

Justice, Freedom, and a Nonviolent Revolution

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU Ellicott City, MD January 17, 2021

On a sweltering August day in 1963, hundreds of thousands of eager, peaceful protestors gathered at the Lincoln memorial in Washington, DC, squished side by side around the long, rectangular reflecting pool. They were there peacefully, they were there to make a difference, and they did. For that day was the historic March on Washington – a pivotal day in the civil rights movement – a day to draw attention to the all too pervasive racial inequities in this country.

Standing on marble steps rising to the Lincoln Memorial, overlooking those hundreds of thousands of eager faces, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. told the world what he envisioned – a country of justice and freedom for all. And he professed how they would get there – through a nonviolent revolution. That day the world heard what this man imagined for the country that was his home. Filled with passion, King declared:

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”

And if you walk those same steps today, climbing towards the huge, white, seated statue of Abraham Lincoln, you will see a special plaque placed right where he stood, “I have a dream” etched into stone, to be forever memorialized. You can stand there today – facing that very same reflecting pool, words of this remarkable man ringing in your ears.

Rev. Jane Smith January 2021

His dream – what he imagined – of freedom and justice and peace stands in such stark contrast to our current reality. We still see on the news every day terrifying images of violence flickering across our TV screens, domestic terrorists raiding our nation’s Capital, an insurrection spurred into being by our very president. White supremacists proudly carrying confederate flags. Every day we hear reports warning of imminent violence as the inauguration draws ever nearer. We are seeing hatred. We are seeing the violence enacted by a group of people fed lies. When people are so very angry, I wonder what lies they have heard. I wonder what they need in order to think for themselves – what they need to find peace, love, and acceptance. When people are filled with lies their reasoning – there very being – this becomes distorted. What we need is collective action to help reverse these lies – to feed people truth. We need to join together to speak and act on truth and change – this takes a movement, and yet we begin one act at a time. What our country needs today is what King imagined all those years ago – racial equality, and a nonviolent revolution.

King often cited the words of Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. Parker spoke the words, “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one ... And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.” The arch of the universe is long, and I am sure it bends towards justice. It bends towards justice when we collectively act to make it so.

To Martin Luther King, this work for justice wasn’t political – it was moral. What can be seen as political – liberal or conservative – to King this didn’t matter. What mattered were morals. What mattered was his faith. He grounded his work in biblical narratives of salvation. Of justice and freedom. His work was based on values – not politics. He worked towards that unfulfilled promise made in our country’s Declaration of Independence – “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Morals of godness, of love, of human decency, of freedom. “I have a dream,” King professed. He was grounded in his faith and his

personal understanding of his God. His faith and his morals.¹ We are grounded in our faith. We are grounded in our Principles.

Scholar Albert Raboteau wrote extensively about King in his book *American Prophets*. Raboteau writes of how King's faith guided him. His faith told him, as our faith tells us, that all people are interrelated – are interconnected. And while for us this speaks to nature and that ripple effect of love, to King it meant that there was a presence of what he called “God” in each and every person. This presence of God – this was the “hidden wholeness that binds us all together” – all of us. Through this he asks that we understand and respect our call to social justice – for we are called to social justice. King asserted “all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”² This calls us to see the humanity in each person. People have done horrific things and need to be held accountable, and yet still within is inherent worth. Holding people accountable because they have worth and need to live to their fullest potential – that is doing justice work. For we are all bound together. In order to produce and maintain this nonviolent revolution – in order to create what Dr. King imagined – we need to try to find what Dr. King found within himself as he peacefully and successfully battled systemic racism. Let us do what we need to bend that arch towards justice.

That same year he told the world about his dream, King wrote, “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.” We are currently in a spiral of destruction and fighting fire with fire will only stoke the flames. How can we be the light that illuminates the dark? How can we be the love that drives out hate? For we find ourselves in a darkness

¹ *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice* Albert J. Raboteau
pg 150

² Ibid 157

devoid of stars. We can continue to do our Eighth Principle work. As Raboteau writes, we can hold our leaders accountable. We can treat opponents as allies. We can engage in civil discussion. We can listen to each other. We can “speak truth to power.” We can “keep faith that change is possible.”³

Raboteau explores deeply King’s call for nonviolence – a mighty beacon of light in the darkness. A call that drew heavily on the work of Mahatma Gandhi, who led a successful nonviolent movement to free India from British rule. Nonviolence – the way this was understood and prescribed by King – is remarkable, and so powerfully applicable to the terror we have been watching unfold every day – that imminent fear of what is on the horizon. How can we take all that he imagined and make it applicable today?

