

“Every Single Child”

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday
January 25, 2015

Emmett Till (1955) – age 14
Addie Mae Collins (1963) – age 14
Cynthia Wesley (1963) – age 14
Carole Robertson (1963) – age 14
Denise McNair (1963) – age 11
Timothy Thomas (2001) – age 19
Timothy Stansbury (2004) – age 19
James Brisette (2005) – age 17
DeAunta Terrel Farrow (2007) – age 12
Kiwane Carrington (2009) – age 15
Victor Steen (2009) – age 17
Aiyana Stanley-Jones (2010) – age 7
Ramarley Graham (2012) – age 18
Trayvon Martin (2012) – age 17
Ervin Jefferson (2012) – age 18
Kendrec McDade (2012) – age 19
Kimani Grey (2013) – age 16
Andy Lopez (2013) – age 13
Deion Fludd (2013) – age 17
Kimani Gray (2013) – age 16
Michael Brown (2014) – age 18
Tamir Rice (2014) – age 12

All were children. All were children of color. All were murdered, most by officers of the law, some by white supremacist terrorists, a few by bullets that presumably strayed from their intended target. Each is a child who will not see adulthood—a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a friend. A spare fraction of those “law-abiding” officers who fired the shots—tens of shots at one young target—are serving time. Those who planted a bomb were convicted decades after the act.

Black lives matter. Brown lives matter. Children matter—every single child.

Martin Luther King, Jr. adored his own children—Yolanda, Martin III, Dexter, and Bernice. His heart broke when four little girls were killed in the September 15, 1963 bombing at Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Three days later, he spoke at the funeral held for three of them, respecting the wishes of Carole Robertson’s family for a private service. Eight thousand gathered in grief. King consoled, proclaimed, and prophesied. I don’t doubt that his words echoed at the funerals and memorial services of many of the children whose names I just read. Might we hold in our hearts each name, each life, as we recall some of those words Dr. King offered to that heart-wrenched assembly of family and friends:

“This afternoon we gather in the quiet of this sanctuary to pay our last tribute of respect to these beautiful children of God.

... they have something to say to each of us in their death. They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows. They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents with the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. ... They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream.

...in spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair. We must not become bitter, nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. No, we must not lose faith in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and the worth of all human personality.

While today we celebrate especially Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ella Baker was a figure in the background, but responsible for the internal fabric of much of the mid-20th century civil rights movement. Born in 1903, she was 26 years King’s senior, old enough to be his mother. In many ways, she shares Rosa Park’s reputation as “mother” of the civil rights movement of the past century. Together with Dr. King, she co-founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and was a prime mover of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), recognizing the core role of young people.

I speak of Ella Baker this morning primarily because of the song written by Bernice Johnson Reagon and made famous by the *a capella* women’s group, Sweet Honey in the Rock. “Ella’s Song” holds grief and hope and above all, the need and the readiness to pass the baton of activism to the young.

Hear just the first few verses—spoken today, but next year, we’ll sing them!

We who believe in freedom cannot rest

We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes

Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers' sons

Is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons

Let's remember that it's not just black mothers' sons who are at risk, but especially our children of color no matter what color their mothers or fathers. The song continues:

*That which touches me most is that I had a chance to work with people
Passing on to others that which was passed on to me*

Ella Baker was known as *Fundi*, a Swahili term for one who passes on skills to the next generation. English could use such a word! The song continues:

*To me young people come first, they have the courage where we fail
And if I can but shed some light as they carry us through the gale*

Recall the Children's March of 1963. Recall that SNCC, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, was comprised of young people. Recall Freedom Summer, 1964, when thousands of students flocked to Mississippi to work with thousands of Mississippi's black folks in the struggle for equal rights. Ella Baker was ever there, sleeves of body and soul rolled up, her mind masterfully organizing:

*The older I get the better I know that the secret of my going on
Is when the reins are in the hands of the young, who dare to run against the storm.*

We can imagine that Dr. King heard those refrains before they were written. Ella Baker surely did; she lived every word. Every young person and the young person in each of us can still hear and heed these words as a call to "the fierce urgency of OUR now," the fierce urgency of being there for OUR children, all our children and most assuredly our children most vulnerable to the racism carved so insidiously into the historic habit of white privilege.

