



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

A Legacy of Nonviolence:

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

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Pilgrimage to Nonviolence

Rev. Lissa Gundlach's homily

As we approach our national observance of the life and ministry of one of our nation's greatest social change makers, we take this opportunity to remember King's impact on our liberal theological tradition. Many of us are familiar with King's legacy of racial justice, but we know less about King's theological evolution.

Raised a Baptist in a middle class black family in Atlanta, King's initial views on human nature were shaped by both religious and social forces: the "love your neighbor as yourself" ethic of Jesus proclaimed by his faith, and his direct experience witnessing the "inseparable twins" of systemic economic inequality and the blatant violence of racism of the American south. How could white Christians treat black Christians so cruelly and both be Christians? He began a keen interest in the concept of evil as it manifested in human nature through individual acts of violence and in social structures which dehumanized and disenfranchised African Americans. He became curious about a Christian theology and practice that would address both individual and systemic evil.

King began his education at Morehouse College in 1944, pursued a theological education at Crozer Seminary beginning in 1948, and completed a PhD in systematic theology at Boston University.

Early on at Morehouse, he quickly began to explore methods to address the social evil of inequality and had an early introduction to nonviolence through the writings of none other than Henry David Thoreau, known and treasured in his connection to our Unitarian history. In an essay called *My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence*, which would become a chapter of *Stride Toward Freedom*, his memoir of the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, he writes, "During my student days at Morehouse, I read Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience* for the first time. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was so deeply moved that I reread the work several times. This was my first intellectual contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance."

At Crozer Theological Seminary, he held his interest in the methods of social change while embracing and falling in love with Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel movement of the early 20th century. Rauschenbusch was a buoyant, idealistic disciple of the liberal theological tradition: pacifist, democratic, nationalistic and fundamentally optimistic about human progress. Rauschenbusch believed in the power of faith to overcome the evil of selfishness and individualism through collective social responsibility. Among the most important tenants of liberal theology which we Unitarian Universalists share is an optimistic view of human nature and an unwavering view of history's turn towards progress. King embraced this liberal view of human nature wholeheartedly in his early academic career, but

found it to be the most difficult theological principle to reconcile with his personal experience of social injustice.

In *Pilgrimage to Nonviolence*, King describes his wrestling with his liberal affinities and his search for a key to understanding a religious response to social evil.

There is one phase of liberalism that I hope to cherish always: its devotion to the search for truth, its insistence on an open and analytical mind, its refusal to abandon the best of reason . . . It was mainly the liberal doctrine of man that I began to question. The more I observed the tragedies of history and man's shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depth and strength of sin . . .

I came to recognize the complexity of man's social involvement and the glaring reality of collective evil. I came to feel that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism.

Reading Reinhold Niebuhr and other orthodox Christian theologians, King became concerned about the consequences of collective evil on human nature. Refusing to acquiesce to a theological cynicism, King's critique of liberal theology created in him a crisis of faith, driving him away from theology and into the theories of philosophers and social ethicists he perceived as more willing to consider the complexities of humankind's collective will to power. He writes:

"During this period I had almost despaired of the power of love in solving social problems. The 'turn the other cheek' philosophy and the 'love your enemies' philosophies are only valid, I felt, when individuals are in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations are in conflict a more realistic approach is necessary."

When King discovered the writings of Mohandas Gandhi, he found a kindred spirit, a social approach to countering violence and oppression fueled by the religious principle of love, with demonstrated strategies and methods that had actively countered racism and colonialism and by so doing changed the course of history. Listen to his words:

The whole Gandhian concept of *satyagraha* (*satya* is truth which equals love, and *graha* is force; *satya graha* means truth force or love-force) was profoundly significant to me. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom . . . Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method.

King's religious commitment to love led him to seek out the nature of the human heart and a systematic approach to confronting oppression and injustice which refused to forsake the oppressor. He would not let the love ethic of Jesus go, in spite of the evidence. King's journey took him into the depths of his own soul and thrust him into a public leadership for which we

remember him today. When he began as a pastor in Montgomery, Alabama in 1954, he had no concept of how his intellectual inquiry would fuel his ministry as he organized the now legendary Montgomery bus boycott campaign. Again, from *Pilgrimage to Nonviolence*, he writes, "Living through the actual experience of the protest, nonviolence became more than the method to which I gave intellectual assent; it became a commitment to a way of life."

This way of life drew him into a life of teaching Gandhian principles and direct action strategies. He traveled to India to immerse himself in Gandhi's legacy and to understand how the plight of African Americans to win freedom were linked to liberation struggles across the globe.