To King, nonviolent resistance is active – not passive. It requires work; it requires doing. It will not simply happen. To King, a nonviolent revolution does not seek to defeat an opponent but to convert an opponent. We are not meant to overpower or destroy or to conquer another – we are meant to convert. To bring that sacred light to the oppressive darkness. When someone is fed lies we are meant to feed truth. When someone is blanketed by hate we need to help them see the light – see what is. We need people to understand truth, to understand love, and to understand goodness. His revolution was not against people – his revolution was against evil. When people who inherently have worth and dignity are fed lies and fear, when their truth has been intentionally distorted by leaders to create an angry mob to do one’s bidding – that is bigger than those individual insurrectionists. Mobs storming the capital, enacting violence with American flags, this is evil. This is a direct result of racism – a systemic evil that has been plaguing our country since its founding – the same exact systemic evil Dr.

³ *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice* Albert J. Raboteau pg 159-160

King was fighting all those decades ago. This calls us not to be actively against these individual people, but actively against this force of evil that drove these individual actions. To be the light.⁴

The nonviolent work he did avoided internal violence as vehemently as it avoided external violence. Internal violence – like “hatred” or “bitterness” that we may feel within us. King believed that through hatred we dehumanized people – and King saw his God’s presence in all people. We must work to create in ourselves a sense of goodness if we are to spread it to others – we must not let our emotions dehumanize another. King encourages us to try to, instead, understand.

King again called upon values we hold dear to us as well – the inherent worth and dignity of every person, as well as respect for the interdependent web of all of life. Those sacred stands that I liken to a spiderweb that connect us all. He loved regardless of “worth or merit” – but based his love on his beliefs of the interrelatedness of all of us – that web that holds us together.⁵

“The arc of the universe bends slowly but it bends towards justice” There has been so much powerful, inspiring, and important work done towards civil rights in this country since King first uttered, “I have a dream.” And yet the arch of the universe is long – there is still work to be done. Ultimately, King worked to, as Raboteau wrote, “transform the oppressors heart.” Let us do this work; collectively. Let us join together to transform hearts.⁶

We speak often in this church about love. King had his own unique understanding of love and what that means in the work of justice. King believed that “human relationships ... should be ruled by love.” What

⁴ *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice* Albert J. Raboteau
pg 146

⁵ *Ibid* 146

⁶ *ibid* pg 146

does he mean? This is not love understood as affection, but a love that calls for “redeeming good will for all,” as Raboteau writes. It is an inherent concern for others, discovering a neighbor in everyone that one meets. Love as the unifying principle of life!⁷ Love working to unite us all as we are surrounded by hate stemming from lies and fear – hate stemming from lies and fear. This calls for active resistance. To convert, not to defeat. To act against evil, not people.⁸ Love as the key that leads to ultimate reality.⁹ Can we pause to consider ultimate reality? That dream that King confessed, all those decades ago? That society he imagined? And this calls for society to be rid of violence – but it also calls for a change within ourselves. To rid ourselves of “hate,” “bitterness,” and “resentment.”¹⁰ King told us, “Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him.”

How remarkably different is this from the actions we see by our leaders? By the actions of domestic terrorists and white supremacists? They scared us – they still scare us. And their brute strength overcame capital police and they made their way into our nation’s Capitol – something that had not happened for over 200 years. The lies they were fed and the hate that this created shook us as a country. And yet, “The arc of the universe bends slowly but it bends towards justice.” Nonviolent actions and ideologies as espoused by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. are stronger than this. They are stronger. If we act with these morals as our guiding compass, we can collectively overcome. This calls for us all to join together in justice – active, not passive. We need to be a force for justice. As we spoke last week, love and faith will always overcome hate and destruction. “I have a dream.” Let us work to create that world Dr. King imagined decades ago.

⁷ *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice* Albert J. Raboteau pg 156-157

⁸ Ibid pg 146

⁹ Ibid pg 157

¹⁰ Ibid 156-157

This is a moral issue. It must be understood as a moral issue. Values are in disarray as lies and fear create hate and stoke the deadly flames of violence and insurrection. Let us speak truth to lies. Let those words "I have a dream" resonate in our minds as we collectively find a way to move forward.

Not far from the Lincoln memorial where King's words are etched in stone stands a remarkable monument of the man. A giant statue of King stands as if broken away from a sculpture of a mountain behind him. Engraved in the statue of King are the words, "out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope." King spoke these words in the midst of the civil rights movement in a call for racial justice and equality. The mountain of despair we are chipping away at today is still held firm with racial inequality and injustice. And that stone of hope is that ever lingering wisdom of this man who imagined a nonviolent revolution. Let that stone of hope ripple throughout our interdependent web, spreading to the most remote corners shrouded in darkness. Let us take that hope and all that he imagined for this country and make it a reality. There is reason for hope. There is reason for resilience. "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that." Let us be the light, this day and every day.

May it be so, and Amen