



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Birth of a King

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“Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

“Those who are not looking for happiness are the most likely to find it, because those who are searching forget that the surest way to be happy is to seek happiness for others.”

— [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

I know a lot of you want to come to church Sunday morning to take a break from the disturbing news of the week. For many of us, Sunday morning is the chance we get to shut the world out – we need this time to replenish ourselves, to reconnect with people who share our sacred values. In fact, back in the 1970's, that's why this sanctuary was constructed the way it was – there were no windows built on purpose, so the outside world could not impede on our reflection during worship. It was meant to feel like a cave of comfort, a haven where we can focus inward.

On the one hand, that still seems like a great idea. Surely we deserve this time to ourselves. I know that I get so few opportunities to worship that when I do, I almost always shed tears, in the space where I can get in touch with my soul. We all deserve this time to check in with our souls – this time should feel like your safe space to be who you are and feel what you need to feel.

On the other hand, the powerful spiritual lessons we glean from such figures as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Jesus of Nazareth show us that our moments of personal reflection and quietude, while vital, are only one piece of a fully realized spirituality. The other pieces have to do with how we conduct ourselves in our closest relationships, in our community, with our neighbors, and even with strangers. Our lives aren't possible without everyone else playing a part. If we're all in this together, then it matters how we act in the world, and so we must ask the difficult questions. Such as, how do I strike the balance between doing what's best for me and mine and at the same time not ignore the reality of injustice and suffering that I'm somehow a part of?

Far as we know, Jesus didn't have a family in the way we know Dr. King did, and his family paid dearly for his unyielding dedication to his civil rights work. He was hardly ever home. The film *Selma* doesn't shy away from that truth and neither does Tavis Smiley's book, *Death of a King*. It's important to not sanitize the truth of Martin Luther King's complexity as a human being. Because it tells us that you don't have to be a saint to engage the world and affect change. Any one of us can plant seeds of justice if we feel moved to do so – even if we stray from our moral values.

Today I ask, how can we sustainably engage the world's struggles for justice without it breaking us? Dr. King was murdered, but based on what I read about the last year of his life,

he was headed for premature death by natural causes - a heart attack perhaps, because he overworked himself to exhaustion, month after month. His allies turning against him broke his heart but remarkably it didn't break his spirit, because he never stopped trying. Such was the relationship he had with his god, a spiritual foundation of support I both envy and don't fully understand. There's no question it sustained him in the face of opposition closing in on him from all sides.

It's hard to say if he had lived whether or not he would have given up at some point. Most of his closest allies were literally working against him. There were young African American leaders who wanted to replace him and his old-school preacherly ways, who wanted to do away with non-violence and resort to the militant approach. At some point the media may have stopped lavishing attention on him and his agenda after too many failures. We'll never know what his leadership may have accomplished had he been given the chance, because like so many black lives continue to be today, his was snuffed out as another black life that didn't matter. Or in Dr. King's case, it was a life that someone thought mattered too much.

One thing's for certain. The very issues he championed before he was killed are the top matters of injustice we face today, the three-legged monster: racism, poverty, and militarism. It can't be overstated how much support Dr. King lost when he took a big stand against the Vietnam War. But he refused to not make the connections between these three evils, and nor should we.

In the film *Selma*, we see how blatantly the racism played out in the Deep South – the verbal discrimination and the clubbing and murdering are visceral and shocking. Because it was captured on film and the world saw it, things changed relatively quickly. But we've come to live in a world in which the three-legged monster has sneakily gone about its business undercover, worlds away from the public eye. The experiences and suffering of the military class is removed from civilian awareness – they are apart. The experiences and suffering of those in the school to prison pipeline is removed from public awareness – they are apart. The experiences and suffering of immigrants who live in constant fear or languish alone in immigrant detention is removed from the citizens' awareness – they are apart. And they are apart, and on and on and on.

It's overwhelming, but here is a way of thinking about this that can provide a bite-sized piece we can swallow, and in fact want to swallow, for I guarantee it provides spiritual sustenance to our lives. It's to have faith and firmly believe that each one of us has a role to play. It can be any sized role, but each role is important, and that role is based on whatever talents we were blessed to be born with, or resources we are blessed to possess.

The resource of time supports a role – often a role can be as simple as showing up. Showing up to a public forum so we can learn the facts about an issue and share that with our community – that's an information-sharing role. Or showing up to any number of grass-roots organizing

efforts, marches, or vigils. You may not think those events make much of a difference but they most certainly do.

Here's a fancy explanation. This is from an article Jim pointed me in the direction of, with New York Times' George Yancy interviewing Judith Butler of UC Berkeley.

Butler says, "What we are seeing in the recent and continuing assemblies, rallies and vigils is an open mourning for those whose lives were cut short and without cause, brutally extinguished. The practices of public mourning and political demonstration converge: when lives are considered ungrievable, to grieve them openly is protest. So when people assemble in the street, arrive at rallies or vigils, demonstrate with the aim of opposing this form of racist violence, they are 'speaking back' . . . insisting on what should be obvious but is not, namely, that these lost lives are unacceptable losses.

"On the one hand," Butler goes on, "there is a message, 'Black Lives Matter,' . . . On the other hand, the assembly, even without words, enacts the message in its own way. For it is often in public spaces where such violence takes place, so reclaiming public space to oppose both racism and violence is an act that reverberates throughout the public sphere."

