



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Theology and Rev. Dr. King,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on January 15, 2012

Last week I talked about the importance of being able to translate theological language, so we can hear and connect with one another across our differences, so we might go deeper and farther in our own spiritual journeys. After church, one of you said, “But theology by definition is about God.” She was right, of course; if you take the word literally, it means “study of God.” I said, in this context, where we embrace a range of beliefs, I understand theology to encompass that diversity. So an atheist has a theology as much as a theist does.

A little later, someone else said that she saw our attempts at understanding our lives, including study and spiritual practice, as ways of doing theology. I like this expansive approach, and hope you see yourself as someone doing theology; that you will engage this task, making meaning of your life experiences, and being in conversation with voices from our religious tradition, and other voices you find compelling.

I hope it's obvious that I like having these conversations. The sermon is certainly not the last word, but part of a wider conversation. Last week, after the service, some of you continued it in the Ladies Parlor, and we're going to keep offering this two Sundays a month.

So, my fellow theologians, today we remember the life and ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. It's a good day to acknowledge that theology is not something done just in the library or the study. The test of theology is when it meets the real world. The feminist theologian Carter Heyward says, “The only theology worth doing is that which inspires and transforms lives, that which empowers us to participate in creating, liberating, and blessing the world.”

If he were alive today, what would Rev. King say to us? I imagine he would be pleased by some things. By the ways historically marginalized people are coming into their own power. That we have our first black president. That equal rights, including marriage equality, for GLBT folks are gaining ground. That we are a land of many colors; do you know that by 2042 white people will no longer be the majority?

At the same time, the gap between rich and poor is widening. There is immense pressure on the middle class, and on the working poor. I have no doubt, were he alive, that Rev. King would be speaking to this, because he was talking about it back in 1967. In his last speech to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he said

“One day we must ask the question, ‘Why are there forty million poor people in America?’ And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

You know what happens when people talk like this, don't you? They get accused of advocating for socialism and class warfare. When King was alive he was called a communist. But when he critiqued our system, which privileges some and discriminates against others, he was articulating a theology that has been central to the Jewish and Christian traditions for thousands of years.

About a month ago I had the privilege of preaching across the street at Calvary Baptist Church. I chose as my text that Sunday the passage from the gospel of Mark, at the start of Jesus' ministry, when he stands in the temple and reads from the prophet Isaiah:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.’

Central to the prophetic tradition is the conviction that power is meant to be used wisely and responsibly, that those at the top are not supposed to take advantage of those at the bottom. That those with advantages have a special responsibility to use their gifts to help others. The tradition claims that God has a special concern and affinity for those at the margins.

Martin Luther King liked to quote the 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, who put it this way: “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. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”

It may surprise you to learn that Martin and Coretta King sometimes attended Unitarian churches when they lived in Boston, when he was working on his PhD at BU. In his writings you see a tension between the theology of the Black church which raised and formed him, a theology of a personal God at work in the world, and a more liberal theology, in which God is understood in less personal terms, a theology more responsive to 20th century understandings of reason and science. Our reading this morning, in which King acknowledges those people in the movement who did not believe in a personal God, but who still believe, he says, “the universe in some form is on the side of justice,” this echoes Theodore Parker and reflects King's appreciation for liberal theology.

He wrote, "There is one phase of liberalism that I hope to cherish always: its devotion to the search for truth, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason." But he also saw its shortcomings. He says it was "the liberal doctrine of man that I began to question. The more I observed the tragedies of history, and man's shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin. . . . I came to feel that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism."<sup>1</sup>

Our Unitarian forebears used to proclaim belief in "the Progress of Mankind, onward and upward forever." That was before the 20th century, with its world wars and genocides. That idealism seemed to say, "If you wait long enough, things will get better."

But King knew from his work on the ground that this is not true. His "Letter From Birmingham Jail" still calls us to account today. From that cell he wrote, "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right."

What Martin Luther King's life says to us is that what you believe matters--because that is the bedrock of the choices you will make; it is what determines how you will live your life. Your theology matters, because it will inform what you do, and where you choose to stand, and with whom you will ally yourself.

If you believe that saying, that "God helps those who help themselves," words that come not from the Bible but from Benjamin Franklin,<sup>2</sup> then you may feel comfortable with the widening gap between rich and poor in our land. But if you are stirred in any way by the prophet's call to do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly, then what are you going to do about that? If you believe, like the prophet Isaiah, that we are here to bring good news to the poor and help set free the captives free, then what are you going to do about that?

Theology matters. Not just this weekend, but all year 'round. How you see this world, and your place in it, that's your theology. And it's not all up to you. You are part of a tradition, and we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, people who did their part, who stood up and sat down, who marched and sang and sacrificed for love and for justice.

If you believe in God, then do you hear God's call to do something with this life you have been given? If you put your trust in the human spirit, then does that compel you to work for fairness and justice for all people, and especially for those at the margins?

On Friday night at Temple Emanu-El, Rev. Greg Thomas preached a powerful and challenging message calling us to be on fire, the way Martin Luther King was on fire. At this time in our history, when there seem to be so few courageous leaders, to be on fire for justice.

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<sup>1</sup> See the article by Rosemary Bray McNatt in *UU World* magazine, "To Pray Without Apology," available online at <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/2527.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> Bill McKibben makes this point in this essay, "People of the (Unread) Book," available online at [http://books.google.com/books?id=o8\\_cS7ympZ8C&pg=PA13&ots=k\\_FRMiFi2X&dq=bill%20mckibben%20unread%20book&pg=PA13#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=o8_cS7ympZ8C&pg=PA13&ots=k_FRMiFi2X&dq=bill%20mckibben%20unread%20book&pg=PA13#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Last fall Cornel West wrote an essay saying that King wouldn't have wanted a monument, he wanted a revolution: "A revolution in our priorities, a re-evaluation of our values, a reinvigoration of our public life and a fundamental transformation of our way of thinking and living that promotes a transfer of power from oligarchs and plutocrats to everyday people and ordinary citizens." <sup>3</sup>

In that letter from Birmingham jail, Martin King wrote, "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people." My good people, will the world be any different because we were here? Will it be any better? Are we breaking down the walls that divide us? Are we building the beloved community? Are we moving forward? Or maintaining the status quo?

I believe in the church because I know that on my own, I am inadequate to the task. But joining hands with you, and with others, I have the faith and the hope that we can and will make a difference.

We can overcome our fears and our prejudices. We can overcome distrust and hatred. Together we can overcome those forces that would divide us. We can help build that land that we dream of. Our faith is that the arc of the universe does bend toward justice. Our duty is to be part of that bending, to help hasten that day when all of us shall be free.

Deep in my heart, I do believe, that we shall overcome some day.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/26/opinion/martin-luther-king-jr-would-want-a-revolution-not-a-monument.html>