

“Remaining True To Ourselves”

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, January 19, 2020

Washington D.C. is filled with monuments; monuments memorializing lives and legacies of foundational figures in our history; giant statues, intricate artwork, metaphorical craftsmanship, honoring the likes of Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. King’s monument is fantastic, his enormous image carved out of startling, white stone. And on the walls behind him engraved with quotes, made famous by this man who led the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. One quote reads:

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” These words; etched in stone.

Darkness, in the sense that King meant it, can be all encompassing, can feel eternal, can feel oppressive. And it requires light, pure, holy light, to draw it out

Hate. The easiest response to hate is to hate in return, yet hate breeds more hate. We need love, pure, holy love, to draw it out.

Today we honor the life, work, and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Today we honor this crucial work of social justice, of racial equality, of the power of love and nonviolence, the necessity of honoring everyone’s inherent worth, of the need for integrity within all of this.

During a time of much racial strife, amongst segregation and racism rampant in the system, a time of deep prejudice and deep pain, Rev. King spoke of light. Spoke of love. Spoke of loving thy neighbor as thyself.

How can we enact this profound wisdom? How can we be the light in the darkness? That powerful, holy light. How can we drive out hate with nothing but sincere, all encompassing, radical love; love that leads to social responsibility and racial justice?

King's work was grounded in his faith. King served as a Christian minister. As such, a primary source of strength and inspiration for King was the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the Christian gospels.

Let the sources of King's faith reverberate in these walls this morning. As Unitarian Universalists we have 6 Sources of our faith from where we draw wisdom. Our 4th Source is Jewish and Christian teachings; teachings that King drew heavily from. Both Unitarian Universalists and Christians, including King, drew from Jesus's teaching of responding to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. Responding to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. Be the light. Be the love. Love thy neighbor as thyself. The downtrodden, the ill, the poor, the racially marginalized.

In King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" he called for a nonviolent resistance to racism. Locked behind bars he penned his famous quote, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" He writes, "Was not Martin Luther an extremist: 'Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God.' And John Bunyan: 'I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.'" And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love?"

King asks, “Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?” Throughout history and in all the days to come we have this option: hate or love. Each day as the light of the sun peaks over the horizon, we are presented with the option of hate or love. King answered with love. His work in racial justice reverberates throughout history, as does his call for love; extreme love.

King preaches and practices a radical love, a love transcending violence, a love extending to everyone, including those who may be seen as enemies.

We read earlier from Matthew chapter 5 “love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you...” this is how King prefaced his sermon “Loving Your Enemies” in his book Strength to Love. He penned this sermon while sitting in a Georgia jail. Loving your enemies is such a simple yet radical idea, an idea that takes great integrity to put into practice; to actually use as a source for living life. And how can we live this life of love? King answers this fundamental question in his sermon. “First,” he writes, “we must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive... second, we must recognize that the evil deed of the enemy-neighbor, the thing that hurts, never quite expresses all that he is. An element of goodness maybe be found in even our worst enemy... third, we must not seek to defeat or humiliate the enemy but to win his friendship and understanding” We need forgiveness, we need to see the entirety of every individual, we need a common understanding. Are these not tenets we could live by?

“Will we be extremists for hate or for love?”

And while King drew his strength from Christianity, another source of strength and wisdom to this revolutionary figure came from the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was a

foundational figure in nonviolent activism. Gandhi practiced nonviolent resistance, and this practice of nonviolent resistance and the work he modeled ultimately led to India's independence from British rule. This served as critical inspiration to King.

Nonviolence means reacting to hate with love

Nonviolence means having that integrity to be true to one's self instead of giving into the easy response or the gut response to answer hate with hate, violence with violence.

Nonviolence is that holy light, sneaking in through a crevice, overcoming darkness.

Are these teachings not intimately tied to our own Unitarian Universalist principles? Our first principle: The respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. To have the integrity to not harm someone who may be inflicting harm on you; who may be threatening to inflict harm on you, or a loved one, or an entire race! To have this integrity to, in the face of violence, hold true to one's own teachings, and to respond to violence with calm, to respond to violence with peace; to have this internal power to see inherent worth in each person and not react to any form of hatred or violence with the return of violence.

Faith, Jesus, Gandhi, King. This brings us closer to our holy; inspires integrity and extreme love. How can we live our best lives as our best selves? How can we live a life based on our Principles? This calls on us not just for a radical understanding of our first principle, "respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person," but also our second, "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations."

