

An American Hero

Arlington Street Church

January 20, 2008

Less than three weeks ago today, our nation marked a momentous anniversary – a huge bicentennial anniversary. Yet there were no huge new automobile sales events, no presidential or political candidate declarations, the malls did not open early or close late in order that we might celebrate this bicentennial with retail extravaganzas. To my knowledge, not even any of our popular or infamous religious leaders made mention of it.

Do any of us here gathered this morning know what this anniversary was? Do I have any guesses or speculations? Well I must admit that I was not aware of the anniversary at the time it occurred – only in preparing for this sermon did I learn of this anniversary and begin to understand our country's most fundamental and shameful need to ignore it.

January 1, 2008 was the 200th anniversary of the United State's Congress prohibition of the importation of slaves into our country.¹

Last year, 2007, marked the bicentennial Great Britain's prohibition of the slave trade. There it was marked by numerous museum exhibits, scholarly and historical conferences and the very

¹ New York Times, Op. Ed. "Forgotten Step Toward Freedom," December 30, 2007.

popular, high budget film “Amazing Grace.” That film dramatized and commemorated slave trader William Wilberforce’s conversion from slave merchant to ardent abolitionist and the genesis of that familiar hymn of the same name.²

Now there are myriad reasons why our nation would not, or could not, mark this momentous day in the history of freedom and liberty. Or was it a disingenuous and hollow date in our national ignominy of racialized slavery and institutionalized, commercialized, and legally-enshrined oppression? But this question is not the purpose or the subject of this sermon and our coming together this morning – the Sunday of our national holiday that memorializes and commemorates the American hero, Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Junior.

Certainly our unique and horrific history of racialized slavery and systematized racism forms the backdrop, stage and plot on which the story of this man was written and lived; but IT is not the story of this man. Rather, it is the story of what he survived and what he overcame and what he was most effective at beginning to dismantle and reverse.

It is this work, this avocation, this spiritual directive to undue violence with peace, to eviscerate hatred with love, and to displace oppression with prayerful compassion that makes him such a hero,

² *Ibid.*

such a singular spiritual force and a person of incomparable vision and hope whose message is as relevant and transformative today as it was 50 years ago.

We – each and every one of us in North America owe the undeserved bounty of our lives and existences – not to mention the very survival of our nation, culture and society – to this man of oh so humble origins. He was a man who had the courage, principle and conviction to bring about the peaceful end of one of humanity’s most savage and cruel systems of exploitation and oppression – American race-based slavery, that for centuries and centuries systematically sought the subjugation and at times the downright destruction of African peoples and their homelands. Far lesser human injustices have brought about far greater carnage; the Bible and human history itself are prime evidence of that.

How could a system of such savage inhumanity produce such a remarkable man of strength, courage and fortitude, one who would usher in the end times of one of man’s cruelest and most systematic inhumanities to his fellow man, a system that persisted in one form or another for almost 500 years?

And he would do it by peaceful and prayerful means.

This is not to negate his own ultimate and knowing, premature sacrifice for the cause that animated his existence and ministry; a ministry and mission that brought profound

transformation to every aspect of life in the United States. Like his own savior, Reverend King's love and profound faith led him to willingly make the ultimate personal sacrifice in order to save larger humanity.

This social transformation – set in final motion by a single man - has been so major that most of us privileged white folks – you know the ones who run the government and big business and our communities – folks much like you and me – have almost no way to fathom the hatred, oppression and exploitation that created that theretofore unbreakable grasp – what we today call systemic racism.

At the time Dr. King began his ministry and mission, every single point of interaction between white folks and African Americans was either legally, traditionally or culturally designed to reinforce the message to the African American that she was an inferior being to a white person and therefore was inevitably required to always live under the thumb and thumbnails of white oppression. These days people often comment that things could never have been all that bad just some 40 or 50 years ago – but they are never African Americans or white folks who know better.

Even after years of higher education, law school and a litigation practice that involved more than a few civil rights cases, I did not learn about the true stranglehold and deadly consequences

of American racism until I entered seminary and studied the hideousness and the violence of the system we had devised to oppress and exploit an entire people and their continent.

Many call it genocide, which is certainly the effect on any African who fell into the nets of the slave traders or their murderous kidnappers. Name, identity, religion, family, social status all completely destroyed in the flash of a moment as one's individuality, identity and independence gone. In their place were beatings, family members gone without notice and the humiliation of public sale; customs and practices that were designed to resemble cattle – just another piece of someone else's property. They were intentionally and systematically stripped of every shred of human dignity.

One thing is certain, this system of racialization that we spent hundreds of years creating, refining and enforcing was not going to disappear easily or soon, even with all of its flaws, injustice and ungodliness. And in terms of morality, fairness and justice, there was also no disagreement about the powerful negative influences that such thought patterns can and did produce, both on the oppressed AND the oppressor. African Americans internalized – began to believe it themselves that they were merely what was reflected back to them by white society and the oppressors, the

white folks began to believe that they might actually be somehow superior to these other children of God.

