

## Opening Words

## Words of MLK

Everybody can be great... because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.

## Chalice Lighting

## Words of Gordon McKeeman

"Let there be light!"

Let it shine in dark places,

in moments of pain,

in times of grief,

in the darkness of hatred,

violence,

oppression,

where there is discouragement and despair.

Wherever darkness is to be put to flight,

"Let there be light!"

## Sermon: *Compassion III*

(c) Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

I begin with this reading from the 2009 Charter for Compassion:

*Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity, and respect.* (Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, p. 6)

This is my third sermon in a four-part series about compassion. The first sermon considered the fact that all the major world religions have some form of what Christians call The Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Compassion seems to be a universal value that transcends the boundaries of particular, specific religions. Practicing, receiving, and understanding compassion is part of the universal human heartbeat.

That first sermon noted how frequently organized religions and individual human beings fall short of

the mark. Yet, the value still holds. In today's world, compassion needs to be overtly stated and consciously (and conscientiously) exercised.

I tossed aside my plans for the second sermon because of the attacks at the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters in Paris, which happened just a couple of days before I preached. So I spoke about what happened in Paris, describing my aching weariness of our world that answers hatred and violence with more hatred and violence. I said we could continue the cycle of vitriol and violence. Or we could stop. We could choose another way. Using selflessness and humility as our foundation, we could drink from the well of compassion that religions have gathered for us.

Today I want to think about a great example of making a different choice. Yesterday was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama. What role did compassion play in the events of that day?

Just sketching a bit of the history gives us some context. Fifty years ago, over 300,000 black citizens of Alabama were denied the right to vote. An organized voter registration movement had been ongoing for a couple of years at least.

The enfranchisement movement began to crescendo on February 18, when State troopers attacked non-violent marchers in Marion, and beat and shot 26-year-old Jimmy Lee Jackson. Jackson died eight days later. Jackson himself had tried unsuccessfully to register to vote five times over the previous four years. Eulogizing Jackson, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., proclaimed: "He was murdered by the indifference of every white minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of his stained-glass windows."

Out of the ashes of Jackson's death came the flame of an idea to organize a march from Selma to Montgomery. With the memory of his death in their hearts, about 600 people, led by John Lewis and Hosea Williams, started the first march from Selma to Montgomery, only to be stopped violently at the Edmund Pettus bridge. Police attacked the protesters with billy clubs and tear gas, dispersing the crowd, injuring almost 70 people, 16 of whom were hospitalized.

(Incidentally, the Edmund Pettus Bridge was named for an officer in the Confederate Army and a Grand Dragon in the Ku Klux Klan. Imagine what it is like when the road you tread for your freedom honors the very system that oppresses you. Our nation stands on the shoulders of courageous giants, to

be sure. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund\\_Pettus\\_Bridge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_Pettus_Bridge))

Two days later (50 years ago tomorrow) Martin Luther King, Jr., led 2000 marchers to the bridge, then told them to disperse because the way forward felt unsafe to Dr. King. Dr. King had made an appeal to clergy of all faiths to join the march. Of the 2000 who marched that day, more than half were white. Roughly one-third were clergy, including 125 Unitarian Universalist ministers. One of those UU ministers was the Rev. James Reeb from Boston. That night, he and two UU colleagues went out to supper. As they left the restaurant, they were taunted, then followed, then attacked by four members of the KKK. One of the attackers struck James Reeb in the head with a club. Reeb died two days later, leaving behind a widow and four young children. He was 38 years old. (Frank Schulman, *This Day in Unitarian Universalist History*. Also, *Timeline: Selma to Montgomery Marches* at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/03/05/black-history-bloody-sunday-timeline/24463923/>)

Many look to that moment as a turning point in the fight to get the Voting Rights Act passed. President Johnson mentioned Reeb four days later, when he introduced the Voting Rights Bill to a joint session of Congress.

I want to celebrate the courage of the UUs of yore and to honor their sacrifices in those frightening days. James Reeb was a brave man, a principled man, an idealistic man, and a compassionate man. But I also want to note the deep irony that where countless black men and women had suffered and died in the struggle for freedom, it took the death of a white man, a minister, to capture the nation's attention. I call honor and blessing on all those who worked so hard in the struggle, but particularly on those who remain nameless and unknown because they were black.

