

Still Learning from Selma

First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Rev. Ken Read-Brown

March 22, 2015

Reading

from UU minister Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed:

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

Sermon

Many of you have seen the film “Selma” – fictionalized portrayal yet largely true to the events of fifty years ago in Selma, Alabama.

Here is a personal perspective from someone who was in Selma for several of those fateful days that changed history.

Susan’s grandfather – my grandfather-in-law you could say – was Lawrence Brooks. Professionally he was a judge for many years at the Malden Court; but he also served our UU movement in many ways over the years, and was a member of the Board of the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1965, the year of the Selma march.

Judge Brooks wrote in his memoir of that time:

On Monday, March 8, 1965 Martin Luther King sent the following telegram to many religious groups in North America, among them the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston:

In the vicious maltreatment of defenseless citizens of Selma, where old women and young children were gassed and clubbed... we have witnessed an eruption of the disease of racism which seeks to destroy all..... It is fitting that all Americans help to bear the burden. I call therefore... join me in Selma.... In this way all America will testify that the struggle in Selma is for the survival of democracy everywhere in our land.

King's telegram was, as I said, on Monday, March 8. As Judge Brooks then simply writes:

On Tuesday, March 9 three (UU) clergymen who had gone to Selma were severely beaten. One of them, a Unitarian minister James Reeb, died.

He then recounts how three days later the UUA board voted that all members of the board who could would "travel to Selma to conduct a meeting and attend services for Reeb. Saturday, eighteen of us, about half the board, flew to Birmingham."

He goes on to recount vividly the tension and danger in Selma during the ensuing days, the care they were to take, warnings to stuff newspapers inside their hats to protect against possible police beatings, warnings against starting casual conversations with locals. He wrote of the bus trip from the airport to Selma: "The plan was to get there before dark, figuring there was less danger of attack by daylight."

Then he describes a worship service at the Baptist Church, Browne's Chapel, at which members of the delegation spoke, including Susan's grandfather, who writes that he gave three reasons for his presence there:

One I'm a judge and I hate injustice.

Two, I love my country and I hate the image this action in Selma is creating throughout the world.

Three, my father-in-law, 103 years ago, was asked by Governor Andrew to recruit a Negro regiment which he did, and he served as its colonel, receiving wounds at the Battle of Antietam which disabled him and gave him scars he carried to his death. I think my father-in-law, wherever he may be in the great beyond, will be gratified to know that his son-in-law is with you tonight in Selma.

Finally, Susan's grandfather recounts events of that night and the following day, long and tense hours at barricades, arm in arm with others, state police on the other side with their "blue helmets and clubs and doubtless tear-gas." Then he describes an afternoon meeting at Browne's Chapel at which Dr. King, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Water Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers, Eliot Richardson (who was then the Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts) and others spoke – as dignitaries from religious traditions including African American Episcopal, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, and others, sat on the platform.

Though Judge Brooks and other board members were unable to stay for the final march, their presence along with thousands of others had helped to make a difference at that moment in history.

His own last words about the occasion? "I was back in Boston early the next morning in time to put in a regular day's work at the Malden courthouse." He was, by the way, 84 at the time.

He concludes by printing some of President Johnson's speech before a joint session of Congress, March 15, pleading for passage of the Voting Rights Act:

I ask you to work long hours, nights and week-ends to pass this bill. For outside this chamber is the outraged conscience of a nation – the grave concern of many nations – and the harsh judgment of history on our acts.

At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was in Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma.

As you may know, in that same speech Johnson lifted up the murder of Unitarian minister James Reeb. Many have noted since the irony that it was the murder of a white minister that helped to galvanize action on the Voting Rights act... and not the murder several weeks earlier of African American Jimmy Lee Jackson, but it was that murder that led to Dr. King's initial call for a march from Selma to Montgomery. But one thing had led to another, tragedy and triumph interwoven, in that fateful year of the long, still continuing long march to freedom and equality and justice for all.

For that series of events fifty years ago, both terribly tragic – including not incidentally the murder later in that fateful month of March by the Klan of Unitarian Universalist laywoman Viola Liuzzo – yes tragic events, and remarkably, even surprisingly, also triumphant, a milestone in the continuing struggle for equality and justice in our land.

So... yes, much was accomplished, much was gained as the dismantling of Jim Crow continued, voting rights for all were at least ensured on the paper of national legislation, civil rights for all broadened.

