

Justice, Love, and Hope

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 16, 2022

As Unitarian Universalists, we are a people of faith and as such a people of values. We are grounded in our historical Unitarian and Universalist understandings of God as a forgiving and loving being, and in the belief that all people are inherently good, with worth and dignity. All of those who inhabit this miracle that is our planet are interdependent and interrelated in ways we may not always understand but in ways that connect the harm of one to the harm of all, the blessings of one to the blessings of all. Justice and equity are at the core of a moral life as we commit ourselves to orienting our lives with love as our guiding light.

And yet much of what is going on in the world is not in alignment with these core values. Harm, hate, lies, racism and violence have in many ways run rampant and we are reminded of this daily as we navigate news sources and social media. We recently acknowledged the anniversary of the insurrection at our nation's Capitol – a threat to our democracy that reverberates in our country to this day as political leaders continue to threaten that which is at the core of our nation's founding. We are an aching country, and aching individuals. I wonder of meeting hate with love, violence with peace, evil with an intention to transform hearts. These thoughts came to mind while reflecting on the values and actions of a revolutionary who altered the course of our nation's history – the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A man of faith – a Baptist minister – whose values and responses to hate and violence run parallel to the core of our own faith. A leader of the civil rights movement who serves as a reminder of those powerful intentions that shape who we are in this world – love, justice, and a commitment to what is right.

King saw faith as a chisel that allows us to carve a “stone of hope” out of a “mountain of despair” – a metaphor of what we can accomplish through our actions guided by our

understanding of the sacred.¹ We are called to be grounded in values that shape our responses so that we act with our morals as our guiding force – when faced with hate we are able to respond with love, when with faced with vengeance we have the power of forgiveness.²

Grounded in the era of civil rights, King writes of those in his movement as an army – supplied with sincerity and clothed in determination, carrying only the arsenal of faith and currency of conscience – an army meant to “move and not maul,” to “sing but not slay,” an army with an allegiance to God – battling through song and love and peace the hatred, segregation, and discrimination which seeks to destroy.³

King’s work – as is ours – is grounded in faith. His beliefs in his Christian God gave him the strength not to despair and to smile in the face of tribulation – his God providing him the tools he needed to navigate even the most formidable of obstacles.⁴ King’s racial justice work was critically shaped and sustained through his personal belief in the sacred and the work of the savior in his Christian faith – Jesus. I think of my own sacred – to me, a personal and loving God – as a crucial companion on any journey where I work to meet hate with love – my sacred sustaining me, giving me strength, and serving as that moral compass. Just as King’s army battled the injustices of racism may we create an army in that image of love to battle hatred and violence and racism. With an understanding of our own sacred at our side – Goddess, Allah, higher power, nature, spirit of life – may we center in that strength that allows us not to meet hate with more hate, instead, peace. In the beliefs of King, “only the strong and the courageous can be nonviolent.”⁵

Both King and the historical founders of Unitarianism and Universalism understood each person on this planet to be held in the loving embrace of God. With this understanding of the sacred,

¹ 1966 Ware Lecture: *Don't Sleep Through the Revolution*, by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

² *Martin and Malcom and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* by James Cone pg. 131

³ *Why We Can't Wait*, Martin Luther King Jr., published 1964

⁴ *Martin and Malcom and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* by James Cone pg. 128

⁵ *Ibid* pg. 77

can we morally engage with violent methods? If we are working for peace and love, can we achieve these ends through immoral means? King's Christian God and our historical Universalist God are "just and loving"⁶ beings who understand each of us to be good, imperfect, and forgivable creations and thus these understandings of God serve as a moral compass to each of us as we each respond to hate and bigotry – we are guided by divine morals.

As Saint Francis prayed,

Where there is hatred, let me bring love.

Where there is wrong, may I bring the spirit of forgiveness.

Where there is doubt, may I bring faith.

Where there is despair, may I bring hope.⁷

King, grounded in his faith, served to be a source of love, forgiveness, and hope. He served to model empowering morals, just as the figures of Jesus and Gandhi who served as exemplars for King. This revolutionary believed each person must use "moral means to achieve just ends."⁸ Morality leads to justice, hate to injustice.

King's actions in this movement were deliberate in creating what he understood to be the American Dream. At the heart of the civil rights movement this was a dream of equal opportunity, a dream of equally distributed wealth and privilege, a dream where the color of a person's skin did not determine the "content of [their] character" – where people are engaged with as unique individuals and not with prejudice or judgment. In this dream everyone's inherent worth and dignity is realized.⁹ I understand this to be a world where there is no "least of these," but simply "all of us." Where there is no "privileged" and "marginalized," but a beautiful collection of humans, one accentuating the attributes of the other. Can we work

⁶ *Martin and Malcom and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* by James Cone pg. 128

⁷ Peace Prayer of St. Francis

⁸ *Martin and Malcom and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* by James Cone pgs. 128-129

⁹ *ibid* pg. 58

towards a dream where there is no “us” and “them” of divisiveness, no disinformation but a wealth of facts, no rampant lies fed to the masses that become their truth, no violence incited but differences met with peace? What would this take? An arsenal of love and peace, and a commitment to making right those rampant wrongs.

