

Just Because You Can, Doesn't Mean You Should

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

January 12, 2014

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“Every colleague in the UUA should be preaching on this this Sunday!” That was the email that flashed across my inbox this past Summer. At the time I was in Michigan in the middle of my vacation; so I was far away from this pulpit. I wouldn't be preaching on anything that Sunday or any Sunday for weeks to come. So there was no way I was going to be able to comply with this supposed injunction. But they had made a good point. The George Zimmerman verdict warranted comment; although perhaps not that Sunday in particular.

This morning I want to go back to that moment six months ago when we first learned of George Zimmerman's legal fate after killing Trayvon Martin in Orlando Florida. I am nothing if not timely in my sermon topics – only half a year behind the event itself! But you know, I think in this case I would have to respectfully disagree with my colleague who urged us all to preach on this topic that Sunday. I think

the Zimmerman case is more complex than it appears, and taking our time to reflect on it is worth the wait.

Of course you all know the details of what happened. Trayvon Martin was a young African American man wandering through a neighborhood in Orlando, on his way to visit a friend we would later learn. Zimmerman saw him, thought he looked suspicious by his dress and mannerism, and confronted Martin. Obviously what we know about what happened next is one-sided since Trayvon Martin did not live to tell his side of things. A fight broke out between them, and Zimmerman claims that he shot Trayvon Martin out of self-defense. Trayvon Martin died as a result of a combination of racial prejudice, an itchy trigger finger, and perhaps just being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Now all of this is further complicated by the laws of the state of Florida. Most states have a “stand your ground” law in some form or another. Basically a stand your ground law is a form of self-defense law that says you do not have to retreat or flee from an area where you are legally permitted to be. Your home would be the most obvious example of this. However Florida’s variation of this law was so lenient that even the state’s Attorney General bemoaned its application. Essentially the Florida law could be used to justify killing just about

anyone with a claim that your life was threatened and the only witness to the contrary would be the person who was dead. Tragically this seems to have been the case with Trayvon Martin.

If you watch Court TV, as often as my wife does, you learned about the wide latitude this particular stand your ground law has in Florida. Court TV is not known for being generous with the accused. In fact most of the people I have heard on that channel are frequently advocating for the prosecution. But this case even they acknowledged that Zimmerman's actions fell within the broad expanse of Florida's stand your ground law. His acquittal sounded fait accompli from what I could tell from the coverage the night before. So I was a bit surprised at the surprise some people had.

My colleague, and minister of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, Rev. Meg Ryan wrote this poem following Zimmerman's acquittal:

Spirit of love and justice,
Tonight I am angry.
May my anger burn cleanly,
Joining the light of so many hearts on fire.
May we know anger as a source of strength,
Anger that seeks to purify,
Anger that has as its fuel the power of truth,
Anger grounded in love,

May I live my life so that Trayvon Martin did not die in vain.

May my anger give me strength to take action,
To stand my own ground, the ground of compassion,
The ground of justice which dwells beyond courts of law and its
technicalities,
The ground of worth and dignity of every human being.

May we live our lives so that Trayvon Martin did not die in vain,
So that African American youth are not seen as threatening merely
because they exist.

May we take steps to bring such a world into vision.
Concrete steps, particular steps, in our own communities.

Anger used well is energy for life.
Anger turned inward saps the strength,
Anger turned to rage severs real connection.
May I use this holy anger well,
Use my privilege well, use my voice and my strength and my power.

May we draw on the strength of those who have turned anger to love
through the generations,
those who have made a way out of no way,

those who have burned but not been consumed by this holy fire.

May we remember the strength of our connections to the generations,
The ancestors and those yet to be born,
The strength of our connection to the fighters and the lovers,

May I live my life so that Trayvon Martin did not die in vain.

May we live our lives so that Trayvon Martin did not die in vain.

May he live forever in our deeds, in our commitment to a justice
Which can never be found in any court of law.

I think Meg touches upon something very important: just because a court rules that an action was legal, it doesn't mean that justice was done. Legal and moral are not the same thing. If I can jump the gun one week by mentioning Martin Luther King, he makes this very point in his Letter from Birmingham Jail. He notes that his actions in the South breaking laws around racial discrimination known as "Jim Crow" was not legal but morally correct. He reminds us that everything Hitler did was legal, but certainly not moral by any stretch of the imagination. In other words, just because you can do something doesn't mean you should do something.

As I said before, time has given us some perspective on this case. We have learned that Trayvon Martin was no saint; he had been arrested a number of times on drug related crimes. Similarly George Zimmerman's run ins with the law have not been limited to his killing Trayvon Martin. Life is always more complicated than the stories we want to tell ourselves. There are no clear cut heroes or villains in this one. But what strikes me about the whole situation is that sense of despair that moved Rev. Meg Riley to write that poem. I think she makes some excellent points about anger and how some forms of anger can move us to do good things as opposed to simply eat us up inside.

Rev. Riley is writing out of a feeling of disempowerment. I would say that disempowerment would have been understating things back in July. We were mad at this injustice, and confused about the legal mess that had resulted. Disempowered; yeah that about sums it up. It felt like we couldn't do anything and it wasn't clear what we would do to make this right. At the end of the day, as is true with all murder cases, no true justice can ever really be served because the dead cannot be brought back to life. You can't trade one life for another no matter how much one may want to. That ever elusive sense of justice seemed once again beyond our grasp. That is a very disempowering feeling.

