

“Leadership in a Time of Fear”

Sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel at
The North Parish of North Andover Unitarian Universalist Church
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Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday

It was in April of 1968 that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached his last sermon in Memphis, Tennessee. He made the trip there to support those whom Jesus might have called “the least of these,” 1,300 striking sanitation workers. From the words of his speech, we can gather that King clearly knew of multiple threats against his life, not to mention risks to any who dared to march. So he began his remarks with those words we already heard this morning: “I’m delighted to see each of you here tonight, in spite of a storm warning.”

His words caused me to reflect that there are storm warnings in our own day and age, just as there were back then, 41 years ago. This week, of course, our minds and hearts are set on the tiny country of Haiti, on the hard-to-comprehend devastation, the deaths of 50,000 people and more, approximately the same number of Americans who died in Vietnam. If only Haiti had received a storm warning, an earthquake warning! If only there was a way to alleviate such human suffering.

As for us, for our nation, perhaps *our* storm warning should have been the fact that 80 percent of the population of Haiti lives under the poverty line, 250,000 of its children have been sold into slavery, its healthcare and infrastructure were inadequate-- never mind unable to cope with massive disaster. The words I shared as we opened our service echo down the decades: “[W]e are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act... A true revolution in values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.”

As it was 41 years ago, there are storm warnings in our day. The glaring contrast of poverty and wealth that King spoke about is still with us, and getting larger. We see in our world economic instability, hunger, the cultivation of terrorists and religious violence. We see the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Again, King’s words resonate: “*If something isn’t done, and in a hurry, to bring peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed.*”

Closer to home, we see the lines at our own People’s Pantry and people losing their homes while bankers receive huge bonuses. And just this week, I’ve heard two stories of your grown children who became gravely, dangerously, even life-threateningly ill, having postponed treatment due to the lack of health insurance.

Like me, a few of you might feel from time to time like King did, 41 years ago, that “*the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around.*”

If so, it may help to also remember what he said next: “*I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the 20th Century in a way that (people) are responding.*”

What did *he* mean by that? What might *we* mean by that? How might we see God, or the spirit of love within us, responding today? Thankfully, we see it responding to the immediate human need in Haiti, including the \$200,000 donated by Unitarian Universalists in the last few days via the UUA/UUSC relief fund alone.

But perhaps this is not all that the Spirit of Love or God requires of us today. Perhaps the outpouring of generosity and support is only sufficient as an initial act. Perhaps what we need, in this nation of ours, is a true revolution in values — one that will have us all look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth, one that will have us declare that such a world is in need of restructuring.

Consider, for a moment, Haiti's international debt. It is at \$890 million. There is a petition circulating to convince global creditors to cancel that debt. Now that might be a start.

Clearly, like King, we have our work cut out for us. After all, who else is better positioned, better equipped to take this on? Who better than the church to face the problems people have been trying to grapple with through history, who better than congregations to ask hard questions about war and peace, who better than people of faith to rise in support of the human rights revolutions of our time? Who better than the church to lift up the ongoing realities of poverty and all of poverty's unfortunate offspring? Who better than we, to share with our neighbors and world the good Universalist news that *all* are God's children, with a right to be here, a right to freedom, a right to experience life, wonder and love?

It's such a big project, no individual could do it alone... so who better than the church to take the lead?

And so, *I* am delighted to see you here today in spite of these storm warnings. I am delighted to see you here, because you reveal that we are determined to go on anyhow... just like the frightened and uncertain people who gathered in that hall in Memphis 41 years ago.

Now fear has a contagious quality. It often prevents us from thinking clearly, from raising voices of protest, from standing up for what is right. Fear makes us retreat. It makes us suspect those who are somehow different from us. Even decent people- when afraid- seem to lose their common sense.

Think of a time, perhaps, when you have felt fearful... a time in your own family, or workplace, or simply as an American. Think, perhaps, of how you felt in the days following September 11, 2001. How did the people around you function? Was the fear, indeed, contagious?

Some of you may not agree with me, but I often feel as if we live in a culture of fear-mongering, a culture that gained great momentum and converts in the years immediately following September 11. I just saw a cartoon in the newspaper that shows three people standing in line at airport security. In front of them, there are three plastic bins on the conveyor belt, and in each of those plastic bins there is a single piece of underwear. I know, this is an odd joke to tell in church! But one of the people says out loud, "How I long for the days when we just had to remove our shoes!" Thank goodness for the comics who reveal the funny side of all this, who remind us to laugh.

Usually, the media takes present day concerns and, instead of simply reminding us what needs to be done and how many willing hands there are to do the work, it acts like a hall of mirrors, constantly reflecting anxiety back to us. The media is not our friend. So what are people of faith to do?

Well, we are fortunate because it turns out that Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was not only a beautiful speaker, he was also a pragmatist. It is ironic that the beauty of his rhetoric means that so often, we focus only on the poetry and sound bites of his speeches — like the words "I have a dream." But Rev. King was quite focused not only on civil rights, not only on war, but on poverty and the need for an economic re-structuring.

As just one example of this pragmatism, in his Memphis sermon he offered five suggestions of what the people there might do in their time of fear.

