

Prophetic Zeal

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee A. Bluemel
At the North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist
January 15, 2017 The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday

*“There is always the danger that religion and the Bible not properly interpreted
can be used as forces to crystalize the status quo.”*

*“If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal,
it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.”
– The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

In 1966, a Gallup poll found that **63%** of US citizens
had an **un**favorable opinion of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Two years before that opinion poll, in 1964,
King had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
He was known and recognized internationally for his leadership and character.
The Civil Rights movement he helped to lead had managed to force passage
of the Civil Rights and the Voting Rights Acts in 1964 and 1965 respectively.
But still, in 1966, 2/3's of his fellow citizens did not approve of him. *Why?*

As Peter Dreier, professor of politics at Occidental College points out
in an excellent 2015 article, Martin Luther King was a radical, not a saint.

In other words, he was a prophet.

King challenged the nation's class system and its racial caste system.

He called for a “radical redistribution of economic and political power.”

No wonder King was branded as a dangerous troublemaker by the powers that be!
He was harassed by the FBI and vilified by the media.

There was a concerted campaign to denigrate him, and it worked very well.

If he had run for political office, he would *never* have made it in.

By August 1966, two thirds of the citizenry agreed that King was problematic.
Just over a year and a half later, he was dead-- assassinated, at 39 years of age.

Can we imagine for a moment, if he was alive today,
what he would be preaching at age 88?
Perhaps of the need for “a radical redistribution of economic and political power”?
And when it comes to the particular question of racial justice for black Americans,
who he would be standing with?
People like Michelle Alexander who wrote *The New Jim Crow*,
or Opal Tometi, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza- founders of BlackLivesMatter?
Would he be standing with Ta-nehisi Coates, the Rev. William Barber
or his old friend John Lewis?

Were he alive, 2/3's of his fellow citizens might *still* not give him approval...
and he might make many of us here today feel more than just a bit uncomfortable!

But he's not alive. Indeed, he's been dead almost 50 years;
next year will mark the 50th anniversary of King's death.
A recent Gallup Poll found that **94%** of US citizens view him in a positive light.
This weekend we celebrate a national holiday in his honor.
As our first reading noted, “*Grandchildren of those who stoned the prophet
sometimes father up the stones to build the prophet's monument.*”
King is tremendously more popular dead than alive. *Why?*

Well, for one thing, it is easier to domesticate someone when they're dead,
when they're not here in flesh and blood, with all their prophetic zeal,
challenging us with their presence, their words, their actions—
their sit-ins, their testimony, their refusals to participate.

Dead prophets are so much easier to handle! Adulation is easy.
It doesn't require all that much of us other than applause.
It gets us off the hook,
and suggests that all that needs to be said and done
has already been said and done.

This is the danger of being a prophet--

one of those people who peel back the layers of denial and obfuscation in society,
one who sees what's really going on, one who tells it like it is,
one who invites us to confront hard truths.

Often, the lot of a prophet is being denigrated, rejected, despised in life,
and romanticized, neutralized and domesticated in death.

It happened to King-- and to Jesus, too.

Think about it: Jesus was an original anti-bias trainer
who expressed a radical welcome for all people and resisted the Roman Empire.
For that he was denigrated and abused in life by the Empire,
only to be co-opted 300 years later by a *new* Empire
that made Christianity the state religion and used it for its own ends.
We can still see the echoes of that today.

This is what can happen to prophets, through no fault of their own.

The irony is this: *despising* a prophet and *romanticizing* a prophet
seem to be opposite reactions, but they serve the same purpose.
Both responses mute the power of the prophet's message
and help us avoid what the prophet has to say.

We humans are good at avoidance when it comes
to hard truths we just don't want to face- at least I am. Is it just me?
We don't like hearing things that shake up our sense of identity or self-perception.
We don't like things that challenge our assumptions or the status quo of our lives,
things that point out our blind spots or our privilege,
things that make us feel confused, or trigger a sense of shame.

So we get pretty good at the art of avoidance-
whether that means rejecting a truth or sugarcoating it over.
Anyone here ever avoided a hard truth about yourself or a relationship?
Anyone ever denied or sugarcoated something about the health or functioning
of a family member or a friend?

Anyone here ever noticed that our society has a tendency to avoid, deny or sugarcoat hard truths?

Denial can be a survival strategy, but sometimes it's just denial. Just ask those who've been through any civil rights struggle—people with disabilities, with physical or mental health challenges, people of color, women, GLBTQ people.

