



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

A Knock at Midnight

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Good morning. I have to say, there is no Sunday which your minister faces with a greater sense of trepidation than Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday. Seriously! You can imagine how intimidating it is to follow the lead of one of the greatest and most beloved preachers in our nation's history. No other orator's distinctive voice echoes in our ears as powerfully, as relevant today as he was fifty years ago.

Dr. King was a preacher at heart, one who used the timeless tools of the church into which he was born and raised, coupled with his powerful intellect and keen organizing sensibility, to persuade hearts and minds towards radical change. As a devoted student of King's life and ministry, today I want to lift up his legacy through the lens of one of his less well-known sermons.

The hallmark of a truly great preacher is that their sermons feature vivid images, stories and phrases that resonate far beyond Sunday morning, standing the test of time and circumstance. King was masterful at the art of preaching, often crafting sermons with vivid images that could be refined and updated to apply to the present day. The sermon we are remembering today, *A Knock at Midnight*, was first prepared to be delivered to the National Baptist Convention in 1958, five years before the March on Washington and his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

At the time of this first draft, Eisenhower was still president and the Civil Rights movement as we know it was in its beginning stages. King was 31 and had just helped to establish the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957 after leading the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. To add more context, around this time Katherine Johnson, one of the true stories told in the amazing film *Hidden Figures*, started her work at NASA and Richard and Mildred Loving married in Virginia, sparking the landmark Supreme Court case in support of interracial marriage.

A Knock at Midnight was adapted for the swiftly changing times, published in his collection of sermons *Strength to Love* in 1963 and continued to be delivered as late June of 1967, less than a year before his death. The text of the sermon is a familiar parable in the Christian tradition:

Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him?"

King begins the sermon with a powerful and resonant image from the parable--- remember this—he says— it is MIDNIGHT.

*It is midnight in the parable;
it is also midnight in our world, and the darkness is so deep that we can hardly see which way to turn.*

It is midnight within the social order.

On the international horizon nations are engaged in a colossal and bitter contest for supremacy.

It is also midnight within the moral order.

At midnight colors lose their distinctiveness and become a sullen shade of grey. Moral principles have lost their distinctiveness.

For modern man, absolute right and wrong are a matter of what the majority is doing. Right and wrong are relative to likes and dislikes and the customs of a particular community. We have unconsciously applied Einstein's theory of relativity, which properly described the physical universe, to the moral and ethical realm.

If King were alive today, you can be sure that he would be preaching this sermon. Isn't it midnight today? How is it midnight, we can ask? *It is certainly still midnight in the ways King names and more, a "confusing hour" for our nation when we are facing the greatest moral challenges in the decades since the Civil Rights movement. Much of the descriptions King sets forth of our nation's moral quandary remain true. It is a confusing time for us to recognize this hard-won national holiday honoring a civil rights legend whose legacy is not universally celebrated.*

Last week journalist Jelani Cobb pointed out the contrast of this year's commemorations from the 8 years past in the Obama administration. He wrote:

The divided bounty of America is such that it is a place where King was both hailed and spat upon; where he wielded influence over a President and was hounded by federal investigators; where he was afforded official accolades and was murdered on the balcony of a nondescript motel... His ideals have survived him, but they have inherited the same unreconciled, and maybe irreconcilable, status. In 2009, the King Holiday pointed to how far we had come. This year, it highlights the fact that we've arrived at a place where the familiar landmarks are missing. The Memphis marchers in 1968 held one advantage: they knew the road they were going down.

Indeed, it is still midnight in our world when we can't see the road ahead, nor the signals which might focus us on a direction. We only know that it is dark and are preparing to link arms and use every source of light we can—every positive message of love and hope, every history of struggle when resistance produced change, every deep belief in human goodness, mercy and kindness, to lead us ahead, one step at a time.

It's midnight in our world when major decisions about the future of our nation's healthcare system are made by congress under the cover of darkness with little information about a future plan for coverage.

It's midnight in our world when self-proclaimed white-supremacist Dylann Roof can murder 9 worshipers in the sanctuary of Mother Emanuel AME church after praying with them for over an hour.

Even more painfully it is midnight when at his murder trial he showed no remorse or apology for his heinous crime, instead reframing his crime as the necessary fulfillment of his racist crusade.

In the sermon, King reminds us that *“As in the parable, so in our world today, the deep darkness of midnight is interrupted by the sound of a knock.”*

In the parable, the knock on the door from a friend, asking for not one, not two, but three loaves of bread to feed the hungry guest who has arrived late and unexpectedly to his home. Not only is it late and everyone is asleep, but the friend is asking for a lot. The ask of three loaves might have well made the difference between his children going hungry in the morning.

I'm not sure about you, but in general when people knock on my door these days, I'm a little bit suspicious. What do you need from me? What will I be asked to sign or to buy? As a woman, I am always wondering if I answer the door will it be safe?