After Reeb's death, there were demonstrations, arrests of protesters, court rulings, a meeting between President Johnson and Governor Wallace, the aforementioned joint session of Congress, and, finally, President Johnson's executive order authorizing federal use of the Alabama National Guard to protect the safety of the marchers. (*Timeline: Selma to Montgomery Marches* at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/03/05/black-history-bloody-sunday-timeline/24463923/>)

The march commenced, finally, on March 21 and reached Montgomery on March 25. That night, civil rights worker, Viola Liuzzo, a mother of 5 from Detroit, was killed by the KKK as she was ferrying an

activist from Montgomery to Selma. A car pulled alongside Liuzzo's car, and one of the occupants shot her in the face. When her assailants stopped to make sure they killed the occupants of Liuzzo's car, her passenger survived by playing dead as he lay in a pool of Liuzzo's blood. (*Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia: Viola Gregg Liuzzo*; <http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/witnesses/violaliuzzo.htm>)

Those were unimaginably horrific times.

Well, as you know, despite the threats and despite the deaths, the people kept organizing. They kept walking forward through the pages of history. The Voting Rights Act was passed in August 1965.

Where is the compassion in this story?

We don't have to look too hard to find the places where compassion was lacking in those days: tear gas, fire hoses, taunts, attack dogs, and bullets, with racism the insidious heart of all those weapons of violence.

But compassion was abundant, too, starting with Dr. King. It goes without saying he felt compassion for his people, beaten down, disenfranchised, lynched, and made invisible by a vicious system. What made King extraordinary was that his compassion did not begin and end with his own people. He extended it to all. His compassion had a strong foundation in Christianity. Those ethical underpinnings lifted up what was righteous – human dignity, freedom, love. But King avoided the slip into *self-righteousness*. When religion meets self-righteousness, compassion is always jettisoned. King never lost his compassion.

Karen Armstrong writes:

*“Martin Luther King Jr. believed ... the highest point of Jesus's life was the moment when he forgave his executioners, when instead of attempting to defeat evil with evil, he was able to prevail over it with good: “Only goodness can drive out evil and only love can overcome hate.” (said King). Loving our enemies means ... we have to accept “the necessity, over and over again, of forgiving those who inflict evil and injury upon us.”*

*King was convinced ... this was “an absolute necessity for our survival ... the key to the solution of the*

*problems of our world.” We could not allow the injury our enemies inflict upon us to become an insuperable barrier to a more positive relationship. “We must not seek to defeat or humiliate the enemy but to win his friendship and understanding,” King insisted.*

*“Every word and deed must contribute to an understanding with the enemy and release those vast reservoirs of goodwill which have been blocked by the impenetrable walls of hate...”*

*“Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illumines it.” King said. (Armstrong, 182-183.)*

That is compassion that has grown legs, compassion at its most powerful and eloquent.

In King's sentiments one can hear the echo of Gandhi, who said, *“Mine is not an exclusive love. I cannot love Moslems or Hindus and hate Englishmen. For if I love merely Hindus or Moslems because their ways are on the whole pleasing to me, I shall soon begin to hate them when their ways displease me, as they may well do at any moment. A love that is based on the goodness of those whom you love is a mercenary affair.”* (Armstrong, 181-182)

The kind of compassion King and Gandhi advocated and demonstrated is difficult. It takes enormous courage and fortitude to open one's heart to the enemy. That kind of compassion is risky, too. Both King and Gandhi were assassinated. Their nonviolent work drawing on the wellspring of compassion put them in the mix with their enemies in high profile ways. But at the heart of that kind of compassion is the ability to look into the eyes of those inflicting injury and see brokenness and pain so deep it cuts to the bone.

