

Standing on the Side of Love

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

January 16th, 2011

Rev. Patty Hanneman

Call to Worship

Don't leave your broken heart at the door:
Bring it to the altar of life.
Don't leave your anger behind,
It has high standards,
And the world needs vision.
Bring them with you, and your joy
And your passion.
Bring your loving
And your courage
And your conviction.
Bring your need for healing
And your powers to heal.
There is work to do
And all we need to do it
Is here.
So let us come in
And then let us reach beyond the walls of this church.
Let us fill this sanctuary with love
And then harness its power to stop oppression and violence.
Let us join together in worship
And together let us stand on the side of love.

Angela Herrera

Lighting of the chalice – We light our chalice, kindling the flame of our Unitarian Universalist heritage.

Opening Hymn – *This Little Light of Mine*, #118

Children's Story – *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*

Candles of Joy and Concern

Pastoral Prayer

Spirit of Life and Love, be present with us as we remember what has just been shared in this circle of community. We also bare witness that there are many things that remain in our hearts this morning. For the weary, may there be strength. For the wounded, let there be comfort. Let the downtrodden be lifted up, and may we have the courage to make it so. May we feel your movement through our lives so that through us your work is done. Keep us ever faithful in standing on the side of love. Blessed be.

Singing the Children to Class

Offering – And now let there be an offering to sustain and strengthen this place which is sacred to many of us, this community of memory and hope.

Reading

When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: “let us love one another; for love is God and everyone that love[s] is born of God and know[s] God.”

From MLK’s address to the anti-war group, Clergy and Laity Concerned, 1967

Sermon

In 1957, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon during which he told the following story:

I think I mentioned before that some time ago my brother and I were driving one evening to Chatanooga, Tennessee, from Atlanta. He was driving the car. And for some reason the drivers were very discourteous that night. They didn't dim their lights, hardly any driver that passed by dimmed his lights. And I remember very vividly, my brother A.D. looked over and in a tone of anger said, "I know what I'm going to do. The next car that comes along here and refuses to dim the lights, I'm going to fail to dim mine and pour them on in all their power." And I looked at him right quick and said: "Oh, no, don't do that. There'd be too much light on this highway, and it will end up in mutual destruction for all. Somebody got to have some sense on this highway.

Somebody must have sense enough to dim the lights, and that's the trouble isn't it? That as all the civilizations of the world move up the highway of history, so many civilizations, having looked at other civilizations that refused to dim the lights, decided to refuse to dim theirs. And Toynbee tells that out of twenty-two civilizations that have risen up, all but seven of them have found themselves in the junk heap of destruction. It is because civilizations fail to have enough sense to dim the lights. And if somebody doesn't have sense enough to turn on the dim and beautiful and powerful lights of love in this world... we will all end up destroyed because nobody had any sense on the highway of history. Somewhere somebody must have some sense.

Somewhere somebody must have some sense. This story is from King's sermon entitled *Loving Your Enemies* where he lays out his reasons for organizing non-violent resistance based on the principle of love. Love, he said, is the only redemptive power that is able to create the kind of change that can lead to peace, and therefore hope for the future.

In politics and in times of social change, there is always a spiritual choice to be made – a choice between love which leads to hope, or fear. Leaders can build movements either by appealing to a vision of what our communities can be, or by painting a picture of what to fear. Increasingly, we've watched as Washington politics have become frozen solid, each party adapting to a politic of fear, leading to vitriol more intense than ever before. On cable TV and talk radio, honest and robust political discourse has been replaced by ideological food fights. New technologies accelerate feelings that are already there. As Community and ethnic bonds have become looser in this country, increasingly political parties have become the new "tribe" so that when our "tribe" is attacked it is natural to want to strike back, to protect our own. Bullying, name-calling, sabotage, stereotyping, have all become expected. We live increasingly, on both the left and the right, by painting a picture of what we fear if the other guys take control. So everyone drives with their brights on, blinding us all to what we hope to be and can accomplish through the kind of love that Martin Luther King, Jr. believed in.