Even people in religious community can become quite good at denial and avoiding hard truths. We might even get *especially* good at it, because we have theology to back us up, and we don't want to rock the boat, or want to preserve a sense of safety or relationship among our congregations. And yet... *we are called to follow the prophets—* those who were truth seekers and truth sayers.

Our second source says that we Unitarian Universalists draw wisdom and strength from *“the words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”* It's a tall order.

As an American Baptist clergyman, King himself was grounded in the words of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures. He was a follower of Jesus, who once said, *“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”* He was a follower of Amos, who said *“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”* He was a follower of Micah- who said *“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*

There are still other prophets in those scriptures—
Elijah, Elisha, Ezekiel, Hosea, Huldah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Miriam and Moses.
These are the people whose stories were preserved.
These men and women in the Hebrew Bible came from *every* part of society:
some from the royal court, some from the temple, some from rural villages,
capital cities or small towns.
Some held royal or privileged positions and some were among the marginalized.
Some performed miracles on behalf of widows, poor people, the sick or the hurt—
always the widows and orphans concerned them.

In the Bible, it is understood that *all* of them were called by God
to speak God's truth to power and to the people.
Many were reluctant at first, but found they *could not refuse* that call.

It is interesting to note, as Peter Dreier writes,
that when King entered his first pulpit—
Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama—
he had no practical experience in politics or activism.

When some of the older, seasoned activists and clergy
saw a window of opportunity open up for the bus boycott,
King was urged to become president of the newly formed
Montgomery Improvement Association in part *because he was new to town*.
Yes, it helped that he was well educated and a brilliant orator,
but it also helped that he wasn't yet embroiled in local clergy politics—
vying for parishioners or visibility.

After stepping into the public eye, King faced a steep learning curve.
A one day boycott turned into 381 days and ended with
the desegregation of the city's buses.
King was arrested, his home bombed and he was subjected to personal abuse.
Dreier points out, he also became a national figure, thanks in part to television.

As a national figure and preacher of non-violence,
over the 11 year period of 1957 to 1968
King would travel over 6 million miles, speak more than 2,500 times,
get arrested at least 20 times.
His call for this work came not only from God, but from fellow clergymen and activists,
from his congregation, from all the people who lifted him up
and longed to hear his voice— even demanded to hear it-
but also gave his voice its power.

Here's a story- one that King told in a sermon called "Antidotes to Fear".
The text for this sermon was from I John 4:18:

"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear..." King said this:

"One of the most dedicated participants in the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama,
was an elderly Negro whom we affectionately called Mother Pollard.

Although poverty-stricken and uneducated,
she was amazingly intelligent and possessed a deep understanding
of the meaning of the movement.

After having walked for several weeks, she was asked if she were tired.

With ungrammatical profundity, she answered,

'My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.'"

He continued, "On a particular Monday evening,
following a tension-packed week which included being arrested
and receiving numerous threatening telephone calls, I spoke at a mass meeting.
I attempted to convey an overt impression of strength and courage,
although I was inwardly depressed and fear-stricken.

At the end of the meeting, Mother Pollard came to the front of the church
and said, "Come here, son."

I immediately went to her and hugged her affectionately.

"Something is wrong with you," she said. "You didn't talk strong tonight."

Seeking further to disguise my fears, I retorted,
“Oh no, Mother Pollard, nothing is wrong. I am feeling as fine as ever.”
But her insight was discerning.

“Now you can’t fool me,” she said. “I knows something is wrong.
Is it that we ain’t doing things to please you?
Or is it that the white folks is bothering you?”

Before I could respond, she looked directly into my eyes and said,
“I don told you we is with you all the way.”
Then her face became radiant and she said in words of quiet certainty,
“But even if we ain’t with you, *God’s gonna take care of you.*”

As she spoke those consoling words,
everything in me quivered and quickened
with a pulsing tremor of raw energy.”

One of the ways to weaken a prophet
is to give the impression she or he is a lone voice crying out in the wilderness.
But perhaps we’ve been thinking about prophets all wrong.
Perhaps we really *are* our brother’s and sister’s keepers,
even when they are prophets.

One of our own, the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker writes:
*“Behind the lone prophet who speaks up, there is a group...
it is always a mistake to imagine that lone prophets are really alone...
We should think of Jesus this way as well.
It is a mistake to see him as an isolated, heroic individual.
It is better to see him as the crest of a wave,
the sparkling foam breaking brightly
from the force of a whole ocean
moving and swelling up from underneath.”*

Our prophets are like the crest of a wave,

lifted up- *from what?*- from the force of a *whole ocean* swelling up from underneath.

