

We shall not regret the past . . .
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Montgomery
December 4, 2005
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Note to readers: Most works cited in this sermon are referenced in footnotes. All the statistics that are not referenced are from Fact Sheets prepared by Alabama Arise which are available on its website, www.alarise.org.

We gather today at the conclusion of a momentous week in Montgomery, marked by the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the bus boycott, the observance of World Aids Day, and our auction, perhaps the biggest single-day event in our congregation. Life did not stop for these events. In the past two weeks, three members or friends of this congregation lost family members. So, it is in several contexts that I say this week has been a real test for this congregation. As an aside, this also was my most public week, appearing on behalf of this Fellowship at three community-wide events, so I can say with some pride that, if the powers that be decide to arrest all the progressive religious leaders in this city, I will be among the first to be charged.

The focus of my sermon today will be a reflection on the anniversary, but I have something to say about these other events as well. I am very proud of this congregation's involvement in both the children's walk downtown and the observance of World AIDS day at Temple Beth Or later that same day.

In a few moments, I'll put on my social prophet hat, but I begin with a more pastoral perspective. The sermon title today comes from the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous which promises, "We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it." How Montgomery and this nation deal with slavery and segregation in some ways is no different than how anyone deals with a difficult past.

As individuals, we struggle with a paradox. Life has all kinds of ways of teaching us some difficult lessons. We often say that we overcame certain obstacles or that we are who we are in spite of our past. I suggest reframing that. A few weeks ago in a sermon on grieving, I said that grieving is not about explaining a loss but rather is about finding meaning in the absence of an explanation. Thus, I find no contradiction in saying in my case that I would not have chosen to have the experiences of my youth, but I am a better man for it. Being an obese teenager was pretty tough some days. (So is being an obese adult.) Today, I can see that my sense of compassion and love and a commitment to inclusiveness and belonging that are deeply rooted in those negative experiences.

Likewise, it would be wrong to say that a whole race of people had to be enslaved for 400 years for the purpose of making us who we are today. That's wrong. What's right, is to ask the question, how can that trauma to our nation and more so to those people enslaved make us a better people?

I don't have an easy answer of how we should regard the Confederacy. Fights over flags, the naming of schools, the placement of statues, I suggest, do little to improve education, health care, transportation, among many other issues. On the other hand, such fights, if I may call them that, raise our awareness of the work that still needs to be done to achieve the kind of reconciliation about which Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed.

Permit me to open a can of worms and then move on. When I see a bumper sticker that says, "It's about heritage, not hate." I am skeptical. Still, it would be wrong to project the motives and the agenda of the extremist hate groups onto every person with

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some form of confederate paraphernalia. There must be some way of us to honor the sacrifice and courage of the men who fought that war without embracing the cause. I respectfully suggest that for all of us who insist it is possible today to oppose the war in Iraq and support the troops, we may find a way there to move toward reconciliation.

We need every voice and every vote we can get. The fear of change is powerful; and we need to practice some humility when we judge those who fear the changes we insist upon—no matter our righteous the change we advocate. We must have faith that Truth will prevail without making our adversaries in the political process bend down and collectively cry “uncle”. Martin Luther King, Jr. said over and over again that we must not give up on each other. In his eulogy for the four young girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing in 1963, he said, “we must not lose faith in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and the worth of all human personality.”

I’m not suggesting here that we all start participating in Confederate Day parades. Perhaps, though, we can forgo the counter-demonstrations so that the day after, we can sit down together, because there is much work to be done, and we share a lot of common ground with people who think very differently than us about a lot of issues.

The movement initiated by Rosa Parks’ arrest may have started for the purpose of addressing the injustice of the public transportation system. Yet, it soon came to be seen as the opening struggle in the modern era for the enactment of what Dr. King called the Beloved Community, a phrase that predates him and around which people of differing theologies can find common ground. Though Dr. King was effective in enlarging the movement beyond his own Christian faith, we should remember that he was strengthened and motivated by his strong personal Christian faith, which was rooted in the social justice of the ancient prophets. He is perhaps best known for his dream that justice would roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream, words that come to us from the prophet Amos.

Here’s something else Amos said, “For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy at the gate. (Amos 5: 11-15)

How do we turn aside the needy at the gate? Let’s start with taxes. The good people of Alabama enacted a relatively progressive income tax in 1935, setting the top rate of 5% on incomes over \$3000 at a time when the average teacher made \$500 a year. That rate still is in effect, and today, Alabama is the only state in the union that makes a family of 3 with an income under \$4000 pay income taxes. On top of that, Alabama is one of only 7 states that fully tax food, something on which poor families must spend a disproportionate amount of their money.

You want to talk about those who afflict the righteous, let’s talk about predatory lending. Those of us with steady jobs, regular bank accounts and even marginal credit ratings can borrow money from banks and savings and loans. Poor people without those advantages who live from check to check have to go to payday loan and title pawn businesses that are not regulated like banks. A worker who needs an advance on his paycheck may be charged up to 455% interest. A poor person who puts his car up for collateral for a loan may pay 300% interest and end up losing his car for defaulting on a

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loan for only a fraction of the value of the car. These are legal, structural barriers that keep poor people in poverty.