A pilgrimage is a spiritual journey to a sacred place as an act of religious commitment. King's pilgrimage to nonviolence reminds us that we are all on our own pilgrimages of faith. As Unitarian Universalists we are each called to rigorously investigate the life-giving seven principles of our faith, and through our commitments turn our principles into a way of life. So too are we on a pilgrimage as a congregation. Hannah will share more about our congregation's work in the community and how we can transform our theological commitment to nonviolence into collective action. We must be mindful of King's critique of our liberal optimism, which must be sobered by the reality of violence and supported by concrete strategies for both interrupting systems of social evil and working towards viable alternatives.

We come together in this church of neighbors and friends to be reminded that we are on this pilgrim journey together. We recall the words and deeds of those courageous pilgrims King and Gandhi who came before us, and allow their wisdom to chasten and embolden us for the tremendous opportunities for the liberation of all people that lie ahead of us. The work of personal and social transformation is never achieved alone. In the words of Rev. Mark Morrison Reed, racial justice pioneer within our own Unitarian Universalist movement, "The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen. Together, our vision widens and strength is renewed."

Like a beacon of light, beckoning us towards freedom, the vision of King's beloved community guides our feet: "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community. The aftermath of nonviolence is redemption. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation."

May it be so, and Amen.

Bending Toward Justice **Rev. Hannah Petrie's homily**

I was pleased when Rev. Lissa asked me to share in a homily today how my work in the Pasadena community serves the high cause of non-violent activism.

Along with the great figures of history that have embraced non-violence as a framework, such as Gandhi and Dr. King, feminism has also embraced it. Feminists work to dismantle the violent legacy of patriarchy with the goal of human rights for all, working to end unjust violence against people of any color, sex, or creed.

With that in mind, I want to highlight the words of three women in our Pasadena community that I've heard in just the past month.

The first occurred in mid-December, when I was honored to share the floor with some of my local religious leader heroes at the Gun Violence Prevention Vigil, on the anniversary of the Sandy Hook massacre, sponsored by All Saints Church. One of those heroes is Edina Lekovic, a prominent leader of the Muslim Public Affairs Council. Remember, this was only 10 days after the San Bernardino shooting, and we were each asked to answer the question, how does our faith work to address the tragedy of rampant gun violence?

The first words out of Edina's mouth were, "I hate guns. Guns make me sick." She repeated herself, then explained that in the Muslim tradition, adherents are taught not to hate. But if you must hate, then you must work to remove that hate with your hands. If you can't remove that hate with your hands, then you must work to remove it with your tongue, through your words, hence, "I hate guns. Guns make me sick." But if you cannot remove the hate with your tongue, then you must hold that hate in your heart. It's one of the best religious teachings for non-violence I've ever heard.

But we don't hear much about these sorts of tenets of Muslim faith in our media, do we? And so the work of non-violence must always take a look at the mode of communications that dominates our world. Not surprisingly, in our violent world, the mainstream media favors violence, and that narrative is so pervasive that people absorb what they hear and see. Which is why when I was also asked to speak at a local mosque in San Gabriel last month, in honor of the victims of the San Bernardino shooting, I said, I promise to spread the good news of this event – that this house of worship was doing more to acknowledge the tragedy of San Bernardino than any I knew of in America. And I urged everyone present to spread the news, too.

The work of non-violence involves proliferating a more positive narrative - using both our tongues to speak with family and friends and our hands to type on social media - a narrative that honors the truth and speaks to the good will among humanity that outshines the hatred, fear, and violence. Unfortunately, Edina's good words were not captured and covered by the media, though had they been, many more people would have received a message of hope, and acquired an alternative perspective of the Muslim faith.

We can also spread the good news of our plan to participate in helping to welcome a Syrian or Iraqi refugee family, likely to be Muslim, to the LA area. Please see the announcement in the green sheet - if you'd like to be involved, the short training is next Saturday.

The second woman I'd like to highlight is Ursula Walker, whom you may remember is the mother of Christopher Walker, who was killed in a drive-by shooting in Altadena a little over a year ago. Christopher was recruited to be a Crip when he was just 6 years old, via Little League baseball. His family had no ties to gangs; he was recruited simply because he was a black child, and by the time his parents found out when he was 11, it was too late. He was in deep and would remain there. But at the age of 23, Christopher *did* leave gangs behind; he became a devoted father and he worked. But he was marked, and when he was 26 he was slain for no apparent reason, the same day a memorial was held for a Blood in the area, a member of the rival gang. To date, no arrests have been made.

The Walk for Christopher I helped organize last April, acknowledging the 6 month anniversary of his murder and death, was only the beginning of my community-organizing relationship with Ursula. I'm quite close with the Walker family now, a mutually beneficial relationship that facilitates our work. In September, I applied for and received a grant by the Center for Council, to receive a 28-hour training in learning facilitation of the council method, to work with small groups, which helps to foster emotional maturation and reconciliation. We will be starting with 20 local committed adult volunteers later this month when the training starts.