That ocean is made of ordinary people;

it builds force, height and gathering speed *from the energy of the people*.

This was true for Martin Luther King Jr., and it can be true again, today.

In his sermon, King continued:

“Since that dreary night in 1956, Mother Pollard has passed on to glory and I have known very few quiet days.

I have been tortured without and tormented within by the raging fires of tribulation.

I have been forced to muster what strength and courage I have

to withstand howling winds of pain and jostling storms of adversity.

But as the years unfolded the eloquently simple words of Mother Pollard have come back again and again

to give light and peace and guidance to my troubled soul.

‘God’s gonna take care of you.’”

Maybe we’re not meant to resist or romanticize our prophets but to work- with God, with the spirit of Love- to take care of them.

Maybe we’re not called to *follow* the prophets but to *call the prophets forth*.

Maybe we’re not supposed to just praise and applaud our prophets

but generate the wave of energy that brings them to the surface-

to let them feel *our* prophetic zeal,

and remind them that the spirit of God, of love, of truth is with them.

The beloved UU theologian, ethicist, thinker and activist James Luther Adams once wrote,

“The prophetic liberal church is the church

in which all members share the common responsibility

to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior

(both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history

in place of merely being pushed around by it.

*Only through the prophethood of all believers
can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways.”*

So I ask, this morning,
are you ready to believe in the prophethood of all believers?
Are you willing to be your brother’s and sister’s keeper?
Do you want to make history?

I ask- and this time I want an answer—
do you want to build Beloved Community?
Do you want to help bring about the Kingdom of God on earth
and save the kingdom of life that is already here but dying today?
Do you feel a bit of that prophetic zeal, this morning?

I hope so, because our communities and our country need us.

Last year, at General Assembly, I had the chance to see Rev. King’s son,
Martin Luther King III, receive the Eleanor Roosevelt Award
for Human Rights Leadership from the UU Service Committee.

This Martin was only 10 when his father, the Reverend,
was gunned down by a white man.
What I did not know is that six years later, when he was 16,
this same child witnessed the killing of his paternal grandmother, Rev. King’s mother.
She was gunned down while playing the Lord’s Prayer in Ebenezer Church.
She was playing the organ, and everyone was listening with their eyes closed,
and she was shot dead... by a black man.

Martin Luther King III had this to say about all that-- he said,
“I could hate black folk AND white folk— I could hate *all* y’all.
But I had a mother and a grandfather who taught me the power of forgiveness.”
He said his mother and his grandfather taught him about moving beyond
a certain set of circumstances.
He said that the death penalty won’t bring back your loved ones.

He said “No one can get *me* to hate.”

And then he said, “Sometimes we go looking for justice...
and then we find out, it’s “Just us.”

It’s Just Us.

We are the ones called to make history.
We are the ones to peel back layers of denial and obfuscation in society,
the ones to see what’s really going on,
the ones to tell it like it is,
the ones who invite others to confront hard truths.
We are the energy within the wave that lifts the prophets up.

May the spirit of God, of love, of truth be with them,
and may it be with each one of us, and with this congregation.

Amen.

First reading: #565 in Singing the Living Tradition, “Prophets” by Clinton Lee Scott

Second reading: A collection of words from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr:

“Millions of people do feel that the church provides an answer
to the deep confusion that encompasses their lives....
It is the one house which stands where it has always stood,
the house to which the man traveling at midnight either comes or refuses to come.
Some decide not to come.
But many who come and knock are desperately seeking a little bread to tide them over.”

“...if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its
great historic mission,
will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace,
it will enkindle the imagination of humankind and fire the souls of women and men,
imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice and peace.”

“We... have a mandate to be nonconformists...
we are called to be people of conviction, not conformity;
of moral nobility, not social respectability.
We are commanded to live differently and according to a higher loyalty.”

“The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state,
but rather the conscience of the state.
It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool.
If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal,
it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.”

“The church must become increasingly active in social action outside its doors...
It must take an active stand against the injustice that Negroes confront
in housing, education, police protection, and in city and state courts.
It must exert its influence in the area of economic justice.
As guardian of the moral and spiritual life of the community
the church cannot look with indifference upon these glaring evils.”

“It will be one of the tragedies of Christian history
if future historians record that at the height of the twentieth century
the church was one of the greatest bulwarks of white supremacy.”

“The broad universalism standing at the center of the gospel
makes both the theory and practice of racial injustice morally unjustifiable. “

“In the final analysis, all (people) are interdependent
and are thereby involved in a single process.
We are inevitably our brother’s keeper
because of the interrelated structure of reality.”