So it really mattered when, a month ago, nearly 50 of you represented Neighborhood UU Church with your time and presence at the Black Lives Matter march, organized by First AME of Pasadena. One of their associates called me on Wednesday to ask us if we'd be a community partner in getting the word out about their Mayoral Candidates Community Debate coming up in a few weeks. I said we'd be happy to, and his response was very positive saying that really mattered because Neighborhood Church is so highly respected in the community. It's just one little comment, but it touched me. It's because we've worked hard to show up in our community, that we received that comment. It's because on a plethora of issues, we've worked hard to play the role of providing educational opportunities on tough issues.

I could tell Pasadena Police Chief Sanchez was impressed with the numbers that day at the march, even if I called him Sheriff by accident. Woops! That day we reclaimed the public space, and it will make a difference as we move forward with our efforts to form a civilian oversight body of the Pasadena Police Department. According to experts, that's one of the most effective systemic changes that communities can make to curb the incidence of police brutality and killing.

Tomorrow there is a similar march happening in Los Angeles, in honor of Dr. King's birthday – we have information about that at the Social Justice Table. And, there is a local event I would especially like to invite you to. This Saturday, January 24, from 10 – 11:30 a.m. at Madison Elementary School, there will be a forum on a Pasadena Livable Wage. We'll hear from workers and city council members and candidates about where they stand on the issue. I see this is as a real opportunity for our church – many of us do enjoy a living wage, though certainly not all of us. Here is the chance to show our support of workers. And it is a

particularly appropriate way to honor the legacy of Dr. King – by addressing poverty, which studies show is no longer contained in rural areas or inner cities today. We've just learned that over half of all the kids in public schools qualify for free school lunches, nationwide.

It was his primary focus when Dr. King died, and he was losing the battle to gain support of his grand idea, what he called the Poor People's Campaign. His idea was to bring thousands of people to Washington, to negotiate, demonstrate, and resist until congress passed legislation to help the impoverished.

You know, alongside saying "Black Lives Matter," we should also say "Poor Lives Matter." We can say that by showing up to this forum. Please let me know if you plan to attend –because I promised the coalition that Neighborhood Church would bring 20 people! I want to make good on our promise. We have plenty of flyers at the Social Justice table that have the details.

Make no mistake that I understand this is a complex issue – how would it affect small business? For example. The role one can play here is that through showing up, we demonstrate there is support for wading through that complexity until it gets resolved. If cities like Seattle, San Francisco, and San Jose waded through that complexity, so can the fine city of Pasadena.

The issues we face in today's world are increasingly complex and sometimes the best role we can play is to commit ourselves to understanding one or two of them better. One of the things that struck me as I watched the film Selma is how ignorant I was about the intimidation African Americans received when they tried to register to vote. That ignorance coupled with the story my father shared with me recently, that my great grandparents lived in Selma when the marches were taking place, and were among those telling the marchers to "go home," leaves me feeling ashamed. Sometimes, it's not facts we need to learn, but emotions, and perspectives, and experiences.

That's how the Beloved Conversations program is framed – a safe space where people can deeply share and listen. To participate in this program is playing the role of connection – to be a vessel of openness, that new understanding may emerge.

I see one of Neighborhood Church's roles as providing a menu of options – a menu of different roles each of us can play, based on our talents, temperaments, and time available. We have one on our web site already, but I want to make one that's specialized for the continuing civil rights struggles of our day.

So even as we enjoy this sanctuary for how it was originally built, windowless to the world, a haven from secular distraction, let us also build windows for our souls to see out, to engage the world with roles that befit us. Roles we are excited to play, that uplift our spirits and sense of volition over our lives. I love what Common says in his memory of the Million Man March.

That being there in solidarity with so many black men made him “recognize the importance of making conscious choices in all aspects of my life.”

I can testify to that feeling, since I do a lot of showing up to be in solidarity with a variety of people and issues. It’s like waking up to go to church in the morning and you don’t always feel like going, but more often than not, by the time you’re headed home, you’re glad you went. I don’t always want to go to these meetings. But more often than not, I feel good afterwards, for being a part of something, for working with other people who manage to show up. It’s a role that makes me feel good about myself, and it makes me want to be a better person in all kinds of ways.

Here Common talks about a moment of self-discovery in his life: “I was now understanding that with my role as a rapper came a serious responsibility. Rap is my gift, but it is also my calling. This didn’t mean that I had to be perfect or that I had to have it all figured out. Far from it. I only had to be open and determined.”

That’s a great message. Like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., like Common, we don’t have to have it all figured out to play an important role. We can simply be open and determined. Sometimes it doesn’t even feel like work then – it feels like a life well lived. It feels like honoring who we are by doing the right things.

“Tell them not to talk too long,” Dr. King said, so shortly before he died. What was he really saying there? He’s saying that his salvation lied in the simple fact that he tried. He tried to love somebody – imperfectly, he tried to be of service. He played a role, and that’s all that mattered to him.

On MLK’s birthday, how do we let some of King’s spirit be born in us? What role can we play that helps save us, connects us to something greater than ourselves? Make a little window in your soul and find out.