So after a couple of generations many African Americans believed that they might be inferior to the light skinned children of creation and we light-skinned folks began to believe our own nonsense about being somehow superior to the dark-skinned children of creation. These lies became entrenched in the very story of the United States, its founding, growth, ethos and prominence today.

These lies held secure that system of theft, dehumanization, savagery and hate; so much so that this system remained in place and unassailable for almost 500 years. It held fast with such strength that even today whole continents and peoples are condemned to poverty, warfare and famine because of this North American historical, economic and cultural phenomenon.

Even the United States Civil War – at its time the most destructive war ever witnessed on Earth – with 610,000 to 700,000 Americans killed at each others' hands – was not a force sufficient enough to break this nation free from the grasp of racialized slavery, and racialized superiority. Systemic racism and racial hatred continued to hold sway for another 100 years. Even in Dr. King's own time, African Americans, especially in the East and South, were in worse economic and social condition and had more

perilous futures than their forbearers had at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, a century earlier – when Abraham Lincoln set free all of the slaves in the United States.

Those 100 years between the freeing of the slaves by proclamation and the first real legal efforts by our government to acknowledge and protect African Americans' most basic human rights is perhaps the darkest time of that 500 years. Our government and society and mainline religious institutions chose to ignore the scientific, political and spiritual dictates of their time in order to uphold a corrupt, inhumane and grossly sinful system of hatred, exploitation and oppression.

What force would ever be big enough and powerful enough to take on this monstrosity? How could that monstrosity be subdued without destroying the very heads, hearts and souls in which it found its residence?

Since you're all here this morning, you all know already, that only something larger than ourselves and individual human capacities, could begin to undo this twisted web of evil that man had created, enshrined and so vigorously defended for centuries. To put in traditional religious terms, at this time of God's children yet once again letting down our potential in the biggest possible way, God or goodness or grace saw fit not to punish, or destroy or

condemn us to live in the conditions and with the consequences, we had so heartlessly created for ourselves and others.

In that traditional lexicon again, for God so loved humanity that Grace brought to us a man of faith and peace and prayer who set about quietly and with profound human dignity to begin to undo one of the most violent, savage and inhumane systems in the history of humankind. The man who would usher in this staggering social, political and spiritual transformation, knew from the very start, that he would never use a weapon to physically harm another human being. This was so even with the most just and pressing cause, where millions had been killed and millions more had been destroyed, with nearly 500 violent and ungodly years of entrenched history.

The man who set in final motion the transformation of a continent, the largest and richest economic machine ever, a nation and its government, its many peoples and many churches, temples and mosques, cities and farms, and yes even Black and white – that man of humble origins and deep faith, with human dignity and divine grace, peacefully changed the course of history by addressing injustice with justice until each injustice was balanced with justice; where hatred was met with love, and despair was overshadowed by hope.

Reverend Martin Luther King counseled prayers for the oppressors until their hearts and souls would be turned to recognize and acknowledge that the ultimate act of Christian faith was to love one's oppressor into the spiritual growth that would allow that oppressor to see the error, harm and grievous sinfulness of the oppressors' ways. Again, I say far lesser injustices in human history have left far greater carnage in their wakes.

It is Dr. King who is so clearly a divine example of amazing grace in our times – that even in the face of some of humanity's more horrific betrayals of love and decency and basic ethics we were met not with destruction, violence and retribution but with even *more* love, compassion and hope. We were spared what many might have called our just desserts for our failures.

Reverend King knew that the hour of our deliverance was at hand, even though millions of powerful white folks and millions of downtrodden African Americans did not or could not see it that way. Reverend King showed us - one injustice at a time - what it would take to turn the long arc of human history toward justice.

In the words of Reverend David Bumbaugh, he showed us, No matter how difficult the situation, how intense the hatred he confronted, how subtle the powers ranged against him, he seemed always to convey a fundamental faith in the humanity of others ... a stubborn faith that no one could be forever beyond the reach of love. He strengthened us in our determination, and by his very presence he guarded us

against the temptation to hate and despise those who blocked our dreams and derided our hopes.³

Yes, Dr. King embodied and lived all of those principles, purposes and values that we Unitarian Universalists hold near and dear. He brought about profound and staggering change – against all odds – by using the ways that we are even now still struggling to live and put to use in our efforts to transform our world. He still has so very much to teach us on our ways.

My beloved fellow Unitarian Universalist seekers and sharers, we have been blessed and enriched by the ministry, mission and work of this Baptist minister. He was that and a civil rights leader and a powerful patriot and freedom fighter. He proved, in compelling and undeniable ways, the power of love over hate. And even with his own tragic and violent death he still embodied the power and the persuasion of the nonviolent way even in the face violence and hopelessness.

While the power establishment sought to exclude him, he made us all learn that “we are caught in a network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny – that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” He is not just an African American hero, he is an American hero and we are blessed that that is so.

³ Sermon entitled “A Candle is a Terrible Thing to Waste,” January 18, 1998, The Unitarian Church in Summit.

AMEN