Such compassion is strong, not roll-over-and-play-dead wimpy. King spoke the truth. Here is how he eulogized James Reeb, in part:

*Naturally, we are compelled to ask the question, Who killed James Reeb? The answer is simple and rather limited, when we think of the who. He was murdered by a few sick, demented, and misguided men who have the strange notion that you express dissent through murder.*

*There is another haunting, poignant, desperate question we are forced to ask this afternoon, that I asked a few days ago as we funeralized James Jackson. It is the question, What killed James Reeb?*

*When we move from the who to the what, the blame is wide and the responsibility grows.*

*James Reeb was murdered by the indifference of every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows.*

*He was murdered by the irrelevancy of a church that will stand amid social evil and serve as a taillight rather than a headlight, an echo rather than a voice.*

*He was murdered by the irresponsibility of every politician who has moved down the path of demagoguery, who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism.*

*He was murdered by the brutality of every sheriff and law enforcement agent who practices lawlessness in the name of law.*

*He was murdered by the timidity of a federal government that can spend millions of dollars a day to keep troops in South Vietnam, yet cannot protect the lives of its own citizens seeking constitutional rights.*

*Yes, he was even murdered by the cowardice of every Negro who tacitly accepts the evil system of segregation, who stands on the sidelines in the midst of a mighty struggle for justice.*

*So in his death, James Reeb says something to each of us, black and white alike – says that we must substitute courage for caution, says to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered him, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murder. His death says to us that we must work passionately, unrelentingly, to make the American dream a reality, so he did not die in vain. (“A Witness to Truth,”*

[http://www.ptsem.edu/Publications/inspire2/6.2/feature\\_4/feature4\\_index3.htm](http://www.ptsem.edu/Publications/inspire2/6.2/feature_4/feature4_index3.htm))

Those are words of courage. Notice they speak the truth. Notice they denounce the evil ways people behave. But also notice they call everyone to a higher standard, but they vilify no one, and they incite no retaliatory violence. When you lead from a heart of compassion, behavior, beliefs, and systems of injustice are the problem; *people are not*.

And what of Jimmy Lee Jackson, James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo?

Jimmy Lee Jackson was a follower of the nonviolent resistance movement that had been gathering steam in the south for years. He was also a Deacon in his Baptist Church. His faith was centered on that great nonviolent activist whose entire ministry was based on compassion – Jesus.

James Reeb's ministry was a social justice ministry, working at a low income housing project in Boston. Viola Liuzzo was an activist, a member of the NAACP, and a member of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Detroit. Unitarian Universalism asked both Reeb and Liuzzo to open their hearts to the world around them and to serve where they felt called.

In 1965, the Unitarian Universalist Association was only 4 years old. Both Unitarianism and Universalism were venerable faiths, of course, but they did not link arms until 1961. Despite its newness, Unitarian Universalist roots were clear: God's love holds everyone, equally. Freedom, dignity, and justice are rights everyone deserves. Each of us is called to serve in whatever ways we can – whether large or small, private or public.

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

It's an amazing story, an inspiring story we celebrate today. But the story has not ended. Now, 50 years later, voting rights for blacks and poor people are increasingly threatened by some states decreasing poll hours to make it difficult for working people to vote and by new photo ID laws in some states. And, all across our land, our criminal justice system is disproportionately applied to black citizens to the effect that black men are incarcerated at shocking rates. Black men being arrested, tried, convicted, and incarcerated for the very same crimes – often drug crimes – white people commit while escaping the supposed consequences. Many of those black men are disenfranchised for life because of their criminal record.

Today, as fifty years ago, we live in a world where compassion needs to grow feet and walk.

The world will ever see only one Jimmy Lee Jackson, only one James Reeb, only one Viola Liuzzo, only one Martin Luther King, Jr. We can't any of us be any of them. But the world will also ever see only one of me and one of you. What, when compassion is at the center, are you called to do? What actions, large or small, public or private, belong solely to you because you are who you are, with the tools and circumstances only you have, and the particular gift of life only you have been given?

“Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?” The poet Mary Oliver asks. “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”



**Offering**  
**Offertory**

Choir

**Congregational Response:** To the work of this congregation, which is weaving a tapestry of love and action, we dedicate our lives and these our offerings.

**Hymn** **?????** *I Know I Can*

*In: Singing the Journey*

**Benediction**

May we honor and hold gently our past.

May we live fully our present.

May we hope toward and build our future,

Living our mission:

"To be a spiritual community

To welcome all

To nurture one another

To work for justice

And to care for the earth."

May the walls of this sanctuary

breathe with the hope, faith and love of the ages.

May they never become walls that separate,

To hold us in and others out.

May they be like arms that reach outward to embrace  
Our community and our beautiful and broken world,  
Extending our ministry to all  
With healing, justice, service, and love.

Let us go forth in joy, live in peace, and return in love.

So may it be. Amen.

**Bell Sound**