



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Ever Singing March We Onward,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on January 4, 2015

When you think about all the discord, the injustice, all the trouble in our world, do you ever get discouraged? Do you ever get tired? I do. Sometimes I wonder: is it ever going to change? Am I a fool for thinking that I, that we, can make a difference?

Are you ever tempted to harden your heart, to say, “All I can do is take care of myself and my family. I can’t worry about anyone else. I don’t have the time or the energy to be concerned about big things like peace and justice, which I don’t have any control over anyway.” Do you ever want to hide out from the troubles of this world; protect yourself from the knowledge of all the hurt and injustice?

There are people who do this, who close themselves off, who try to withdraw from the troubles of the world. I worry for our society, because we seem to be heading in this direction. It’s more socially acceptable these days, than it used to be, to say, “I’ve got mine; I can’t worry about anyone else.” As a culture, are we more jaded, more cynical, more selfish, and less hopeful than we used to be?

Fifty-four years ago, on the day he became president, John Kennedy exhorted the nation, “Ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country.” Aren’t we as hungry, these days, for this call to service and commitment? Don’t we want and need to be reassured that we are all in this together, that we are bound together, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, “in an inescapable network of mutuality”? Isn’t that why you are here?

Our worship theme for January is justice. And I have to admit that sometimes, thinking about all the injustice in our nation and in the world makes me tired. But that is my problem--it’s a sign that I’m seeing things too much from my own narrow perspective. People who are thirsting for justice don’t have the luxury of taking a break or walking away. How can I, who profess to care, not do what I can to help?

When we find ourselves feeling tired and discouraged, in danger of not caring, that is a spiritual affliction that needs to be taken seriously. In our reading this morning, Mark Morrison-Reed is clear that the desire and passion to work for justice comes from our connections to one another, and that is why we are here--to wake up to this connectedness.

Listen again to Mark’s words:

This is the central task of the worshipping community:  
to invite the Spiritual Presence;  
to unveil the connectedness of all humanity through the story of life;  
and thus to reveal this universal truth,  
which is only discovered amid the particulars of our own lives  
and the lives of others.  
Once felt it inspires us to act for justice.<sup>1</sup>

If you don't feel inspired to act for justice, then that is a sign that you are disconnected, that you need to tend your relationship with your soul, with others, with that Spiritual Presence. Because it is from those sources that our passion and power, our commitment to justice, will come.

We won't all go about this work in the same way. Some of us come to church primarily to have our spirits fed: we express our spirituality through prayer and meditation, we are comfortable with quiet, we tend toward the contemplative. And others of us are activists--we come to church primarily to put our hands to work, we express our spirituality through what we do, we want to change the world and want others would join us because there is so much we could do!

But this is not an either/or: we are called to live an integrated life, to see contemplation and action not as separate or as competing interests, but rather, as two sides of the same coin.

Two years ago I attended a minister's conference in California. Mark Morrison-Reed was part of a panel discussion there. I don't remember the topic; I only remember something Mark said to us, his colleagues in ministry. He said, "If you are not cultivating your own spiritual life, if you don't have a spiritual practice that is feeding you, then do us all a favor and get out of the ministry." He understands that the stakes are high, and that you'd better be grounded in something larger than your own ambition or ego if you have any hope of helping to heal and bless our world.

Sometimes we put things backwards. In our zeal to make ours a better world, we forget that this is soul work, and we have to tend our souls if we are going to stay in it for the long haul. We need to remember that our work for justice has to come out of a deep joy and reverence for life, for human connection, for the fathomless mystery some of us call God.

Two weeks from today is our annual Martin Luther King breakfast. It's such a blessing, this friendship we have with our friends from Calvary Baptist Church. That morning we will break bread together, we will hear words and music that help us to remember Rev. Dr. King's life and ministry. At the end we will stand and sing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," and "We Shall Overcome." We'll hold hands as we sing, and that moment is a powerful one; it does what good worship also does, it makes the connections we share, the mutuality are part of, visible, tangible, feel-able.

We don't do this just because it makes us feel good. No, we do it to be inspired--for the Spirit to come in--to be strengthened and encouraged to go out and work for the same things Martin Luther King, Jr. fought for--human dignity, equal opportunity, an end to racism and discrimination and violence against people of color.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Morrison-Reed, "Integration Where it Counts," from *Awakened From the Forest: Meditations on Ministry*, Gary Smith, editor.

Singing has been integral to so many social movements because singing opens our hearts and connects us to one another in powerful ways. Singing and praying, worshipping and praising, open us up and connect us to our source and to one another. These practices remind us who we are and how we are meant to live.

I've told you before what Bernice Johnson Reagon says about how, during the Civil Rights Movement, the authorities would come in and try to intimidate protesters, and those fighting for civil rights would start singing, and that would help them take the space back. Last summer, when a group of people interrupted the worship service at the 1st UU Church in New Orleans, it was a group of youth there for a training that took the space back by starting a song that soon, everyone joined in on.

There's a hymn that I love, set to Beethoven's tune Ode to Joy, that was written over a hundred years ago. My favorite line is

Ever singing, march we onward, victors in the midst of strife,  
Joyful music leads us sunward in the triumph song of life.<sup>2</sup>

Ever singing, march we onward--that's the image I want to lift up for you today. That's how we ought to set about our work for justice, with a joyful heart and a celebratory spirit. That's how we will sustain ourselves for the long haul. Ever singing says, "You can't beat us down, because we have soul force!"

There's a Swahili proverb that strikes a similar tone. It says, "Life has meaning only in the struggle. Triumph or defeat is in the hands of the Gods... So let us celebrate the struggle!"

To celebrate the struggle, to make a practice of standing on the side of love and justice, that is what it means to be a person of faith. It is to cast your lot, as Adrienne Rich wrote, "with those who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world." It is to choose, as Rebecca Parker puts it, "to bless the world."

This is what we are about. Inviting that spiritual presence into our lives, being stirred up and fired up, compelled to do our part; begin drawn into connection with others, so our perspective is broadened and our strength is multiplied. It is getting to that place Denise Levertov writes about, that "starts when you say We and you know who you mean, and each day you mean one more."

In this month when we celebrate champions of justice like Martin Luther King, Jr., it could be tempting to cast them as heroes and think, "What can I do? What power do I have?" But we can't afford for anyone to sit back. There is too much to do. We each have a role to play. Not all the same role, but we each can do something. What is yours part to play?

"If you can walk you can dance," the saying goes, "if you can talk you can sing." Our world need more people singing, keeping us moving forward, lifting our hands in service and lifting our voices

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<sup>2</sup> "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," words by Henry J. van Dyke.

in praise. We don't need more spectators, we need you to find your way to join in the song. Whether you have confidence in your ability, or not. That's how you learn, by trying. That's how you grow, by sticking your neck out. That's how a movement starts, that's how things change, one person at a time. Progress can be slow, it can be discouraging sometimes, which is why we need to keep our spirits up, why we need one another, why we need to be singing.

This is what prophets have always called for. Their words ring out to us, down through the ages they cry:

Come build a land where sisters and brothers,  
Anointed by God, may then create peace:  
Where justice shall roll down like waters,  
and peace like an ever flowing stream.<sup>3</sup>

May we be people of faith and courage, so in touch with the Spirit, so connected to our sister and brothers, that we are ever compelled to do our part to help heal and bless our world. Ever singing march we onward!

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> "We'll Build a Land," words by Barbara Zanotti.