Midnight is a time with the promise of being peaceful, but many of us—especially those with children-- know that nights are often a wrestling match to pin down both adequate rest and family obligations. As the clock turns from one day to the next, midnight can be a time of both panic and possibility. I spent time with a good friend and a new parent of an infant last week. He spoke about his new year's resolution not to wake up angry and disturbed in the middle of the night when his little one is in need.

When I listen to the parable, I can imagine this friend receiving the unexpected knock. Maybe he worked all day and came home to spend a few hours with his family and a few hours resting before starting the day again. Maybe he was at home with the child all day which included much struggle to feed and bathe and get ready for bed until everyone was finally peacefully asleep. And then, at midnight, a neighbor knocks furiously on the door and wakes him up to ask him to look for food a guest he doesn't know, disrupting his slumber and his sense of peace.

The parable asks us to question our limits of hospitality and compassion. If it was our neighbor asking us for bread, might the response be different? How far would we go to feed the needs of those we don't know? Would we feed our friend's friend? Our neighbor's neighbor? If we were convinced to offer our bread, would we do this with annoyance at the inconvenience, or joy at the opportunity to nourish a guest?

In the parable, Jesus reminds us that it is not the friendship that is persuasive, but the persistence of the friend seeking bread.

In King's sermon, the knock at midnight is a knock on the door of the church from members and seekers desperately seeking nourishment and direction from the church in the midnight of such morally challenging times. Those who knock look for nourishment in three loaves of bread:

The bread of faith—renewed faith in oneself, faith in neighbor and faith in God.
The bread of hope—everyone needs and wants hope and cannot live without it.
And the bread of love—not just within their families and relationships but to break down the barriers which separate and divide us.

If preached again today, King's sermon might look to a similar knock from seekers looking to the church to be the conscience and moral compass for our nation for this previously unchartered path. Over the past months since the election, our church has joined multitudes of liberal churches across the nation experiencing a growth of visitors.

I have heard you knocking on our door asking questions about our community and looking to find a spiritual home. You want to stay grounded in your values, to raise your family supported by a caring community and to know how you can make a difference in such challenging and deeply troubling times. You seek a place you can turn to weekly for solace, strength and inspiration.

This congregation wants to give you the loaves of which King speaks—the bread of faith as you understand it, the bread of hope for a positive future, and the bread of an inclusive and abundant love.

King's sermon, as does the parable, cautions us that more often than not, it is persistence and not compassion which ultimately motivates the generosity of the friend asked for bread. King chastises the church's tendency to squander its opportunity to satiate people's hunger with platitudes and pronouncements in place of true pathways for personal and social transformation. He urges the church to fulfill its moral duty with these words:

In the terrible midnight of war men have knocked on the door of the church but the church has often disappointed them. What more pathetically reveals the irrelevancy of the church in present-day world affairs than its witness?

The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.

As newcomers come into our midst, we need you to help us stay relevant, responsive and bold, taking risks to be an active agent of positive change. We know you are asking if this church will meet the current midnight of our world with opportunities to be nourished and serve, or will it turn away another unexpected guest?

Church, it is up to us. This is our time to bring our light and our love to the midnight that is now.

Can you hear the knock?

There is a knock on our door for our church and our denomination to be more involved than ever in efforts to be the conscience of the state and not its master, to have the moral courage to name and resist injustice and to safeguard human rights. (Faith in action has always been at the center of our movement. We can look to our history of advocacy and public witness of the civil rights movements of the past fifty years. Most recently, our church rallied for marriage equality and LGBTQ rights, witnessed and pledged our commitment to racial justice and have provided physical and material support for the resettlement needs of a Syrian refugee family.)

Our most transformative justice commitments have often come to us as a knock on our door at unexpected times, stretching us to find more and more bread even at times when we are worried we may not have enough for ourselves. Each time we have been asked to provide and respond to our neighbors we have been stretched, discovering there is more bread than we imagined, and by sharing it, we are more deeply nourished than by simply enjoying it on our own.

In the midnight that is now, we are being called upon to witness as we gather our energy for our weekend of healing justice and resistance around the inauguration and Women's Marches around the country. We are being called to protect our Muslim neighbors, our undocumented neighbors, for refugees and asylum seekers in need of advocacy and protection. Non-immigrant congregations like ours are being invited to partner with immigrant congregations to help provide both "virtual" and "physical" sanctuary for undocumented immigrants who are facing deportation.

If we choose to step up and into this kind of responsibility to our neighbors, we may soon hear another knock at our door—the knock of authorities asking for information and demanding compliance with federal immigration detention processes. In the case of this knock, we have a few choices. One, we can choose not to answer the door at all. Not complying is a way that congregations have faithfully resisted. We can answer the door and choose to defend our neighbors as we would defend our own families.

So, friends, let's listen for the knock – we are already receiving but are too asleep to hear. Let's open our hearts to be moved to give not simply by the audacity of our neighbor's persistence but by our radical hospitality.

Let's ready ourselves to answer the door, mustering the generosity of spirit to keep our pantries packed with enough nourishment to feed the unexpected but always invited guest.

Amen and blessed be.