Refusal to respond recalls an episode in Herman Melville's saga, *Moby Dick*. Ahab, captain of the whaling ship, Pequod, is obsessed with the creature that took his leg—the great white whale Moby Dick. His willfulness renders him mute to anything or anyone who would steer him off course. Ahab has engaged the crew of the Pequod in his voyage of madness, from which there is no turning back. Nowhere does this seem so tragically established as in the Pequod's encounter with The Rachel. As uncommon as it was for ships to pass within mutual visibility on the vast stretches of the Pacific, it happens. It happened. What were Ahab's first words as he waves to the captain of the Rachel? "Hast seen the White Whale?" " 'Aye, yesterday,'" blew the reply. "Have ye seen a whale-boat adrift?"

In the habit of commanders of crossing ships, the captain of the Rachel boarded the Pequod and immediately revealed his purpose—to engage Ahab and his crew in a search for the missing whaleboat. The crew of the Pequod sensed the urgency of his appeal, confirmed by further words from the captain of the Rachel:

"My boy, my own boy is among them. For God's sake—I beg, I conjure'

... Yet Ahab stood still like an anvil, receiving every shock, but without the least quivering of his own."

Even when the desperate captain pleaded with him as a father with his own child safely at home, even when he told of a second son who had been lost in the search, the immutable Ahab bellowed to his crew:

"'Avast...touch not a rope-yarn'; then in a voice that prolongingly moulded every word—'Captain Gardiner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time, Good-bye, good-bye. God bless ye, man, and may I forgive myself, but I must go.' And he retreated to his cabin," at which the stunned Captain Gardiner had no choice but to retreat to his own grieving Rachel.

Melville's choice of Rachel for the name of the ship whose captain had lost two sons draws on the Biblical Rachel who had lost her children into the Babylonian captivity. Rachel cries for her lost children but is comforted with the promise that they will return. The theme surfaces again in the Gospel of Matthew. Herod, the local Roman magistrate, had ordered the murder of all male infants in his desperation to protect his throne from the threat of a babe born in Bethlehem purported to be the long-awaited Messiah. Rachel after Rachel cries for her lost son. The single ray of hope moves through the figure of the baby Jesus, who escaped the slaughter by his family's flight into Egypt.

Rachel weeping for her children taken into captivity, the mothers of the sons slain by Herod wailing in grief, the desperate father who had lost his sons and for whom Ahab would not steer a knot off course—all bring us back to the lost children of our own day, beautiful children of color lost to the undercurrents and tidal waves of racism.

Sooner or later a fault line expands and the earth around it quakes. When that fault line is racism, and the economic roots of an entire nation are mired in that crevice, something will give. Sooner or later something will give.

Whether we are black, brown, white, whatever, until we understand that every single child is our child, we will continue to weep or far worse, in the shadow of Ahab, we will turn our backs on children who are not yet lost.

Because Dr. King knew the preciousness of every child, his quest was not just for voting rights for the disenfranchised, but a halt to the war in Southeast Asia where children of all ages were dying by the thousands, bargaining power for sanitation workers in Memphis, income equality in a nation where economic privilege had become viral, and the dignity of each and every individual whose rights were denied.

Consider those inconveniently truthful words of Clinton Lee Scott: "It is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision." If we take to heart the worth and dignity of every person; if we honor the life and legacy of Emmett, Addie, Cynthia, Carole, Denise, Michael, Tamir, and so many more; if we *believe* that all life is connected, how can we possibly take the easier way?

For all of us who gather here this morning, there is much that we can do and more that we can be. As we heed the calls for engagement in the ministries of love and justice of this congregation and this faith and this community, calls grounded in the dignity of connectedness of us all, we will heed also the call of Dr. King and walk step by step toward community that is beloved.

So may it be. And Amen.

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