I am convinced that for practical as well as for moral reasons, non-violent resistance offers the only road toward dramatic social change. I believe in King's idea of the redemptive power of love. Of living out of a politic of love that leads to hope, not fear. And yet here's the irony: while that may be the case, it often takes a violent, senseless act to get our attention. In the 1960s, King became deeply involved in the Civil Rights movement, using non-violent confrontation. Yet it was in large part due to the beating death of the Rev. James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister, in 1965, that caught the attention of the nation and gave President Johnson the space from which he could say to Congress, "*We shall overcome!*" and push forward the Voting Rights Act of that year. The beating caused the nation to pause and to ask, how can we make moral sense of this?

A week ago yesterday we witnessed another violent and senseless act in Tucson, and although there is little correlation between the events of that day and our political food fighting, it has caught our attention; we are again pausing, considering how to act. Some, pausing momentarily, are pointing fingers at the other side. Shame on you for your behavior, we say! Others are looking into their own hearts and asking, how do we make moral sense out of this, and where do we go from here?

We cannot let this moment go by, by simply using this tragedy as one more reason to turn on one another. As King once wrote, “men must see that force begets force, hate begets hate, toughness begets toughness, angry words beget angry words. And it is all a descending spiral.” (from his sermon: *Loving Our Enemies*). We cannot let this moment go by. But let our national debate be worthy of those we have lost. Judge John Roll, Christina Taylor Green, Gabe Zimmerman, Dorothy Morris, Dorwin Stoddard, and Phyllis Schneck.

And let our national debate be worthy of the man we celebrate this week on Martin Luther King Day. King would have asked, what does love require of me now? What does love, that force which all the religious have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life, require of me now?

What does it require of us now?

As Unitarian Universalists, we could begin by taking our 7 Principles seriously, in particular having the humility to accept the first principle – that everyone, regardless of political persuasion, has inherent worth and dignity. A religious leader who meets regularly with Obama’s staff and who has been serious about changing the tone of political discourse is the Rev. Jim Wallis, an Evangelical Christian dedicated to social change. Last year Wallis called on religious leaders across the country to sign a document called *A Covenant for Civility* which I have signed and I recommend us all to consider. It also has seven principles:

1. We commit that our dialogue will be in line with the Apostle James’ words: to be “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”
2. We believe that because each of us is created in the image of God, each of us deserves to be treated with respect.
3. We pledge that when we disagree, it will be done without falsely impugning the other’s motives, attacking another’s character, or questioning another’s intentions.
4. We will be mindful of the language we use, that it be neither arrogant or boastful.
5. We will be mindful of how we treat each other as we dispute how best to pursue the common good, in the common life we share.
6. We commit to praying for our political leaders – those with whom we agree, as well as those with whom we disagree.

7. We commit to praying for our enemies and adversaries, because it is more difficult to hate them when we are praying for them.

When we take these kinds of stands we are saying, I will not let my life and my politics be dominated by fear. I choose instead to stand on the side of love.

The word *love* is often bantered about too much until it begins to lose its meaning. What exactly do we mean by love? What did King mean when he said we should love our enemies? The Greek language very powerfully gives real meaning and depth to the philosophy of love. The Greeks have three separate words that we interpret into English as love. First there is the Greek word *eros*. *Eros* is a kind of hyper-aesthetic love; the yearning of the soul for the beautiful or romantic. You experience all the beauty and power of *Eros* when you find someone who is attractive to you and you want to pour all your time and energy into that individual.

Then there's the Greek word *philia*. *Philia* is a sort of intimate affection between friends. It's a reciprocal love. You love that person because you have certain things in common; you call them up to have dinner. You like them and they like you and there is a comfortable exchange between you.

