

What Love Looks Like in Public

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Martin Luther King Jr. decided not to be a Unitarian Universalist. Believe it or not, he actually considered leaving his native Baptist faith to join Unitarian Universalism, but decided he could not do so. Perhaps it was living in Boston for so long finishing his Ph.D. that made him consider the possibility. Boston is the historic center for both the Unitarians and the Universalists, and while in graduate school at Boston University he had plenty of opportunity to meet and get to know Unitarians. Indeed, part of the Ph.D. thesis he was writing was a theological critique of various theologians include the Unitarian Henry Nelson Wieman. So Martin Luther King's refusal to join the Unitarians was not for lack of knowing who we are.

Indeed, he may have known us all too well. Although he didn't lay out a detailed theological critique of Unitarianism in the late 1950s, one can infer I think some of King's issues. Unitarianism, in generally and particularly then, did not place the Christian idea of sin in a prominent place. We can perhaps debate whether or not sin should be something

we make a big deal of or not, but to King it was probably a feature of our religion that he could not accept. How else could one explain the decades and centuries of African American oppression and racist degradation at the hand of his fellow Americans without calling it “sin?” Somehow Emersonian optimism just doesn’t quite cut it in those circumstances.

What we do know, what Martin Luther King privately told friends of his who were Unitarian ministers, was that the reason he didn’t join us was that he felt such a move would undermine his credibility in the African American community. Unitarianism, and subsequently Unitarian Universalism, was a predominantly white religion. Today, while we are somewhat more diverse, this has not changed very much. This year marks my twentieth as a Unitarian Universalist, and in most of that time I have borne witness to our desire, empathy, hard work, and ultimately frustration around connecting with the African American community in a significant way. I don’t mean to paint an overly gloomy picture – there have been successes along the way and yes progress. But for the most part it is unlikely that Martin Luther King Jr. would have felt much better joining the Unitarian Universalist denomination in 2013 any more than he did in 1961.

As you can probably guess I share in this frustration of our faith to be relevant to the African American community. I believe that Unitarian Universalism has the potential to speak to everyone. Of course whether

it does so in actuality is another matter. But potentially it is possible. After all we lay claim to one of the biggest words in the English language, “Universalism.” Surely there is room for everyone somewhere in our expansive gospel of love and hospitality for all.

Obviously not everyone sees it that way. Mistrust between blacks and whites in our country has roots that are both deep and wide, and that mistrust is not easily or naively overcome. A few years back an African American church in our community expressed an interest in partnering with our congregation in the hopes that we might be in conversation around issues of race. We would develop relationships across lines of color and theology and begin the slow but important work of eradicating racism from our city. Meetings were held, worship services were attended, both here and there. I met privately with the pastor who was a likable fellow and seemed sincere in his desire to form this partnership. For the first few months, things hummed along pretty well. We had some joint projects together, such as Loving Day. However after a little while things dried up. While we were all fired up and ready to go, the other congregation was unresponsive. They had lost interest somewhere along the way and had moved on to other things. One of them was the political career of their pastor.

This was a disappointment to many of us who had such high hopes and expectations for our partnership together. Distrust between races has deep and broad roots, as I said. The inability to effectively form a

partnership with an African American church had as much to do with our theological differences too. We are a free church that does not require a test of belief in order to join, and we are a welcoming congregation for our gay, lesbian, and transgendered brothers and sisters. That is probably not news to most of you, but what is everyday and mundane for us, can be a radical pill to swallow for others.

As Martin Luther King preached in our story this morning, forgiveness is needed in order to reconcile relationships. I don't mean that my colleague should seek my forgiveness. Things don't work out as we planned sometimes. It happens. Nor, conversely that I should seek his. As a single individual I can hardly be held responsible for the breakdown of trust between races and religions. And yet at some point, somewhere by someone, reconciliation needs to happen. Forgiveness needs to occur, but how and where? What are we to do? The philosopher Cornel West wrote that "Justice is what love looks like in public."

Hope for restorative justice comes to us in the form of Desmond Tutu. Tutu is an Anglican archbishop, now retired, and was the head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that reviewed human rights atrocities following apartheid in South Africa. The basic premise of the Commission was simple: individual could apply for amnesty on the condition that they tell all of the details of the crimes they committed. Truth and reconciliation were more important to Tutu and the rest of the

Commission than punishment and recrimination. The result was a spectacular display of what love looks like in public. It looked an awful lot like forgiveness, and it was only possible by risking some vulnerability and telling the truth. Desmond Tutu writes:

“There is another kind of justice: restorative justice, whose chief purpose is not punitive but restorative, healing. It holds as central the essential humanity of the perpetrator of even the most gruesome atrocity, never giving up on anyone, believing in the essential goodness of all as created in the image of God, and believing that even the worst of us still remains a child of God with the potential to become better, someone to be salvaged, to be rehabilitated, not to be ostracized but ultimately to be reintegrated in the community. Restorative justice believes that an offense has caused a breach, has disturbed the social equilibrium, which must be restored, and the breach healed, in a process through which the offender and the victim can be reconciled and peace restored.”

