

“Reflections on Anti-Racism”

Homily by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

January 16, 2022

When Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at the 1966 Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly, the relationship he had with our Association wasn't all a bed of roses. Though he and his wife Coretta did attend Unitarian churches in Boston, they chose not to become Unitarian. In a 2002 interview, Revered Rosemary Bray McNatt shares some of the reasons why, based on an interview she had with Coretta Scott King. In addition to the challenges the Kings may have faced with their Christian theology, Reverend King may not have been welcomed to a settled ministry.

McNatt wrote, "In a religious movement engaged until the 1970s in the active discouragement of people of color who wished to join its ministerial ranks, King might have found his personal struggles to serve Unitarian Universalism at least as daunting as the Montgomery Bus Boycott."¹

The thing that most dissuaded the Kings from becoming Unitarian, however, was Dr. King's concern about liberalism. He wrote about this in his 1960 essay entitled "Pilgrimage to Non Violence":

...there is one phase of liberalism that I hope to cherish always: its devotion to the search for truth, its insistence on an open and analytical mind, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason. I came to feel that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism. Liberalism failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations.²

King needed a religion that realized a core need for faith in and relationship with the God of Liberation, as well as intellectualism, and he needed a religion which took action in accordance with values.

As part of his Ware Lecture, from which we drew

1 <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/why-martin-luther-king-jr.-wasnt-uu>

2 <https://www.christiancentury.org/article//pilgrimage-nonviolence>

this morning's Call to Worship, King asked Unitarian Universalist congregations to do four things: First, he said, we must "instill within the people of our congregations a world perspective." Second, we must "affirm over and over again the essential immorality of racial segregation." Third, he called on our congregations to "refute the idea that there are superior and inferior races. We must get rid of the notion once and for all that there are superior and inferior races." And, finally, Dr. King said our congregations must "move out into the arena of social action."³

Embrace theological diversity within our congregations, including Christians; ordain and call Black Ministers to our pulpits; admit the limits of reason; acknowledge our sins, or where we fall short in living in alignment with our values; create a world perspective; disavow racial segregation and the systemic racism behind that segregation; acknowledge the equality of all races and engage in social action.

How are we doing on those eight challenges, necessary to overcome if we are to create genuine beloved community where diversity is embraced in all its forms and where we are changed by each other's differences, no longer asking people to become just like us?

The answer to that question is that we are not doing so well, and we are not doing so badly, either. We are taking steps and making real change here at FRS and in the community at large. We are hanging our Black Lives Matter banner, supporting the change to Indigenous Peoples Day, and welcoming Afghan refugees into our Parish Hall. Equally, we are doing all those things in partnership with others in the community. We are not acting like saviors, nor the lone people out there working for justice. We are part of – part of circles of people and organizations who are also concerned about addressing racism and creating the beloved community within our city and beyond.

Now we are inviting every one of you to join in

3 *Witnessing For the Truth: Martin Luther King, Jr., Unitarian Universalism, and Beacon Press*, UUA, Beacon Press, 2014, pp. 22-26.

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supporting Living the Pledge and participating in a group when you are you able. At some point soon, this year or next, we will be voting as a congregation to become an anti-racist congregation. People have asked what that means. We have engaged in dialogue with other congregations, the UUA, and other organizations committed to being anti-racist. There is no cookie cutter answer.

What it means to be an anti-racist congregation is up to us. That is the beautiful truth and the hard truth. We need to grapple with that question. We need to define what it means to us to be a congregation committed to anti-racism, as we are to climate justice and to serving as a level two Sanctuary Congregation, both of which were voted on at Annual Meetings.

The good news is that our process of discerning and stating what our commitment to anti-racism includes and how we are going to hold ourselves accountable will itself deepen our commitment to this work, to each other, and to the congregation as a whole. We are made for this work, my friends. We are made for it because we are here, in this time, in this place. We can do the work that would make Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. proud. So that, in quoting the words Dr. King used to close his Ware Lecture some fifty-five years ago, we can do this work so that we can sing “Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we are free at last.”⁴

⁴ *Witnessing For the Truth: Martin Luther, King, Jr., Unitarian Universalism, and Beacon Press*, UUA, Beacon Press, 2014, p. 36.