

“Love Embraces”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday
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“He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in!”

Love has a way of doing that, and poet Edwin Markham had a way with words about love and what it called for. Today we seek to honor the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who embodied and modeled exactly the inclusive love Markham described. In this congregation and throughout the Unitarian Universalist world, we launch the sixth annual observance of 30 Days of Love, a public policy campaign whose mission is to resist oppression wherever it occurs through the transforming power of love. Specifically, it’s a “month-long spiritual journey and commitment to sustained action and service.” It is a life-long spiritual journey and commitment that we honor in spirit and seek to honor in deed as we observe Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday. While love was certainly not invented by Dr. King, he emulated the lives and journeys of those who had gone before who traveled minefields of love. Love survived; the travellers often did not.

Resisting oppression wherever it occurs is not for the faint of heart. It is a journey promising and treacherous. It calls for the utmost of sustainable energy and a resilience imbued with grace and courage. Only love meets such demands. Such was the claim of Dr. King in his earliest years of ministry, when he responded to the challenge of another young man who positioned his notion of practicality against his notion of idealism, the young man whose interchange with Dr. King I described earlier this morning. Who are we fooling? Why not address “the race problem” by “fighting fire with fire”—that is, violence—rather than the dubious practice of love—that is, non-violence?

How many times have you heard or contended yourself that “we must be realistic” in response to an approach, a suggestion, or a strategy that held compassion, understanding, and mutuality, at its core? King claimed that love is realistic, that it is creative and unifying and “absolutely necessary for the survival of our civilization.” This is not a love grounded in blind faith or a Pollyanna perspective, but in clear seeing, raw honesty, and pragmatism for the long haul. It is visceral and spiritual, gut-wrenching and soul-stretching.

How does our Unitarian Universalist Standing on the Side of Love venture synch with what Dr. King was about? How might the “Beloved Community” of which Dr. King spoke again and again find its way into the heart of what it means to be intentional about the direction of our spiritual journey through sustained action and service grounded in love?

Like most movements—social or religious—Standing on the Side of Love had a catalyst. The Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville had been visible in welcoming those among us who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. Just five years ago last July, on a Sunday morning when two Unitarian Universalist congregations gathered there for a children’s performance of “Annie,” a gunman entered the foyer and opened fire. In seconds, two congregants were dead and seven injured. One of the dead was 60-year-old Greg McKendry. He had thrown himself onto the gunman to protect his fellow congregants. As McKendry sank to the floor, four other congregants overpowered this man whose fears and phobias had turned violent. In the days that followed, the congregation responded with a vigil of compassion and remembrance. Our Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Team was there in full force. Bill Sinkford, our UUA President at that time, was present. Just a few weeks later, our Unitarian Universalist Association took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* proclaiming: “Our Doors and Our Hearts Will Remain Open.”

This was the inspiration for Standing on the Side of Love. Again and again my friend and mentor the late Forrest Church would say: “The opposite of love is not hate but fear.” So it was that this congregation responded not with fear, but with love. So it was that so many across the UU world responded not with fear, but with love. So it was that our Unitarian Universalist Association launched “Standing on the Side of Love” at the 2009 General Assembly in Salt Lake City, as hundreds of us stood in solidarity with our sisters and brothers from Utah who were relentlessly oppressed by neighbors who had chosen fear over love regarding the matter of inclusive marriage. While that state is now in legal limbo on this matter, the winds have definitely shifted from that time when we stood with banners raised, singing out and speaking out. Love holds no guarantees, but it is tenacious well beyond popular expectations.

Is love enough? Is it enough to mobilize ourselves and our fellow congregants and fellow citizens and fellow residents on behalf of compassionate justice? I’m thinking of the choice made by Martin and Coretta Scott King so many years ago when both were drawn to Unitarian Universalism and then, away from it on behalf of what they understood it would take to mobilize a people so long oppressed.

“Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian.”

These reflections of Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, friend and Unitarian Universalist colleague, call us to ask if love is enough, or at the very least, what kind of love is enough to mobilize a people so long oppressed.

“...what troubled me most,” mused Rosemary, “was my realization that our liberal religious movement would have utterly neutralized the greatest American theologian of the twentieth century.”

How would this faith that we share have neutralized the power and promise of Dr. King for the long sought exodus of those among us who are African American from the forces of oppression that formed the bedrock of this nation’s earliest economy and still describe this nation’s fault line? Were Unitarian Universalists so intemperate as to cast judgment on one’s understanding of a God who suffered as well as a God who loved, let alone a God at all?

Now hear this. I'm not suggesting that we opt for a theology of a suffering God in the person of Jesus and what we know and don't know about his life and death and after-life or, for that matter, that all who are Unitarian Universalist opt for a theology of a God in whatever form s/he might be described. While I consider myself Christian inclusively but not exclusively, I wonder if the suffering so at the heart of Christianity has been as much a disservice to Christianity as it has been a saving grace. On the other hand, I wonder if Love is far more accessible in the form of a singular human being with an extraordinary story of birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection than in the form of a people striving to live in beloved community grounded in covenant over creed.

I believe that the burden is on us, as Unitarian Universalists, to ask such tough questions—especially if we are people of privilege—white privilege, economic privilege, educational privilege; and I remind us that we are all NOT of such privilege. What then IS our saving grace, the grace that mobilizes us during times that we are, in the words of that hymn we sang earlier, “sinking down, sinking down?” Is it my staying power, my force of will, your force of will, this community, this faith? Yes. Is it a sacred spark, a singular incarnation of Love, the examples of prophetic women and men of all ages, a divine force, God, whomever, whatever? Our responses dot a wide-open roadmap. I don't believe that I have the answer, if there is indeed AN answer. I do hope we understand that it's not a weakness to call on the spirit of God or Jesus or Allah or the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or the Divine Mother, or Mary, or anybody or anything “out there” or “deep inside” for courage and sustenance in the face of any of the countless forms of oppression.

How has our faith changed since Rosemary wrote those words not so long ago? How has our faith changed since Coretta Scott King and her husband, Martin, made the decision that they did not so long ago? How have we drawn a larger circle, grown a larger love, cultivated awareness that we as UUs are not necessarily the coolest clan dancing in the spiritual/religious pantheon? How have we explored the historic treasure trove of Unitarian Universalism from which we might draw story after story of courage and compassion that share common ground with what the Kings sought and lived for and what Dr. King died for?

The words of Francis David, Unitarian court preacher to the 15th c. Unitarian King John Sigismund of Transylvania, echo: “We need not think alike to love alike.” In the aftermath of King John's reign, David died for love. I wonder if the later King drew inspiration from David as he did from Gandhi, as he did from Jesus, as he did from the stream of women and men who lived and died for love.

As we begin this month-long spiritual journey, this time-disciplined pilgrimage, might we ask the tough questions? Might we honor not that which is doable only by superheroes but by ordinary women and men living extraordinary dreams? Might we summon the wisdom to stand not just on the side of love, but to bend that side into an arc and bend that arc into a circle, an ever expanding circle of love in which we are all free at last.

May it be so. Amen.

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