I'm not sure whom Dr. King would quote today, but he may begin with this verse from Isaiah 58:

6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

What chains of injustice might we loose today? We can start with by supporting a moratorium on the death penalty. Alabama ranks 6th in the country in executions, but in one recent year, on a per capita basis, we were number one. The ACLU has issued an excellent study on the death penalty and made some common sense recommendations, such as having public defender's offices, which only 4 judicial circuits have.¹

If we were to turn today to other sources to which Dr. King turned, we might re-read Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*. In his book about the boycott titled "Stride Toward Freedom" Dr. King wrote that the idea of withdrawing support for the bus system was inspired by Thoreau's notion on non-cooperation with evil. In King's words: "The bus company, being an external expression of (an evil) system, would naturally suffer, but the basic aim was to refuse to cooperate with evil. At this point, I began to think about Thoreau's "Essay on Civil Disobedience." I remembered how, as a college student, I had been moved when I first read this work. I became convinced that what we were preparing to do in Montgomery was related to what Thoreau had expressed. We were simply saying to the white community, 'We can no longer lend our cooperation to this evil system.'"²

Here's what Thoreau said that so moved Dr. King: "It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty at least, to wash his hands of it, and if he give it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at lest that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders."³

How do we cooperate with evil today? The answer is by accepting public policies that trample on the poor. Case in point: Wal-Mart. I said a couple of weeks ago that I don't judge anyone for shopping at Wal-Mart. Arguably, most of the practices that

¹ "Broken Justice: The Death Penalty in Alabama" ACLU Report, October 2005.

² King, Martin Luther, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, Harper and Row (New York, 1958), 36. (Note: this book is out of print; I obtained my copy through Barnes and Noble's used-book site.)

³ Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, (introduction and Notes by Jonathan Levin), Barnes and Noble Classics (New York, 2003). p. 271. "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" first published in 1849.

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offend us are practiced by their competitors as well. But having the state single out Wal-Mart for special benefits paid from out tax dollars is a whole other issue. Wal-Mart is the only retailer that got \$38 million dollars in subsidies in Alabama out of \$1 billion nationally. That makes Alabama 9th in the nation in subsidies to Wal-Mart. Here's another example of powerful interests avoiding corporate responsibility for the common good. Regular commercial property is taxed at a rate of 20% but big commercial farms and timber lands are taxed at only 10%. Guess who wrote that law? The great myth propounded by our opponents in the political process is that liberals love government and hate businesses. Quite the contrary, I want nothing more than to let the free market work. All I ask is a level playing field.

Tax breaks for businesses are not inherently evil. What is evil though is state-sponsored corporate charity when over 700,000 Alabamians—250,000 of whom are children-- are in poverty.

What might it mean to provide the poor wanderer from shelter? How about starting with a landlord tenant law? Alabama is only one of two states without any kind of law to protect tenants. Landlords don't even have to maintain a minimal state of habitability in this state—not even a roof-- and that's about as wrong as it gets.

Jesus picked up where the ancient prophets left off. He was very much in sync with Isaiah and Amos and all others; yet, he had a way of turning things around and saying them in a way that was even more challenging. Consider these verses from Matthew 25:

“41 Then he (the King) will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

44" They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45" He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

Many of you may be more familiar with the verse that precedes the verse I quoted. The previous verse is written in the positive and says what you do for the least of these, you do for me. The verse I quoted is in the negative: whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. Jesus made both points. That means we don't just collect brownie points for the good things we do. We are accountable for our failure to act. When we drive up and down Atlanta Highway, past all those title pawn and payday loan shops, and do nothing, we are cooperating with evil. When this state executes a man—I would say ever, but especially one who has not had competent legal counsel--we are cooperating with evil. When a public officer evicts a tenant from a household that may not have running water, we are cooperating with evil. When we accept the benefits of a state-recognized marriage without insisting that they be made available to all, we are cooperating with evil.

Just because we lose an election, we do not lose our accountability. The cause of a just and fully inclusive society has not changed in 50 years—or even in the past 5000

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years. The tactics have changed. Don't put away those anti-Roy Moore placards just yet. You may need those in the future. Still, the political process is more open. Our obligation as citizens and as Unitarian Universalists is to fight the good fight in the halls of the legislature, in the offices of the executives, and in the courtrooms of our judges. This can all be overwhelming for just one person or even a congregation. That's why we ally ourselves with groups like Alabama Arise and Equality Alabama and others. That's why, also, we send to Boston an annual contribution, based on the size of our membership, to support activities like the UUA office in Washington. As the legislative session draws near, these and other groups will be requesting our time and energy. When those calls come, I ask you to remember these words from Isaiah 58:

"1 Shout it aloud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion
and to the house of Jacob their sins.

2 For day after day they seek me out;
they seem eager to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right
and has not forsaken the commands of its God."

Whether your ultimate reality is known to you as God, as nature, or simply the Great Mystery, we are in rebellion. Whether for you it is a matter of reconciling with God or walking more closely with the way of the universe or it is simply a matter of conscience, we must turn our direction. We may begin to do so by supporting tax reform, a moratorium on the death penalty, and the enactment of a landlord tenant law. We may not be able to force businesses to be good corporate citizens, but we can stop actively supporting those who are not. We can insist that the benefits we claim for ourselves be given to all. Let us turn away from our cooperation with evil, and, with whatever image you might substitute for that chosen by the prophet Micah, live out these words he spoke to the people of Israel:

8 He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

May it always be so. Blessed Be and Amen.