



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Prayer for our Nation: A New Heart,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on January 16, 2011

As the shooting tragedy in Tucson was unfolding last Saturday, one of the first headlines I saw online was written by the correspondent for a newspaper in London. This reporter led with the fact that the immediate result of the shooting was a torrent of anger in our country; that the internet lit up with people casting blame, or reacting to something they disagreed with.

It's an unfortunate part of our human nature that we tend, when something bad happens, to look for a reason. We want to explain it, and sometime reach for unhelpful and even harmful conclusions. “Your cancer must be God's will. Maybe there's a lesson you need to learn.” We seem to have forgotten the age-old practice of lament. That when something bad happens, there is a time to mourn, and a time to weep. A time to say, “This is awful. It shouldn't have happened.” That's what we need to do first--lament and grieve.

There is a time for anger, and it's healthy to express anger when bad things happen. But too often we don't know where to place that anger. In the old days, I mean the really old days, people would rent their garments, literally tear their clothes, to express their grief, loss and anger. This was a physical and public way to act out the pain that comes when a relationship had been severed.

But these days, anger seems close to the surface all the time--people swear at each other in traffic, flame one another online, get paid to yell at each other on TV. These days, anger is a growth industry.

The people who have created an, uncivil and toxic climate in our country--the media personalities, the bloggers, the politicians, and all of us who feed them, because we are their audience--we are to blame for creating a society in which no holds are barred, in which the truth is not as important as scoring points, in which the winner is the one who gets in the first blow, and the last. I'm not saying there is a link between politicians who use language like “targeting our opponent” and the shooting in Tucson. But does an overheated political climate diminish our culture? Do airwaves loaded with blame and vitriol contribute to increasing levels of anger in America? Does this meanness threaten our democracy? Of course it does.

Last Sunday, Sally spoke about Bobby Kennedy's openhearted response to the people of Indianapolis, speaking on the night Martin Luther King was killed. This week I heard a story about Bobby Kennedy's son Joseph, who in the early '70's, participated in a Boston-area class on

community organizing, That class offered tactics for getting people fired up so they would work for change. The teacher described a process of choosing “targets,” that is, community leaders they could direct the public’s anger against, in order to mobilize people for positive change.

The story is that the younger Kennedy brought the class to a halt with his focused stare into the instructor’s eyes. When the teacher asked Joseph Kennedy if he had anything to say, this young man, who’d lost his father to an assassin, said: “Human beings must never be targets.”¹ Would that our leaders might take this lesson to heart.

We are a people obsessed with winning. Our politics reflect this--for many, it has become a game, a spectator sport--who is up and who is down? Who landed blows and scored points? The reason for politics in a democracy is to sort out competing ideas and interests, to build a stronger fabric of community among diverse perspectives, to insure the common good--that is, the best outcome for the greatest number of people. But this gets trounced underfoot by the gamesmanship that is our politics these days.

It is not a game, as the events of last Saturday painfully remind us. Real people are affected by the votes taken in Congress, and by what is said on the internet, talk radio and cable TV. Would anyone disagree that we are on a dangerous path, and need to turn back from this downward spiral of vitriol and violence?

If we were the kind of church where you brought Bibles to worship, I’d ask you to turn right now to the prophet Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible, to chapter 36. Ezekiel was a prophet in the time when the nation had been crushed, the temple destroyed, the people exiled to Babylon. It was generally understood that the nation had brought defeat upon themselves. But in exile Ezekiel spoke to them these hopeful words, in which God promises better times to Israel, not because the people are good, but because God is good. Here is what he says:

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Ezekiel 36:26-29).

A new heart and a new spirit I will give you. I will remove your heart heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh. Is there any doubt that we are, these days, a hard-hearted country? It was Vice President George Bush, running for president back in 1988, who acknowledged this when he said he wanted a kinder and gentler nation. That was over 20 years ago, and things have gotten worse. I’m not saying we need to tone things down, though that is needed. I’m not saying we need to be nicer to one another--that’s not enough. I’m saying we need a change of heart. A big change, a transformation. A heart transplant.