First, he said, "We've got to stay together and maintain unity." If one reads between the lines, there must have been some dissension in the movement, some disagreements, some infighting, some power struggles going on, because King felt the need to tell a story, to point out that whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong slavery in Egypt, his favorite formula for doing so was to keep the slaves fighting amongst themselves. King said, "When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity."

The same could be said for congregations and the entire UU movement; we are stronger when we are part of a larger, unified body.

Second, King said, "Let us keep the issues where they are. The issue is injustice."

Apparently, the Memphis newspapers had been reporting that a few protestors had been breaking windows. King said, "That's always the problem with a little violence...we've got to

march again in order to put the issue where it is supposed to be, and force everybody to see that there are thirteen hundred of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry... That's the issue... The issue is injustice."

The same could be said for people of faith who can get bogged down in lesser matters of congregational life, and can wonder where their outreach efforts should focus. The issue is injustice.

The next two steps of his plan were economic ones. The third step was "Always anchor our external direct action with the power of economic withdrawal." Did you know that King was an advocate of boycotting more than just buses? Did you know that boycotts were a critical part of King's non-violent strategy? He pointed out to his audience that even though they were poor individually, the combined income of the U.S. black population at the time was more than \$30 billion dollars a year. "Never stop and forget that collectively... we are richer than all the nations in the world with the exception of nine," he said. "That's power right there, if we know how to pool it."

The boycott was a key feature of King's non-violent plan to "re-distribute the pain" that the garbage handlers had been feeling. We, too, might do well to remember that collectively, even people of small means can help re-distribute the pain of a broken economic system.

Fourth, King said, "We've got to strengthen black institutions." This is why some of us join organizations like the NAACP or UU congregations. Institutions can carry positive power.

King told his audience to pay attention to where they banked and bought insurance. He told them to start a 'bank-in' movement in Memphis, an 'insurance-in' movement in Memphis.

This reminds me of the online "move your bank" to a local bank movement that some of us are looking into, as part of our book group on building a new economy. It's interesting how these old ideas come back around.

And fifth, he said, "Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness." Then he told a story, a story about that strangely "good" Samaritan on the Jericho Road.

It seems to have been a favorite story of King's. In another speech where he mentioned this same story, he once said, "[W]e are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside,

But that will be only an initial act... One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar.

It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

So how might we begin?

Jericho Road Lawrence, which we lift up today, is one effort. In addition to that, we might remember King's last advice:

Maintain unity.

Keep the focus on Injustice.

Use the power of economic withdrawal.

Strengthen justice-seeking institutions.

And develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.

Armed with this simple plan of action, I suspect the people in Memphis, Tennessee, didn't feel *quite* so helpless or scared after listening to Dr. King. I also suspect they were encouraged by King's very being.

There's a book out called "The Anxious Organization: Why Smart Companies Do Dumb Things." Have any of you ever worked for a company like that? It's written by Jeffrey Miller, who offers this simple observation: "If fear is contagious, then so is courage. In an anxious organization, a single individual can have a powerful and wide-ranging effect just by mastering his or her own anxiety."

It seems that Martin Luther King Jr. had somehow mastered his own anxiety, even though he lived in a fearful time, even though he could read the storm warnings, even though he was himself a target for those whom he called "my sick white brothers."

As if to announce this to the world, in his last public words, King echoed the story of Moses in the Hebrew Bible. Moses, having led his people out of Egypt, went to the mountain top to see the Promised Land, even though he would not get there himself before he died. And on that night in 1968 King said:

“We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land.

I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

May we strive to have such courage.

May we harness such power of the spirit, and the power of community.

And may we ease our nation on down that road to the Promised Land.

Amen.

Readings

I. Opening words: by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., from a speech he gave at the Riverside Church:

“A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say “This is not just....”

II. Reading: an excerpt from “I See the Promised Land,” a sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on behalf of 1,300 sanitation workers who had gone on strike in Memphis, Tennessee. This sermon, or speech, was given on April 3, 1968, the night before he was murdered.

“I’m delighted to see each of you here tonight in spite of a storm warning. You reveal that you are determined to go on anyhow. Something is happening in Memphis, something is happening in our world.

“...[I]f I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of a general and panoramic view of the whole human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, “Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?”

... “Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, ‘If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy.’

“Now that’s a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around. That’s a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars.

“And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that (people), in some strange way, are responding—something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South

Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee—the cry is always the same—‘We want to be free.’

“And another reason that I’m happy to live in this period is that we have been forced to a point where we’re going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn’t force them to do it. Survival demands that we grapple with them. (People), for years now, have been talking about war and peace.

But now, no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it’s nonviolence or nonexistence.

“That is where we are today. And also in the human rights revolution, if something isn’t done, and in a hurry, to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed.

“Now, I’m just happy that God has allowed me to live in this period, to see what is unfolding. And I’m happy that he’s allowed me to be in Memphis.”

III. Benediction: from the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Let us rise up (today) with a greater readiness.

Let us stand with a greater determination.

And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge
to make America what it ought to be.

We have an opportunity to make America a better nation.”