And the third Greek word for love is *agape*. *Agape* is more difficult but more profound than the other two. *Agape* is the creative, redemptive goodwill for all people. It is what Christian theologians would call the love of God working through the lives of men and women. When you love with *agape* love, you love, not because people are likable, or because they're attractive, or because you have something in common, but because God loves them. Because, no matter what, they too have inherent worth and dignity. Even though the person may be the biggest scoundrel you ever saw.

When King wrote his sermon, *Loving Your Enemies*, this is the kind of love he was talking about. It doesn't mean you fawn over the person; but it is a love that refuses to defeat a person, even as you are trying to defeat his agenda; it is a love that refuses to engage in name-calling in a debate; refuses to use violent rhetoric or imagery during a protest; refuses to abuse our 1st Amendment privileges to be offensive; refuses to deliberately spread misinformation.

This is standing on the side of love. The murders in Tucson give us a window of opportunity to reflect humbly, to look into our souls and ask, what does agape love require of us now?

Standing on the side of love requires that we consider being a liberating people instead of simply a liberal people. Marjorie Bowens Wheatley and Mark Morrison-Reed and others have written about the differences between liberal and liberating. Liberal, they explain, means “freedom to,” as in freedom to believe what you want, freedom to say what you want. Liberating means “freedom from.” Freedom from the structures of oppression; freedom from being dehumanized; freedom from the threat of harm through violent acts or language. Standing on the side of love means standing with those who need liberating. It means harnessing agape love to stop oppression and violence where we see it by speaking out and acting out with love. The world desperately needs people of faith, speaking out of agape love, to speak up and change the tone of conversation in the public square. On the highways of our lives let us be the first to dim our lights, living out of a theology that says love, not fear, is our default position.

In the late fall of 2008, a gunman walked into the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church on a Sunday morning and out of fear for the liberal stance they have on many issues, opened fire. The Knoxville Community responded with an outpouring of love that inspired the leadership at the Unitarian Universalist Association to launch a campaign that would harness love’s power to challenge exclusion, oppression, and violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, race, religion, political tribe, or any other identity. It is called the Standing on the Side of Love Campaign, and it has been used as a rallying point for Unitarian Universalists as we fight for the rights of LGBT people, for humane immigration laws, wherever we need to stand with those who need to be liberated.

The Standing on the Side of Love Campaign remains focused on the exact opposite of vitriol. It says that all our protests will be non-violent and that all our debates will use non-violent language. It tells those who represent us that their responsibility is to unify and advance our communities, not divide us from our neighbors simply because of who we are. It says that we know how we treat one another truly matters, that we recognize what King taught us decades ago: that fear only hardens to rage and potential violence. Therefore we choose to ground our actions in love. Not fear. When we walk behind this banner in protest, when we schedule a Standing on the Side of Love event in our community, when we write a note to our congressperson with this logo, we are speaking as a person of faith, a Unitarian Universalist, choosing love over fear.

What does love require of you right now? Is there a place in your life where you can offer, not just your liberal voice, but a liberating voice? An area of your life where you need to dim your lights? How would it feel, for instance, this week, to send that congressperson of yours with whom you vehemently disagree, a letter thanking him or her for their public service, understanding the risks that public office entails? But also telling them that you expect them to denounce violent language in their discourse. Tell them it is unacceptable to you and you expect them to commit to a more respectful, cooperative political climate. If they don't know what that looks like, tell them to get in touch with Rev. Wallis and he can show them his *Covenant for Civility*.

This is agape love. And on this Martin Luther King Sunday, I can think of no better way to honor that great man's life and legacy than choosing to stand with him on the side of love.

May is be so, and blessed be.

Closing Hymn - #1014, *Standing on the Side of Love*

Closing Words

May we, as individuals and as a congregation, rededicate ourselves to be a model of peacemaking. May we commit ourselves to providing by the way we live our lives that there are effective alternatives to violence. Go in peace my friends, and blessed be.