



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“On the Arc of the Moral Universe, Justice, and Us,”
a sermon given by Bill Taylor ¹
on August 18, 2013

Reading: from “Justice And The Conscience,” by Theodore Parker

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” I was reminded of this line on June 26th of this year, that wonderful day the Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act, ruling it unconstitutional. It’s one that many (including, until recently, myself) attribute to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and indeed, he employed the line on at least two occasions--once in print and once in a speech.² But, as some of you may know, the line is actually a condensed version of a passage in a sermon titled, “Of Justice And The Conscience” by Reverend Theodore Parker--a canonical figure in the UU tradition--published over a century earlier. I would like to now share with you all some of that sermon, including that passage:

“ . . . It is justice that we want to organize,--justice for all, for rich and poor. There the slave shall be free from his master. There shall be no want, no oppression, no fear of man, no fear of God, but only love. ‘There is a good time coming,’--so we all believe when we are young and full of life and healthy hope.

God has made man with the instinctive love of justice in him, which gradually gets developed in the world. But in Himself justice is infinite. This justice of God must appear in the world, and in the history of men; and, after all ‘the wrongs that patient merit of the unworthy takes,’ still you see that the ploughshare of justice is drawn through and through the field of the world, uprooting savage plants . . .

Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice. Things refused to be mismanaged long . . . ”³

¹ My friend Nancy Rusk provided extremely valuable feedback while I was writing this sermon, for which I am very grateful and thankful.

² Source URL: <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/15/arc-of-universe/>; “The Arc of the Moral Universe Is Long But It Bends Towards Justice.”

³ Ten Sermons of Religion; “Of Justice and the Conscience,” Parker, p.83-85; Crosby, Nichols & Co.; 1853

Sermon:

Theodore Parker was certainly an optimist. This sermon was published during an especially difficult time in American history. The country had just emerged from one war, the Mexican-American, which he considered immoral and denounced. It was hurtling towards another, the Civil War, which still ranks as our bloodiest and most divisive to date. And the country was beset by the ultimate atrocity of slavery (which he also denounced--and sadly, he would not live to see the day it was abolished).⁴ And yet, here he was, somehow confidently insisting, "I am sure [the arc of the moral universe] bends towards justice. Things refuse to be mismanaged long."

I find Parker's optimism commendable. I only wish I shared it.

This summer--even more so than the recent, tumultuous times that preceded it--we've seen matters of justice not only dominate headline news but also affect us in very real ways. But the news certainly hasn't all been good; it's been, at best, a mixed bag.

The Supreme Court's striking down of the Defense of Marriage Act was, indeed, a wonderful civil rights victory for our brothers and sisters in the gay community. But while we celebrate that repeal, we must also face the sobering reality that there is currently no significant push in Congress or by the President for federal legislation to replace the discriminatory law with one that ensures the equal rights of gay couples to marry. No, instead, the very best we can hope for the foreseeable future, we're told, is to win the fight for their rights on a state-by-state basis. I find this disheartening.

In the wake of the Zimmerman trial, many in this country--and especially many of our friends in the Black community--are left feeling similarly disheartened, and also deeply concerned and fearful, and believing that justice was not served. In general, the results of such high profile trial court cases often frustrate many of us, in part because these criminal trials often only focus on very narrow applications and interpretations of existing laws. As Andrew Cohen recently wrote in *The Atlantic*, "Trials like the one we've all witnessed in Florida can therefore never answer the larger societal questions they pose. They can never act as moral surrogates to resolve the national debates they trigger."⁵ If we want a different result in these cases, we must lobby our local, state and federal governments to change the applicable, existing laws. Surely we can do something to reduce gun violence and the vast number of lives, like Trayvon Martin's, so tragically lost as a result.

And yet, paradoxically, the single greatest obstacle to progress with respect to matters of justice is that legislative body in the federal government we charge with writing the laws to address these matters--Congress. Many of our federal legislators are timid and corrupted by special interests, and as a collective, they can perhaps be best described--if we want to be polite about it--as ineffectual. Two hundred and thirty calendar days have passed since the 113th Congress first met on January 3, 2013, and a total of 31 bills have been passed by both houses, one of the

⁴ Source URL: <http://www25.uua.org/uuhhs/duub/articles/theodoreparker.html>; "Theodore Parker"

⁵ "Law and Justice and George Zimmerman," Cohen; theatlantic.com, 7/13/13.

lowest paces of productivity in this country's recorded history.⁶ Some of these bills address worthy things, certainly, but they have largely punted when it comes to dealing with country's biggest and most pressing issues. (I printed out a list of the bills they've passed. You're welcome to take a look at it and draw your own conclusions.⁷) And now, they're on a month-long vacation. Their inaction is a real scandal, as is the public's largely apathetic response to it.

Many in Congress have, however, demonstrated an eagerness to cut funding to those programs which help the poorest and most vulnerable in society. Some in the House, for example, plan to introduce a bill early next month (after their vacation) that would cut food stamps by five percent, a program in which individuals currently receive, on average, a benefit of just four dollars and 38 cents per day.⁸ Especially in these times of gross wealth inequality--where we see so many struggling so mightily just to get by, while we see that the wealthiest amongst us have never done better--I find this action deplorable and cowardly.

