

## **Bending Towards Justice Sermon**

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### **Reading**

This I believe to be the privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation's self-defined goals and positions. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation and for those it calls "enemy," for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.

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Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken, the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments. I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

## Discourse

On April 4, 1967--a year to the day before his death--Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered the speech of which those words are a part: Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence. He spoke them to a group of clergy and laity who had come together at Riverside Church in New York to express concern about the Vietnam War. For this speech, he was reviled in the press, criticized by his own allies in the Civil Rights Movement--his cordial relationship with President Johnson was permanently damaged.

I can't imagine that anyone living in the US doesn't have at least a passing familiarity with King's "I Have A Dream" speech. Memphians seem to absorb a little knowledge of his Mountaintop speech, delivered here on the night before his assassination. But many of his other, powerful speeches, including "Beyond Vietnam," remain obscure. That's shameful; "Beyond Vietnam" was, and remains, a searing, prophetic condemnation of a country--of a people--slipping into a grotesque consumerist oblivion, whose material wealth is propped up by imperialistic militarism, and who have been distracted from issues of true peace and justice by the cynical manipulations of tribalism and the so-called "culture wars."

People who live in Memphis, whether born here or not, seem to feel a certain connection with King--several years ago I was at U2's Pop concert at the Liberty Bowl, where among the set, they sang "Pride (In The Name Of Love)." When they sang the line that goes "early morning, April 4/a shot rings out in the Memphis sky..." most of the stadium burst into cheers. It was... a little odd. But it's also true that part of the legacy of being the place King was assassinated is that we are home to many people, and many organizations, who continue to stand up for and work for the ideals of equality, justice, and nonviolence that were so important to him.

The power of "Beyond Vietnam" (and I'm not going to just straight up read it from the pulpit this morning, though I want you to know I thought about it) is that it identifies both the civil rights movement and the peace movement as being parts of a larger struggle. King sketched out the big picture in this speech, that peace, and equality, and justice--not just in Vietnam, and not only for African Americans--are not separate goals, but inextricably intertwined.

Terry Pratchett, the British fantasist, puts much the same idea into the mouth of one of his characters:

"Sin, young man, is when you treat people as things. Including yourself. That's what sin is."

"It's a lot more complicated than that--"

"No. It ain't. When people say things are more complicated than that, they means they're getting worried that they won't like the truth. People as things, that's where it starts."

"Oh, I'm sure there are worse crimes--"

"But they starts with thinking about people as things..."

And Unitarian Universalists, as a denomination, affirm this same concept--right in our seven principles:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

World community, respecting the interdependent web, accepting each other and treating others with justice, equity and compassion, recognizing each individual's worth and dignity and all people's right to peace, liberty, and justice. This is the goal of the beloved community, "tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality," in King's phrase.

So because of who we are as UUs, and where we are geographically, Neshoba has a unique opportunity to be a community of faith that sustains this work. Partly this is because there are so many others in Memphis doing the hard work of peace and justice for us to connect with. Partly it is because of our strong commitment as a congregation to the work of social justice. And partly it is because as a community, we can support and sustain each other in this struggle. That's important, because this isn't work that you do, and then it's done. This is ongoing, the work of a lifetime, of many lifetimes.

That's important, because individuals, working separately, cannot create the Beloved Community. Individuals can lay that groundwork, they can show us the vision, but by definition, the community must come together, to create and support and sustain itself and its individual members.

"Beyond Vietnam" calls for people of goodwill--people of faith, whether that faith be in God, or in love, in the universe, or in our own boundless human potential for good--to rise and lead a revolution. A peaceful revolution, but a revolution nonetheless--one that replaces a society structured around things with one centered on people. Because the terrible danger of a society centered on things is this: pretty soon, other people become things, as well.

It's a huge undertaking. It's daunting to consider, a revolution this big. King recognized how long and how hard the struggle for a better world could be. He also said, in a speech to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference: "When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us

remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

There's more hope, in there. But that arc doesn't bend by itself--that progress is made by all the people, in all our individual and collective ways, who choose to put their hands to this work, and their shoulders to the bars of an unjust system, and bend it. All the men and women who grab onto the promise of a better tomorrow, and hold on for dear life--that's what bends us toward justice. And it's a choice we make, every day, in small ways, and in big ones. Every time we challenge ourselves to listen to the better angels of our natures, or to examine our own prejudices and privileges. And when we speak out as advocates of justice and peace, and when we work to make our world a fairer, kinder, more peaceful place--we are bending that arc. We are bending toward justice, hoping to create a world in which there is more love.

### **Charge & Benediction:**

Go forth in love, to sow peace, cultivate justice, and share your harvest with all who hunger. The love and support of this beloved community go with us, now and always. Until we meet again, amen.