And yet, I do want to remind you of the words we just sang from “Lift Every Voice and Sing”:

¹ I read this story on the blog of the Rev. Marie de Young, minister of the Gulf Coast UU Fellowship, which can be found at <http://networkedblogs.com/cMT3Y>

Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our (parents) sighed?

We have come so far in this country. When I was a child in North Carolina, segregation was legal and was the norm. That we have come, in a half century, from segregation and oppression to electing an African-American president, is real progress. Progress is often two steps forward, and one step back. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Rev. King wrote, "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of (people) willing to be co workers with God."

So if you are discouraged by the news these days, as I often am, then take heart, and take the long view. We who believe in freedom and justice have come a long way. Do not let your hearts be discouraged. You need an open heart, a loving heart, for the living of these days. How do you get one? And how does our country trade in its heart of stone for a heart of flesh?

For the answer we need only look to the man whose life and ministry we celebrate today, the pastor and prophet who lived among us, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. What Rev. King gave to us, and to the world, was a living example of love in action. Specifically, the power of nonviolence as a force against evil and for good, a transformative power for the oppressed and for the oppressor. What do we need in this hard-hearted time in our country? How do we transform our heart of stone into a heart of flesh? It's simple, and it's difficult-- we need to commit to nonviolence.

This is a huge subject, and it's work for a lifetime. I'll have more to say about it next week. For now, I'll say that nonviolence means you don't respond to hatred with hatred. You give up the desire to get in the last word, or land the last blow, or make the final point. A commitment to nonviolence means giving up the use of power in the conventional sense--the power of intimidation, coercion, force. You lay those weapons down. But what you gain is soul force, what Gandhi called Satyagraha, "the Force which is born of Truth and Love."

Our times cry out to us, and ask, "Where are you going to stand?" On the side of distrust, fear and violence, or on the side of love, and faith and hope? Where are our leaders, and our institutions, and our country going to stand?

Will you say no to the violence in our society? Turn off the TV and radio when they spew hatred, and let them know you will no longer patronize them. Call our leaders to account when they malign others, and say "You will not get my vote when you tear down or target another person." Will you commit to changing your own heart? To trying to understand and even love, not only your friends, but your enemies? It won't be easy. Rev. King knew this from experience, and told us so in our reading this morning:

"I do not want to give the impression that nonviolence will work miracles overnight.... When the underprivileged demand freedom, the privileged first react with bitterness and resistance.... the nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does

something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. Finally, it reaches the opponent and so stirs his conscience that reconciliation becomes a reality.”²

Those words describe not only his time, but ours. For those who are privileged, because of skin color or national origin or wealth, these can be scary times. The old world is falling away, and the future is uncertain. What is certain is that violence is not the answer. As Gandhi said, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” Now is the time to drop our defensive posture, lay down our weapons, and pray to be transformed. To pray for a new heart, a heart open to the beauty and the pain of this life, a heart emboldened with soul force--with the power of truth and love.

Dr. King knew this because he lived it. He inspired others to stand up to their oppressors; to say, “I am no longer going to participate in my own oppression.” They put their lives on the line for the cause of freedom and justice. They suffered together, went to jail together, sang and prayed together. And together, they changed our nation.

Now is our time. These days, I’m praying for our country. That we will be transformed. That America will lose her heart of stone, and it will be replaced with a heart of flesh. That we will see what a gift we have been given to live in this country at this time, and we will commit ourselves anew to the work that lies before us. To build the kingdom of heaven right here on earth. To carry on the work of Rev. King and all those who have brought us so far along the way.

Will you pray with me?

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by Thy might led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.³
Take away this heart of stone, and put in us a heart of flesh,
that peace and justice will reign,
and we will be your people, and you will be our God,

Amen.

² from Martin Luther King’s essay “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” published in the *Christian Century* magazine April 13, 1960, available at http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/pilgrimage_to_nonviolence

³ These words from “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” by James Weldon Johnson.