So, those are just a few of the matters of justice we're confronting. We could delve into so many more, but I do want to allow you some time to yourself to enjoy your Sunday. Clearly, though, both in the few examples I've cited and the many more we see all around us, there are many uneven bends in that long arc of the moral universe. We do not see "a continual and progressive triumph of the right," as Parker describes it. And if the arc does eventually bend towards justice, it's definitely not a smooth and obvious curvature.

But we should expect regular dips and valleys in the arc of the moral universe. After all, the very fabric of the moral universe--the shared sum of our moral agency--is complex. While most of us share a general capacity for moral consideration, its composition inside all of us varies slightly from person to person. Our better angels--those companion travelers riding shotgun along with us through life's journeys--take different forms and offer each of us different directions. Our individual inner spirits twirl and dance and stir us in unique ways. The conscience whispers to each of us in different tones and about different things. That unique inner voice, that sublime grace--wherever it comes from--that speaks to and through each of us also shapes many of our unique concepts of morality and justice. But these concepts are also shaped by our particular places in the world--our particular experiences and the framework of our societal norms. As members of a pluralistic society who ought to embrace diversity of all kinds, we should likewise embrace these well-meaning, diverse ideas of morality and justice and include them in our public dialogues. However, rational arguments, considerations beyond narrow self-interests, and tolerance should always win the day in these dialogues.

It seems too often, though, that real, constructive dialogues--the sort borne from and worthy of our capacity for rational deliberation--never quite materialize in the public sphere. No, instead we see political leaders and pundits mostly talking past each other, delivering sometimes dishonest and rhetorically vicious messages that appeal viscerally to this-or-that segment of the population, while often demonizing those other people who disagree with them. Indeed, it's typically the loudest, most intolerant voices in these banal conflicts which get amplified in our ever-present

⁶ "113th Congress On Track To Be Least Productive In Modern History," Terkel; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/08/113th-congress-bills_n_3563008.html, 7/8/13.

⁷ Source URL: <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/LegislativeData.php?&n=PublicLaws&c=113> (library of Congress).

⁸ "GOP prepares bills to cut food stamps by 5 percent," Jalonik; <http://news.yahoo.com/gop-prepares-bill-cut-food-stamps-5-percent-174851507.html>; 8/1/13, AP.

news and social media. It can all be very disheartening, and it threatens our sanity in very real ways.

I must admit--even after a few years of studying rational argumentation and logic in college--I have since been frequently guilty of getting caught up in the us-versus-them hoopla that dominates our public politics. When debating politics with others, I've even occasionally directed personal insults at those with whom I disagree. It's such an awful, shameful thing to do. I--and we all--need to stop engaging in the silly and counterproductive games that dominate our political debates, for there's truly nothing to be won. But that does not mean that we should disengage from these debates, either. No, we must speak out against nonsense, demand real dialogues and real debates, and demand more of ourselves.

For the arc of the moral universe to bend towards justice, our direct, active participation is required. We must always fight for justice—but especially now, with so many big issues before us, with so much at stake. And in the midst of this fight, we will and should be angered by the injustice we perceive in the world. But that anger should always be righteous in nature—couched in reason, our love and respect for human dignity, and our yearning to make the world a better place.

It's easy, though, to think of Parker's metaphor and succumb to a fatalistic mindset. You may, on the one hand, think that the moral universe is so vast, and our place in it so relatively small, that we are helpless to change it for the better. On the other, you may take comfort in his metaphor and think that these pressing matters in the moral universe will just somehow work themselves out, with or without our involvement. But I believe that such fatalistic thinking, either way, is wrong-headed. We all must do our part to bend the proverbial arc towards justice--however small that part might seem, and however discouraged we might feel. And when we feel like our individual voices are too small, we must then organize, and speak with a shared voice, and exhaust our abilities to petition our political leaders and the public to act.

Our individual and collective convictions of justice confront their greatest challenges in the form of the very real evil we see in the world--the many twisted threads interwoven in the moral universe's diverse fabric. There are, indeed, troubled souls walking amongst us who have turned their hearts away from that sublime spirit inside them, who no longer listen to the good directions offered by their better angels, or who've long-abandoned them somewhere along their journeys. I speak of those people who occasionally harm us, or terrorize us, or otherwise bend that proverbial arc away from justice. When we feel profoundly impacted by their evil acts, we will surely feel filled (at least in part) with righteous anger, but it can be also mixed with, or even eclipsed by, a different, uglier sort of anger--an excessive, vengeful rage. We should never confuse one for the other, and it's important in these most tense and trying moments to act with temperance, to not allow that ugliness to poison our inner grace. We must never allow ourselves to become monsters when we are forced to confront those who commit monstrous acts.

Maintaining self-control during trying times, doggedly advocating for that which we find just and good--these are spiritual acts representing the best forms of our humanity. Later in his sermon, Parker discusses the necessity of our engagement in matters of justice and describes it as an expression of the divine, and on these points, I agree:

“ . . . In human affairs the justice of God must work by human means. Men are the measures of God's principles; our morality the instrument of his justice, which stilleth alike the waves of the sea, the tumult of the people, and the oppressor's brutal rage. Justice is the idea of God, the ideal of man, the rule of conduct writ in the nature of mankind. The ideal must become actual, God's thought a human thing, made real in a reign of righteousness, and a kingdom--no, a Commonwealth--of justice on the earth. You and I can help forward that work.”⁹

⁹ Parker, p. 100.