What is a life of love? A life of love is tied to a life of justice, compassion. And how profound is this; how foundational to progress, to justice, to equality; when love inspires action. When love calls us to go out into the world, driving out hate with compassion; reacting to violence with peace. Loving thy neighbor as thyself.

Faith serves to bring us closer to our holy. And the holy means different things to each and every one of us. This is Trinity to Christians, or knowledge and science to humanists, Spirit of Love and Life; Goddess, Allah to Muslims. These entities; these tenets of faith serve to bring us closer to that which sustains our spirits; that which sustains our souls. Growing closer to our individual holy sustains us and calls us to love, and to live a life of integrity. To fall back on the tenets of any of these faiths to which we covenant to live; remaining true to ourselves; reminding us of our own integrity.

Faith is a call to social action. Faith is a catalyst to making this world better. Faith calls for us to work for the least of these. Faith calls us to extreme love.

The covenantal elements of Unitarian Universalism call us to worship together under common understandings – common values, not common beliefs – and these values and these principles call us to be regularly reminded of our true selves; who our faith calls us to be. King lived the life he felt Jesus called him to live; to live the work of Gandhi. Christianity is one of our sources, “peace, liberty and justice” is one of our Principles. Our Sources and our Principles serve a reminder of who we are as a faith; who we covenant to be. These Sources, these Principles; they call us to live a life of integrity, just as King’s Christian roots called him to do. Our faith

brings us closer to our holy, it connects us to one another, it calls us to live our best lives as our best selves. It calls us to love, to live our Principles.

To Martin Luther King, integrity, being called into action by faith, radical love and light, this demanded of him a life dedicated to racial equality.

Cornell West, philosopher and activist, gave a speech at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. Standing behind a podium in a room that I would imagine would be filled with anticipatory UUs he proclaimed, "How shall integrity face oppression? That is one of the most fundamental challenges of today because we live in an age of mendacity. It's an age in which lies are ubiquitous. [And so] integrity has to do with what is the quality of your courage and your willingness to bear witness radically against the grain even if you have to sacrifice something."

We live in an age where lies are rampant; where we navigate truth and fiction on a daily basis, stories flickering across our tv screen. How can we respond to these lies with integrity? We can educate ourselves. We can research the truth and live by this truth, and live by our principles to spread this truth. Integrity as courage and integrity as a willingness to bear witness.

All radical action requires sacrifice. Sacrifice looks different dependent on one's level of privilege. For the privileged, sacrifice means giving up indifference, the ability to remain unaffected; perhaps safety to a degree. The marginalized sacrifice personal safety every time they do this work. Take the assassination of Martin Luther King as an example.

This why the privileged must use their privilege, and follow in the footsteps of the marginalized leading the way. Action requires sacrifice. And through this sacrifice, society gains so much.

This is how we face oppression with integrity.

What are we willing to sacrifice in order to live a life of love and action?

In 1966 Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the Ware Lecture at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. He spoke to his audience, hundreds of Unitarian Universalists, both faith leaders and congregants, and professed, “It has always been the role of the church to broaden horizons, to challenge the status quo, and to question and break mores if necessary. I'm sure that we all agree that the church has a major role to play in this period of social change.”

1966, in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, in the midst of his call to love and nonviolence; King acknowledging the church's role. King elaborates “First, we are challenged to instill within the people of our congregations a world perspective... Secondly it is necessary for the church to reaffirm over and over again the essential immorality of racial segregation” King later states, “There is another thing that the church must do to remain awake. I think it is necessary to refute the idea that there are superior and inferior races,” and finally, “The next thing that the church must do to remain awake through this revolution is to move out into the arena of social action.”

King is directly calling to us as a church – as Unitarian Universalists – to do the work of racial justice. To uphold the immorality of racial segregation; to refute the idea of superior and inferior races; and calls on us to do this necessary and important work of social action. To this revolutionary, to this minister, these are the roles of the church. To this revolutionary leader, we, as Unitarian Universalists, are called to social action, social justice, and to the work of race in this country. What must we sacrifice? What must we give up in order to do the work that

King called on us to do? “It has always been the work of the church to broaden horizons, challenge the status quo, and question and break mores if necessary.”

These teachings of King, of Jesus, of Gandhi, of Cornell West, of our very Principles and Sources, what does this demand of us? It demands that we love radically. It means we respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It means we live a life of nonviolence, responding to hate and violence with love and compassion. It means living a life of integrity, which our faith calls us to do. It means remaining true to ourselves and our Principles. It means doing the racial justice work that King specifically called upon us to do. “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” These words, etched in stone. Let us be the light. Let us be the love.

May it be so, and Amen.