of the pain around us and as such become disengaged, we, through inaction, sustain the animosity perpetuating oppression. King’s Christian world was one of community, as articulated by Jesus. Instead of “I,” we are a universal “we,” one that functions on “togetherness.” We are children of God, siblings, intimately connected through a common good. So may each of us have the opportunity for love, hope, peace, promise, and dreams that can come to fruition. No one is a failure by lacking wealth, status, accolades, education, prestige. No one is an outcast – whatever illness, gender, socioeconomic status, race, or sexual orientation. “Why justice?” because of our “we,” our “togetherness,” our equality, our compassion, our love. Together, we will be free.

Which leads us to our next question. How do we implement this justice work that must be done? King responds with two truths: nonviolence and loving our enemies. King was inspired and guided by the work of Mahatma Gandhi, so I begin with that. Gandhi successfully led a nonviolent revolution which led to India’s independence from British rule. Gandhi understood nonviolence as a force for truth, a force for love, rejecting lies, rejecting hate. It is a refusal to participate in any action that runs counter to the love, morals, and values we hold in our hearts. It means intentionally, continuously, constantly meeting violence with peace.⁹ King made this his platform. He spoke, “We adopt the means of nonviolence because our end is a community at peace with itself.”¹⁰ His dream was a community of peace, of “we,” of compassion. Meeting violence with violence is antithetical to a community of peace. Love fosters love, hate fosters hate.

⁹ “How Martin Luther King Jr. Took Inspiration From Gandhi on Nonviolence” by Becky Little

¹⁰ Nobel Lecture December 11, 1964

How do we implement justice? King drew inspiration from the teachings of Jesus, as well. Jesus taught “love your enemies,” which King famously elaborated upon. He spoke, “If you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption.”¹¹ What is redemption? In Christianity, it means being saved from sin. For Unitarian Universalists, I offer it is being saved from error or evil; it keeps us from error or evil in our future. This transformation away from hate, anger, and the resulting violence begins when we meet a hurt and angry person unexpectedly with an unconditional, persistent, active, agape love. Hate undoubtedly perpetuates and initiates only more hate. It is love when an enemy undergoes a dramatic change, and the world is overturned.

What is our ultimate end goal through this work of love and nonviolence? King writes it is one of reconciliation. That of which Christians understand as a peace between humanity and God, what Unitarian Universalists may understand as restoration of relationship. It is redemption, the saving from error or evil we discussed earlier. It is, ultimately, that of Beloved Community – a body of myriad identities held together as one through the power of unlimited love. It represents those beautiful, interdependent relationships fostered by respect, care, and compassion as we work together towards justice in the larger world; as we engage with a love that sees no one as either worthy or unworthy, as either friend or enemy. All people – all of us – share in the “glories and the mysteries”¹² of this great life. Poverty, hunger, homelessness and any of other forms of societal ills will not be permitted because human decency will not allow it to be so. It is a global vision – a grand vision – and one we should hope for and work towards. Black and white, rich and poor, abled and disabled all as one – all one, overarching community – based in love, compassion, justice, and care.¹³

¹¹ “Loving Your Enemies” by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

¹² Marjorie Montgomery, Reading 452, *Singing the Living Tradition*

¹³ Ideas from The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation’s Chief Moral Dilemma,” by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and 8thprincipleuu.org

Building Beloved Community. King visited India to learn more from his predecessor, Gandhi. At that point, it was the aftermath of the division between Indians and the British – it was a society that had been steeped in “hatred and bitterness,” and yet one who dealt with this animosity through nonviolent means. The result was not one of which typically followed a violent campaign. Instead, it was one of mutual friendship and equality – I find this remarkable. Both Indian and British were held within the beloved community of this commonwealth.¹⁴ It was the likes of which the world had never seen before, violence turned to nonviolence, animosity turning to friendship – love upending the world. Can we do the same?

We, friends, do not reside within a nation of beloved community. We reside within a culture steeped in political division and divisiveness. We see hate, animosity and, yes, violence on our TVs, newspapers, in our communities. We see families torn apart and dear friendships ended. We see one side intentionally pitted against the other. I invite us into these practices of agape and nonviolence. I invite us to see the opposition as a person with a story, not as a flag or a soundbite. Someone else who wants to live a life of purpose, meaning, and friendship. Let us unify the separated. Power needs love – so may we do what we can to bring this to the lawmakers, the politicians, the media, so they can make laws and policies from these loving values and morals. I pray for this each and every day. We do not accept harm done, we do not welcome, condone, or allow violence, hatred, or animosity, but respond, nonetheless, with peace and agape. That active love we spoke about earlier – engaging in conversation, praying, resisting, uniting, educating, voting, demonstrating. We meet violence and division with a universal love and a nonviolent stance that changes the heart, mind, and soul, deteriorating hate, building a community of peaceful coexistence where all are cared for. Our society is turned upside down. The least of these become the most cherished and cared for, the marginalized are granted power. May we, through loving our enemies and practicing nonviolence, bring to our lives, and our children’s lives, and our children’s children’s lives, the teachings of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the reality of true Beloved Community.

¹⁴ How Martin Luther King Jr. Took Inspiration From Gandhi on Nonviolence” by Becky Little

May it be so, and Amen.