



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Heart is a Mirror,”
a homily given by Sally Liebermann
on January 9, 2011

Reading: Excerpt from “If I diminish you, I diminish myself.”

Words of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu as quoted in the foreword to “The Words and Inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi”

“In my culture and tradition the highest praise that can be given to someone is that, one has the wonderful quality of ubuntu. It is a reference to their actions toward their fellow human beings, it has to do with how they regard people and how they see themselves within their intimate relationships, their familial relationships, and within the broader community. Ubuntu addresses a central tenet of African philosophy: the essence of what it is to be human.

People with ubuntu are approachable and welcoming: their attitude is kindly and well disposed: they are not threatened by the goodness in others because their own esteem and self worth is generated by knowing they belong to a greater whole. To recast the Cartesian proposition that claims “I think therefore I am,” ubuntu would phrase it, “I am human because I belong.” Put another way, “a person is a person through other people,” a concept perfectly captured by the phrase “me we.” No one comes in to the world fully formed. We would not know how to think or walk or speak or behave unless we learned it from our fellow human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human. The solitary, isolated human being is a contradiction in terms.”

Homily:

“Ubuntu addresses a central tenet of African philosophy: the essence of what it is to be human.”

Our younger children are exploring courage and characteristics of Super heroes while they learn about the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. Our older children and youth are defining courage and what it means to be an ally as they prepare for their participation in next week’s MLK breakfast celebration with Calvary Baptist Church.

Last week Erika and I had the fun privilege of leading a blended age class with 8 children who are in Kindergarten through Grade 6. We acted out the Dr. Seuss story of The Sneetches, which is a clever tale about mythical creatures who live on beaches. Some are better than others because they have Stars on their bellies, hence they are called the Star bellied Sneetches. The story is an

essay on differences that don't render creatures better or worse, and in the end, all the Sneetches learn to enjoy one another regardless of the markings on their bellies.

Before we played with the story, we reminded our children about our breakfast celebration next week and we asked them what they know about our neighbors from Calvary Baptist Church. The older children generously offered that "they are way more religious than us!". That prompted great and appropriate conversation about our theological differences-and what we consider religious!!:) We talked about Jesus and Christianity and UU Christians-our exchanges were rich and meaningful.

I asked for something else that we know about our neighbors at Calvary. One of our older children raised his hand and very gently said "I don't want to be racist but, most of the people at Calvary are Black." We assured him that he was not in any way being racist, that he was only observing what is true.

Another great and appropriate conversation followed about why we celebrate Dr. King's birthday with Calvary. I was touched by the sensitivity that our children have to racial differences and reminded by this young man's discomfort that we have much to talk about. He was so very careful to not offend or hurt with his comment. And although his comment was not offensive or hurtful, his unease can remind us that we need to be talking, even when we are uncomfortable. We need to take risks and give voice to questions and wonderings, particularly around race if the real conversation on race is to take place in America. Maybe the African descriptive word ubuntu can encourage us to believe that our words and thoughts are important and maybe even necessary for someone else to know and hear.

Next week, we will celebrate the life of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.. At the time of Dr. King's death, Robert Kennedy was running for president of the United States. He was due at a campaign rally in an inner city African American neighborhood in Indianapolis on the night that Dr. King was killed. What follows is a recording of his visit to the corner of 17th and Broadway.

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Audio recording 5:20 may be found at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89365887>  
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I invite you to think about your feelings and response to Mr. Kennedy's words. There are many studies on the psyche of Robert Kennedy and many observations about his choice to go to 17th and Broadway on the night of Dr. King's death.

One might question the choice to quote Greek poetry to a volatile crowd in a poor African American neighborhood on the eve of the assassination of the most empowered black man that this country had ever recognized. To quote the ancients in his Harvard accent before an audience of underprivileged, devastated people might be interpreted as thoughtless and perhaps even arrogant. However, as we heard, his words were received with relative calm and cast a peace across the crowd. There are interviews with friends who share that after his brother's murder in 1963, this staunchly Catholic man struggled to keep a relationship with his God who had allowed

such tragedy. Friends relate that he found solace and understanding in tragic Greek literature and that as he grieved the loss of his brother, his determination to accomplish social change became fierce.

I'd like to suggest that Robert Kennedy was acting from his heart and was practicing ubuntu, what we have heard defined today, as the essence of being human. Here he was, this powerful, privileged, political white man, standing before a crowd that was angry and heartbroken, asking that crowd to look into their hearts. He did not apologize for who he was or justify why he was there. He asked those people to see him; a man who had also suffered great loss, a man who could understand the visceral, and very human responses of hatred and violence. He stood in solidarity with the humanity of those there to hear him that night. His voice shook a bit as he recited the words of Aeschylus, perhaps the only comfort that he knew to share, maybe the only words that he could pull from his heart in those desperate moments.

I'd like to suggest that the people in the crowd that gathered that night at 17th and Broadway looked into a man's soul and responded with ubuntu. There were decisions to be made fairly quickly in that crowd of 2000, some of whom had come with harmful intent. Although there would be some who would later invite the greater to violence, the great majority of people there chose to listen, to hear, and to stand in solidarity with a sad and heartbroken man on a flatbed truck. Hearts with very different histories opened to each other and upon reflection, found the same human truths.

After Robert Kennedy left, people quietly walked away from 17th and Broadway, back to their homes, to their lives and to their nation that would now need to find a way forward without Dr. King.

Despite rioting in other major American cities, Indianapolis remained calm the night after Kennedy's remarks, which is believed to have been in part because of what is now called one of the great American speeches. Calling Kennedy's words that night a speech seems crass- a more honest appraisal of the events at 17th and Broadway might be "the beginning of a very long and difficult conversation". It is in the nature of our human experience that we tread upon each other throughout our lives, our loves, our works. Let us look to moments of brilliant truth and candor, where people have reflected upon theirs and the hearts of others, and found common ground. Let us forget to regret, let us forget to justify, let us forget to defend ourselves and let us remember to listen and hear with open mind and heart. Let our hearts be as mirrors unto our selves and to our companions in this life and upon this planet.

Blessed be, and in the name of all that is sacred, and all that we cherish, Amen.