In her recruitment letter, Ursula wrote, "Besides providing their well-tested methods for calm and forgiveness in our penal and school systems, *The Center for Council* provides these practices to community volunteers to help ensure the power of forgiveness at the local level. In Altadena, the youth often submits to criminal behavior via the Crips, and in Pasadena, many fall into criminal behavior via the Bloods . . . we have an exciting opportunity to deal with this concern and are pleased to announce that we have formed a local council for resolution known as the Altadena Pasadena Council for Reconciliation, or APCR."

Helping to get this little zygote of a non-profit organization off the ground will be one of my goals during the four month sabbatical I'll be taking February through May of this year. It's community organizing work I believe in – every effort to transform the world begins with a small group of people. The Council training will empower these concerned citizens to address community violence by offering these kids who are vulnerable to gang affiliation tools of forgiveness and reconciliation. Nearly all the trainees are people of color.

Dr. King says that the work of non-violence draws upon the love of good will. Of course, I think he used the phrase, "the brotherhood of man" in the same sentence, but this type of love, the love of agape, of course, is for everybody, just like bell hooks says feminism is for everybody. Good will amongst the whole of humanity is utterly reliant on our ability to build healthy, solvent relationships. Sure, I walk the talk of non-violence, but what this actually looks like is connecting people - building associations that otherwise might not be built. When people ask me to sum up my public ministry, I tell them I connect the dots in our community.

I was able to do this recently, this past Wednesday, when I urged Ursula to attend the Community Clergy Coalition of Pasadena, a traditionally African American ecumenical monthly gathering that has close ties with the Pasadena Police Department. There our project

was plugged by the president, Pastor Kerwin Manning, and participation was encouraged. Afterwards, Pasadena Police Chief Sanchez approached Ursula and her husband Richard, suggesting they have lunch to discuss how the PPD could further empower this worthy effort. I am also invited to attend this lunch. In an email to Ursula, Chief Sanchez wrote, "Thank you for your passion and courage. I am so grateful for your continued commitment to reduce violence in our community. Yes, of course I will help support your efforts."

So even as we as a church and a community take the Pasadena Police Department to task for policies and blunders related to the wrongful police killing of Kendrec McDade, Pasadena's Michael Brown, I understand how important it is to not write off anyone as "the enemy." We use our hearts for non-violence in the love of good will, but we also use our heads, and recognize the complexity of right relationship.

So finally, let's talk about our efforts to transform the policies of the Pasadena Police Department, in part so wrongful deaths can be prevented, but also because this is a way to directly address racism in the Pasadena community. CICOPP has existed for a couple years - the acronym is the Coalition for Increased Civilian Oversight of Pasadena Police. The coalition is diverse, with both white and black clergy, the ACLU, and talented attorneys who have created an historical precedent for releasing an officer incident report that will enable similar efforts across the country. We have made headway with city government leaders to establish an IPA, an Independent Police Audit, and we're about to meet with consultants hired by the city to determine the best reporting configuration.

That's good news, but there's still much work to be done, and we could use your help, especially if you have a mind for reading what a good police policy should look like, then comparing it to that of the PPD's. Once the IPA is in place, it's this sort of analysis that is really going to transform PPD policies. And that's the ultimate goal - to change laws that change lives, in this case, policies that will better serve our community. The leader of CICOPP, our very own Kris Ockershauser, and I have coined a new group, the PPD Reform Task Force, specifically for Neighborhood Church members and friends to join. Our first meeting is January 26th, and we have a sign-up sheet where we can capture your contact info at the Social Justice table after services.

We had an informational meeting about CICOPP this past Tuesday, and I want to quote what one of the African American leaders of CICOPP, Michele White, said when she was asked by a white man what the inhabitants of NW Pasadena, where tensions are high between the PPD and the community, think about people in the rest of Pasadena. Her answer was thoughtful. She said, "You know, it's great to do your own internal and reflective work about racism, but what people really want to see is you at the table - coming to meetings, furthering the agendas of worthy initiatives, such as advocating for higher wages, affordable housing, or a more accountable police department." Her point was that *that's* what demonstrates commitment in the eyes of the downtrodden.

And so I try to make it easier for all of you to have these opportunities, if it's a commitment you wish to take on - to build a less racist, more equitable Pasadena community. It's not sexy work - sure, there may be a rally here and there, but mainly it's about showing up, and agreeing to action items.

No, the actual work of creating a more non-violent world is not sexy, but it sure is rewarding - the process itself, and all the good relationships you build, the movement you become a part of. It's the essence of a good life, a life well lived.

Dr. King wrote, "The method of nonviolence is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice." It's reminiscent of another aphorism Dr. King used so regularly that the words became attributed to him, and even President Obama has done so when he used them. But today, let us lift up that the articulation of the Christian theology of God being on the side of love and justice was *first* uttered in more humanist terms, by 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, who said, "The arc of the moral universe is long - but it bends toward justice."

May all of us see a way, whatever it is, a part of we can play, a role we can embrace - to become instruments for bending that moral arc - toward a more just and peaceful world for everybody.