Well the theme for the month of January is not disempowerment! In fact our theme is empowerment. Empowerment is the opposite of how one might have felt after hearing that George Zimmerman would walk after killing Trayvon Martin. Empowerment has two aspects to it. It is either acquiring power over yourself and your destiny that you didn't have before or realizing that you have power over yourself and your destiny that you had not been aware you had. That is empowerment. It bolsters our self-esteem by granting us freedom in ways we may not have known we had or didn't actually have before. Either way it is an energizing feeling that gives hope to the previously hopeless.

Next week, and really all month, we will be celebrating Martin Luther King who gave people of all colors a sense of empowerment. To African Americans he gave them a sense of self and purpose that was not defined by white people no matter how many unjust laws were passed. And for white folks he gave them a sense that racism and white privilege is not a permanent condition. He pointed to a new way. But it was not an easy way.

Andrea Miller, in her article about Thich Nhat Hanh, mentions how closely Thich Nhat Hanh identified with Martin Luther King. The two had met on a few occasions, and King attributed Thich Nhat Hanh

as being among the more influential people on him as King came to speak out against the war in Vietnam. King even went so far as to nominate Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize. So it was no surprise that when the fiftieth anniversary of the “I Have a Dream” speech came around, it was a big deal at Thich Nhat Hanh’s home monastery of Plum Village in France.

Miller’s interview with Thich Nhat Hanh’s follower Peggy Smith reveals something important things about social justice, activism, and empowerment. Empowerment starts with a foundation of values. We have to know what is important to us, and what is not important to us. Peggy recounts her understanding of Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings about the rain. The cloud that floats above our head becomes water in the form of rain. Somehow or another that water comes out of our facet and is boiled into tea. The tea then feeds and fuels our minds and bodies to practice. Everything we do, and say, and feel comes about as a result of that tea along with many, many other factors and conditions. But the tea is one of those conditions. This teaching on interconnectedness and interdependence is Thich Nhat Hanh’s foundation for empowerment.

I will read once again his poem “The Tears I Shed Yesterday Have Become Rain”

“I walk on thorns, but firmly as among flowers.

I keep my head high.

Rhymes bloom among the sounds of bombs and mortars.

The tears I shed yesterday have become rain.

I feel calm hearing its sound on the thatched roof.

Childhood, my birthland, is calling me, and the rains melt my despair.”

Tears and rain intermingle just as clouds and tea intermingle. But what is particularly important as we consider empowerment is the story Peggy Smith shares is her experience at the rally in which she laid down at the intersection. While there she remembers and reflects on teachings she has heard and it sustains her in the work she is doing. Be it a poem, a sermon, a small yet powerful interaction with her teacher, all of these spiritual moments in her journey help to sustain her in the face of arrest. Granted, from an outside observers point of view the person getting arrested who didn't meditate is just as arrested as the one who does. However from the perspective of the activist, this distinction is night and day.

I think Peggy Smith and Thich Nhat Hanh have an important lesson for us when we are faced with suffering and injustice such as the

kind that Meg Riley expresses in her poem about Trayvon Martin. That lesson is this: social action is a spiritual practice. I know that sounds glib; perhaps even flippant, so let me unpack that sentence a bit. Social action is a spiritual practice. Meaning we should approach social action work in much the same way we would approach sitting in meditation or kneeling in prayer. It is an act of intention that reminds us of our values, what we hold to be of ultimate concern. It is an act we do without expectation of results. I think that is the sticking point for many of us; it is for me I know. I admit that I have hesitated to do some social justice work if it looked like it was going to be utterly futile. Why join a losing cause? Why jump into some work that may at the end of the day have little to no effect. Our desired outcome may be all but guaranteed to fail. It is hard to get excited about that work.

Who knows how effective Peggy Smith's demonstration was. She actually doesn't say. That isn't the point of her story. The point of her story isn't that she changed some politician's mind and made the world a better place. Maybe it did, maybe it didn't. But what it sure did do was transform her, it changed her outlook on the world, it made a difference from her point of view and reaffirmed her values and beliefs in interdependence. It sustain her and kept her going, so that even if that demonstration does have the intended effect, she still has the energy and desire for the next one. That my friends is empowerment.

Social action becomes a spiritual practice when it is done in the context of a religious community that teaches us our values and points us to how to live them out. Empowerment comes when we do not let one law, or one legal decision plunge us into despair. For despair is a pit, a quagmire of inaction that stymies our work when there is so much work to do. Empowerment gives us hope by reminding us that just because one social action project or event didn't pan out the way we like, that doesn't mean there is another one tomorrow that won't. For you see we don't do social action as part of some game or sport where you score points and wins. If it truly is a spiritual practice, then we do social action for its own sake regardless of success or failure.

If we want to use Trayvon Martin as a symbol for the victims of injustice, then yes he would not have died in vain if we do not let injustice discourage us. May we always stand with the oppressed and downtrodden so that, in the words of our Unison Affirmation, we challenge injustice with courage and find hope in times of fear. May it be so. Amen Blessed be.