King did not accept what was wrong with society – and neither can we. The work of King as he battled the effects of racism was fed by his commitment to never accept and become accustomed to segregation and discrimination. He refused to live in a world where myriad people struggled to survive in poverty while a small few lavished in a sea of wealth. Those societal ills he could not accept. And while remaining grounded in faith he did all he could to create a world where these wrongs could be righted. He chiseled that stone of hope out of a mountain of despair. Can we each hope for that American Dream? Hope – that which keeps us going in the face of all odds. Hope – a cornerstone to any revolution. King saw past revolutions fought on the basis of hope of change partnered with hate – revolutionaries hating those they were in opposition to. King’s revolution, in contrast, would be won by the hope of change partnered with love.¹⁰

And yet this is not love as we typically understand it. King expressed that no oppressed people should ever be urged to love their violent oppressors with a sense of affection.¹¹ We are not called to hold affection towards those who harm us, those who feed lies, those who incite violence, those who seek to destroy. They do not need to be met with affection, but love.

The Greek language has three different ways of expressing love. There is *eros* which is described as romantic love and *philia* which embodies reciprocal affection. These are not the revolutionary ideas of love as espoused by King. King was led by *agape* – redemptive goodwill – saving another from error or evil. This was at the heart of his call to remain nonviolent.¹² King expressed his own understanding of *agape* – the love that created his response to the world.

¹⁰ 1966 Ware Lecture: *Don't Sleep Through the Revolution*, by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *Martin and Malcom and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* by James Cone pg. 130

He wrote of “understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all [people], an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.”¹³ Not to meet another with affection but with a desire to save another from that which is harmful – to wish goodwill on all of those in our midst. When one obtains the strength and faith to do this, one can learn to “love a person who does the evil deed while hating the deed.”¹⁴ We can hate the evils that are surrounding us; we can refuse to accept them and pledge to work against them. Yet, King believed that when we love, we are at our best. We cannot fight hate with hate. We cannot fight violence with violence. King sought to love everyone because his God loved everyone.

And in alignment with these ideas of redemptive love is King’s idea of non-violence, for “destructive means cannot bring about constructive ends.” If our goal is to work towards a just society, the methods used to get there must be just as well. King espoused that if what we are working for is a society without violence – a society without hate and bigotry and racism, a society without lies and deceit – the only way to achieve non-violence is to practice non-violence oneself.¹⁵

When we reflect on King, we must acknowledge that these ideas come from a black man working in the civil rights movement to create justice from those who used their power and privilege to keep the marginalized blacks at the bottom and who were continually threatening to kill him. When he calls for non-violence in the face of so much violence, he knows this may be a hard request to accept. And yet this intention for love and nonviolence and not accepting what is wrong – to him, this was a way of life. To all people of faith this need be a way of life. To all of those fighting against evil and oppression and bigotry and racism, this need be a way of life. King’s sentiments and actions are parallel to the values espoused in our Unitarian Universalist principles. Are his actions not the embodiment of seeing the inherent worth and dignity in every person? Does his work not serve to respect and defend that web of justice we spoke of last week – knowing that to show one person harm is to show all people harm, and

¹³ 1966 Ware Lecture: *Don't Sleep Through the Revolution*, by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid*

that to show one person love is to show all people love? He knew those in his midst were facing, at the very least, discontent and frustration, and yet he encouraged and promoted and created non-violent channels to funnel this energy through.¹⁶ King used his leadership to urge all of those in his midst to create this revolution with nonviolence. And this changes the oppressor in ways violence simply cannot, for, in the words of King, “[nonviolence] has power because it has a way of disarming the opponent. It exposes [their] moral defenses, it weakens [their] morale. And at the same time it works on [their] heart and on [their] conscience, and [they] just [don't] know what to do.”¹⁷ It is easy for our violent opponents to respond to more violence – it is difficult and transformational for them to respond to actions based on the idea of peace.

King knew what was wrong – discrimination and segregation – and countered those evils with a redemptive love and a commitment to nonviolence, building on the legacies of Jesus and Gandhi before him. We, as a people of faith, are likewise called to heed this message as we navigate the evils of this day and time. This is a commitment to a way of life – to chisel hope from despair and respond to hate with love – to be grounded in our morals and our faith, and to use our sacred for strength. We have a vision of the American Dream of equality and opportunity and people understanding one another as people – as individuals – not through judgements or stereotypes. We know our faith values and we know what is not in alignment with our values and we can use the wisdom of Dr. King’s legacy to guide us in the work ahead. We are called to continue his revolution for racial justice and to create a Beloved Community where all are welcome and cared for. Dr. King wrote, “I know that there are still difficult days ahead. And there are days of glorious opportunity. Our goal for America is freedom.”¹⁸ Today, we are still on that quest for freedom. Let us follow in the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s powerful footsteps.

May it be so, and Amen

¹⁶ *Martin and Malcom and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* by James Cone pg. 78

¹⁷ 1966 Ware Lecture: *Don't Sleep Through the Revolution*, by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

¹⁸ *ibid*