And much has continued to change for the good in the fifty years since.

Think of just this single image: Two weeks ago thousands, black and white, all ages, all backgrounds, marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma peacefully with the full protection and coordination of the police and civil authorities. And... think of it... among the leaders of this march an African American president of the United States.

And yet... and yet...

We need only name Ferguson... to remind us that though much has changed... *much* remains to be done.

We need only to catalogue the efforts in all too many states to roll back the achievements of that landmark Voting Rights Act, to restrict access to the ballot... to remind us that *much* remains to be done.

We need only to name the hate too often directed not only towards African Americans (including our president), but towards undocumented immigrants, towards Muslims, toward gays and lesbians... to remind us that *much* remains to be done.

We need only to look around here today and see that we are an almost entirely white congregation in an almost entirely white community to remind us that *much* remains to be done... and that there is much we still need to learn from the events and the courage in Selma fifty years ago.

What then? What must we still learn? What must we still do?

First, we must not neglect our history: Not just the events at Selma, but the legacy of racism that has its roots in slavery, in reconstruction, in Jim Crow, and then the aftermath of World War II, a mere twenty years before Selma, when African American veterans who had risked their lives for this country and for ideals of freedom and equality, returned home only to be denied home loans, only to continue to be victims of institutional and personal racism in all manner of ways.

Second, we must name the many ways in which in spite of so many gains racism continues to permeate our society. There may no longer be separate water fountains and rest rooms or separate seats on the bus. But the gaps in income, the gaps in educational opportunity and achievement, the appalling rates of incarceration of young black men as compared with whites, the ways in which pollution impacts communities of color far more than largely white communities... all attest that a legacy of four hundred years of racism cannot be entirely undone in fifty years.

So - to those who say we've achieved the promised land of a color-blind society, and therefore can roll back this or that legislation from the civil rights era... we need to say and say loudly and clearly "*not so fast.*" For the work is indeed not yet complete, the march to freedom must continue.

Third. Those of us who are white must come to a deeper understanding of the privilege which comes to us not as a gift of God, not because we are somehow more virtuous or harder workers than those of other hues... but because we are white, because we - in general - had opportunities more easily open to us than to those of darker skin, often a better education, no fear of being stopped for the crime of "driving while white," no fear of being denied a loan or employment because of our color.

Finally then. I want to return to the message in the reading from my African American colleague Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed.

He wrote that "The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all."

He is of course precisely right. And his is an assertion not only about Unitarian Universalism, affirming as we do that we are part of an interdependent web of life and therefore must act for justice. No, every tradition at its heart affirms this message of the unity of life - each of us sparks of one divine reality, one body of Christ, one interwoven net of the Hindu God Indra, one Buddha nature, all children of one God.

But that's not all. For Mark goes on to write that this connectedness is "discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others." In other words we may all be part of a single unity of life, but we are each also individuals among other individuals - individuals of many colors, many cultures, many religions, many shapes and sizes, many ways of loving.

So we will have achieved a semblance of what Dr. King called the beloved community when we live in ways that affirm through particular connections and relationships amidst our diversity and within the power and reality of our unity.

Knowing that black lives matter, immigrant lives matter, Muslim lives matter.
Police lives matter.

All lives matter.

To put it another way, to march ever closer to that beloved community we need to do more than talk the feel good talk of the unity of life and the divine light within each person.

Again: We need to keep our eyes open to the history *and* to the continuing realities of life for people of color in our nation and in our communities.

We need, those of us who are white, to realize that we have privilege in this society simply because we are white.

We need to see and name the relationship between other social and environmental issues and racism.

All of this... *and* speak and act accordingly. In this spirit, to conclude, a few words from the current president of our Unitarian Universalist Association, Peter Morales:

We, Unitarian Universalists, often describe ourselves as believing in "deeds, not creeds." We are committed to putting our religious values into action, to stand on the side of love with the oppressed, the voiceless and the unseen. We are called today as we were called 50 years ago... We find ourselves again at a pivotal moment in history.

We must recommit to the work of those who struggled before us. We honor the sacrifices of Jackson, Reeb, and Liuzzo. But we look also to the future, to the vision of Dr. King's Beloved Community... The future will judge us by how we answer that call today.

Amen.