Our ultimate spiritual goal should be wholeness not perfection. The Unitarians in the 19th century were particularly keen on perfection and whether or not human nature could evolve its way to perfection. Quite a bit of ink was spilled in speculating our perfectibility. I think that is the wrong question. Perfection is unattainable, and perhaps even meaningless when applied to human beings. We are not purely good or purely evil as Martin Luther King pointed out in his sermon earlier this morning. That isn't the point. Desmond Tutu's Truth and

Reconciliation Commission sets before us a different goal: wholeness, forgiveness, healing, and as a result trust, reconciliation, and restoration. Interestingly, his turn away from punishment and instead seeking to heal relationships comes not just from his Christian beliefs. Tutu acknowledges that this is how African tribes would traditionally work together when there was a conflict among them.

Wholeness not perfection. Forgiveness moves us closer to wholeness not perfection. Forgiveness reconciles relationships and that is how we achieve wholeness. Fortunately, this past fall the First Unitarian Church story of interracial partnerships with African American churches took a positive turn.

It all started with a sermon last February. Actually it wasn't a sermon I gave, it was a sermon given by my colleague Paula Mariano. It was about a book called "The New Jim Crow" on the penal system in America and how it discriminates against African Americans. I wish I had heard it—I was away interviewing potential Assistant Ministers at the time. However when I returned, I heard one person after another witness to the power of Paula's words and the passion of her appeal. That very day she signed up over twenty people at coffee hour to participate in a book discussion group to delve deeper into the issues presented in "The New Jim Crow."

At the same time, one of Paula's friends and colleagues at Mother Africa Church downtown started a similar discussion group in that congregation. Both groups began with the understanding that they would meet both separately and together. So while everyone was reading this book about how racist the American justice system is, they would discuss it among themselves. Then the two churches, which were mostly one race or the other, would come together to compare notes. These were powerful conversations that lead to real relationships developing.

It was not all roses and sunshine however. There have been differences, arguments, tension, and perhaps even moments of distrust. But the groups' commitment to each other have been able to overcome these flare ups. Forgiveness has happened in those moments, relationships have been restored, and the beloved community has been brought about. It was Martin Luther King, after all, who developed the idea of the beloved community as a model for racial harmony and connection.

This was the story as it was told to me last fall by Paula and Joan Priest. The group had been operating informally for over a year by that point, and wanted some sort of official connection to the church. Fortunately our social justice program, called the Ministry for Compassionate Action, has an application process. A quick plug for them, by the way, if you have some cause you deeply care about and

think it should be something First Unitarian Church should be doing as a church and not simply as a collection of individuals, all you have to do is get four friends together who are members, fill out the application online, and send it to the Executive Team. If they approve it, then you have yourself an official social justice group that is part of the Ministry of Compassionate Action. Joan and Paula followed this process, and the Executive Team enthusiastically approved their work.

I love this story. What starts off as a book discussion group becomes the beloved community. It spans two churches, two denominations, and two races. Yet we know there is no such thing as “two” there is only one. One humanity, one forgiveness, one relationship, one love, one heart. The new group, called “Dismantling the New Jim Crow,” doesn’t have the catchiest name in the world, but it is embodying the truth that Dr. King and Archbishop Tutu are preaching to us this morning. We are so blessed to have this program as part of the work and ministry of our church.

But that is as it should be, is it not? Yes we have a long way to go before we are there, but we have started down the path of reconciliation and trust. Relationships can only be healed when they are made, and forming this new partnership with Mother Africa Church is an important way that we accomplish our mission. That is what love looks like in public. Because it is about wholeness not perfection. I don’t know about you but I am very glad that perfection is not on the table. If we all

had to be perfect in order to be here I am sure there would be very few of us left on Sunday morning. But if our church and our faith are called to help move people toward wholeness, well then I think the line of people looking to be made whole would be very long. For you see wholeness is linguistically related to “holiness.” When you move toward one you are moving toward the other; both wholeness and holiness.

So let us not fear the judgment of others. Let us not be timid with the light we hold. Don't go looking for the nearest bushel to hide it under. We don't need to knock on our neighbors' doors to spread the good news. But we certainly should not feel like we need to apologize to anyone because we love our gay brothers and sisters and we don't force people to confess their lord and savior when they join. We are who we are and that is something to be proud of. And at the same time, while we are not called to proselytize our faith it does call us to listen. Listen to those who think differently because of their life experience and their theological difference. These differences can be strengths and need not be divisive.

In the future, let us be bold as a faith community as we seek to be relevant to the needs of our wider community. What are we here to do if not to serve others? Our spiritual journey, which we come to church to explore, is not for our own sake alone. We can and should be in service to others. We can and should strive to develop an external focus as a

congregation that seeks to learn the hurts and hopes of the people who are out there, and not just those of us who are in here. Because if we are able to do that then there will be more in here than ever before. That is my hope and prayer for First Unitarian Church this Martin Luther King Day. May it be so for us and for all our fellow Unitarian Universalists as we strive to better serve our faith, our tradition, and our society.

Amen Blessed Be.