

1/17/10 Sermon

"Martin Luther King Jr. – A Voice for the Ages"
Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

***"And if he should die,
Take his body and cut it into little stars.
He will make the face of heaven so fine
That the entire world will be in love with night."***

If Shakespeare had written these poignant words today, he surely would have had Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in mind.

Such eloquence is befitting this genuine American hero who became a beacon of hope ... the conscience of the nation ... the voice of the oppressed ... a pathfinder for justice, freedom and peace.

He spoke truth to power and changed the political and racial landscape of America.

As I wrote this sermon, I was mindful that President Obama just ordered a surge in American forces in Afghanistan. I couldn't help but wonder what Dr. King would have thought about this escalation.

Dr. King said, **"Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding 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."**

Even as I think this war is more justified than Iraq, I believe Dr. King, a pacifist, would have spoken out in opposition to the loss of so many brave young men and women.

He abhorred war as a means to settle disputes, as do many of us. Throughout our long and distinguished history, Unitarian Universalists have stood witness, if not always with a united voice, against war and violence. While we are not a peace church in the same way our Quaker brethren are, we do have a strong tradition against violence and war dating back to Adin Ballou, a 19th Century Universalist pacifist. He wrote a treatise on passive resistance that influenced Tolstoy, Gandhi and Martin Luther King himself.

Throughout our history, UU voices have spoken out against war. Julia Ward Howe, a stalwart Unitarian, wrote "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in support of the Civil War, but also founded Mother's Peace Day, which is now

Mothers Day. It is not uncommon for us as a denomination to disagree on political issues, and we have followed the pendulum from supporting pragmatism to pacifism, peace to war, slavery to freedom.

During the Vietnam War, our strong resistance to that war caused fractures in our denomination, and even now – since 9/11 – we differ on the use of war to settle disputes.

During the Civil Rights movement, we joined hands with Dr. King. The cause of universal justice and peace remains central to our faith, a foundational value that defines our very soul. So we marched with him and some of us sadly died for that noble cause. Our conscience demanded that we not watch this struggle from the sidelines of history. And because UUs and others marched in solidarity, we helped rout Jim Crow and still today serve peace and justice non-violently. I invite you to join the march tomorrow in Atlanta to honor Dr. King's memory and work.

Perhaps Martin had more faith in non-violence than most of us. He said, **"The non-violent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to non-violence. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they possessed.**

"And finally it reaches the opponent and so stirs his conscience that reconciliation becomes a reality."

Dr. King's genius is that he understood the human heart and soul, and was thus able to achieve breakthroughs with non-violent means in the face of determined opposition. He learned the power of non-violence from Gandhi, Ballou and others, and became skilled at its tactics.

He also understood that, **"the principle of non-violent resistance seeks to reconcile the truth of two opposites – acquiescence [to violence] and violence, while avoiding the extremes and immoralities of both."**

A kind of equilibrium develops with those who resist with non-violence and those who have acquiesced (to violence) that one should not be physically aggressive toward an opponent, but balanced through a tacit understanding with the forces of violence that evil must and will be resisted.

The hope is to steer a course between non-resistance of the former and violence of the latter. Nonviolent resistance means that no individual or

group needed to submit to any wrong, nor need anyone resort to violence in order to right a wrong.

Martin Luther King's strategy recognized that ultimately, **"no one could stand against an idea whose time has come."**

Dr. King understood the currents of history were with him and he could do no other. He had to speak his truth into coming heartbreak.

He understood that people did not change easily; nor readily move beyond their cultural norms. Nor, as he said, "does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom, and in the surrounding world."

No matter how uncertain or gripped with fear we are, we must go on, we must speak against that which oppresses.

To use violence against violence is a betrayal of our integrity, our UU values and our hearts. Emerson put it this way: "Nothing is at last sacred as the integrity of your own mind."

I believe that we find the holy when we reach out to others and find a community of commitment.

The poet Audre Lorde said it powerfully, "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised and misunderstood. We can sit in our corner mute forever, we can sit in our corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid. My silence will not protect me. Your silence will not protect you."

Martin had a dream that overcame that silence. He marched on the highways and byways of this land and he died for it, as he dreamed he would. But his vision never wavered. His courage saw him through the struggle.

He saw the Promised Land where the bells of freedom would ring across this country, to toll a new way, a new day of freedom and justice.

"This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

My country,

'Tis of thee,

Sweet land of liberty,

***Of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died,
land of the pilgrim's pride;
from every mountain side,
let freedom ring.***

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true."

So let freedom ring. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia, just miles from here, the birth place of the KKK.

Let freedom ring everywhere, from sea to shining sea.

And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children – black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants, gay and straight – will be able to join hands and say the words of the old Negro spiritual:

***Free at last,
Free at last,
Thank God almighty,
We are free at last.***

Let it be so for all the people the world over.

Let freedom ring.

Blessed be!