

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

But he had seen the mountain top
And he knew he could not stop
Always living with the threat of death ahead
Folks you'd better stop and think
Everybody knows we're on the brink
What will happen, now that the King of love is dead?
– Nina Simone

Opening Words and Chalice Lighting

Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that. – MLK, Jr.

Prayer

MLK Sunday Prayer, By Audette Fulbright Fulsom

Holy Spirit, God of Ages and so many names, we gather once again to rejoice in the light offered to the world by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

His walk on this earth was a gift to generations, and today we give thanks for that gift.

We know that we are called together today not simply to rejoice and be glad that such a man was given to us for a time, but rather to heed the calls he made to us—the same calls that reverberate now, as they did when he was alive; the same calls You have made time and time again, in a voice of justice that calls us throughout the ages.

We are called to hear that same Word of truth that Dr. King spoke: that the hungry and poor are with us still.

It is not enough to march and remember. The work we are called to do is to feed hungry children and to wipe the tears from our siblings' eyes.

It is not enough to sing a joyful song; we must also build the houses that will give shelter to every adult and child, and allow them full security and dignity.

We are called today to be remember that we are not to judge one another by the color of our skins, but by the content of our character.

In a world where our families are knit ever more tightly together past old ideas of color and race, we know that the tyranny of fear and hatred still exists in our hearts; we know that racism still lurks like a viper around unexpected corners.

And so we gather again to renew our promise to one another: that we will be vigilant. We will be warriors and peacemakers of a new world, a world that is always dawning—the Kingdom of God, which

is always at hand among people who work and pray and give thanks together.

Holy Spirit, on this day of remembrance we do give thanks, and we are joyful that for a time we had our brother and father, our pastor and leader, Dr. King, with us. But we do not forget that the mantle he wore for a time has been passed now to us—to each of us here gathered—and it is in our efforts, in our faithful struggle, and in our generous witness to a better world becoming, that we make our most powerful prayer of thanksgiving.

Thank you, Gracious One, for this day, and for all our many gifts. In a spirit of remembrance and a spirit of gratitude and hope, we set forth once again, with your guidance and strength, to make the world anew. Amen.

Sermon: Berea

(c) Rev. Sylvia Stocker

“What will happen, now that the King of love is dead?” Nina Simone asks in her beautiful song. (We showed a video of this song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Uy8cyVWU2A>)

Well, positive things *have* happened – the election of our country's first black president, for instance. I had never dreamed that would happen in my lifetime.

But we have a long way to go, too. Our country next elected a president, who is openly, unapologetically racist. Just days ago, the president offended people the world over with his offensive, racist remarks comparing Norway (positively) with Haiti and African countries (negatively). I won't repeat the remark, which has received wide coverage. Such comments from the president are no longer shocking, at least for me. They are typical. We live in times when the flames of hatred and prejudice grow stronger, when hateful rhetoric has spawned increased vitriol, and even, in the case of Charlottesville, physical violence. We live in times, too, when white outrage over such remarks can hide another truth: that we live in a white supremacist society. When white people continually (and justifiably) point our fingers at Mr. Trump, they may well forget to point those same fingers at themselves.

Ibrahim Kendi writes in today's NYT:

The reckoning of Mr. Trump's racism must become the reckoning of American racism. Because the American creed of denial — “I'm not a racist” — knows no political parties, no ideologies, no colors, no regions.

He goes on to call out Senator Richard Durbin, Democrat of Illinois, who, in denouncing Mr. Trump's comments said, “I cannot believe that in the history of the White House in that Oval Office, any president has ever spoken the words that I personally heard our president speak yesterday.”

Challenging Durbin, Kendi lists outrages of past presidents, both recent and going back to Thomas Jefferson. He says,

“a racist is not who a person is. A racist is what a person is, what a person is saying, what a person is doing. Racist is not a fixed category like “not racist,” which is steeped denial. Only racists say they

are not racist. Only the racist lives by the heartbeat of denial. The anti-racist lives by the opposite heartbeat, one that rarely and irregularly sounds in America — the heartbeat of confession.”

For the white people in this congregation – for most of us – our Black Lives Matter banner is a confession – of uncovering and acknowledging white supremacy and white privilege.

In honor of King, the man who had a dream, I say we still have dreaming to do – and hard work to support our dreams.

I am inspired by stories, so today I bring you one from my sabbatical a couple of years ago. I have previously mentioned my sabbatical included a trip to Berea, KY. I chose that seemingly unlikely destination because my dulcimer teacher told me Berea was “a hotbed of dulcimer playing.” But, as I began to research Berea, I discovered an amazing story.

In 1853, Cassius Clay, the wealthy Kentucky abolitionist, offered a 10-acre homestead to a white preacher named John Fee. In Fee, Clay saw someone who would take a strong stand against slavery. Why? Fee himself was an abolitionist, and he had put his life on the line for the cause. Repeatedly, Fee and his family were violently attacked when he preached abolition.

Fee dreamt of creating in Kentucky a co-educational, racially integrated college modeled after the anti-slavery Oberlin College in Ohio, but, more revolutionary, open to both black and white students. He envisioned a college “which would be to Kentucky what Oberlin is to Ohio, anti-slavery, anti-caste, anti-rum, anti-sin.” He wrote, “we...eventually look to a college — giving an education to all colors, classes, cheap and thorough.”

Fee built a home in Berea in 1854, and, in 1855, a one-room school, which doubled on Sundays as an anti-slavery church. Recruiting teachers from Oberlin, he then began incorporating the college. But in 1859, the dream had to be put on hold. Fee and his supporters were driven from their homes in Berea by pro-slavery southerners.

Fee spent the Civil War years in exile, raising funds for Berea College, and educating former slaves at Camp Nelson – slaves who had enlisted for military service. At Camp Nelson, Fee also oversaw construction of lodging, hospital, and school for those soldiers' families.

After the war, Fee returned home. In 1866, the Berea College articles of incorporation were recorded at the county seat. In 1867, 96 black students and 91 white students enrolled. For almost 40 years, the college carried out its commitment to interracial education, gathering a student body that was roughly equally black and white.

In 1904, three years after Fee's death, the vision of an integrated college was put aside once again, when Kentucky passed the Day Law, which prohibited educating black and white students together. When the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Day Law – (yes, the Supreme Court did that) – Berea College set aside funds to establish Lincoln Institute, outside Louisville, to educate black students. (Notice the black students had to move, while the white students stayed in place. Enlightenment and

progress come in fits and starts.) In 1950, the Day Law was amended to allow integration in higher education. Berea was the first Kentucky college to open its doors to black students. (Information about John Fee and Berea College: <https://www.berea.edu/about/history/>)

I had never heard of Berea College before. Perhaps because in more recent times, the college has focused providing education – not exclusively but largely – to students from the local, impoverished Appalachian region. Amazingly, the college offers free education, funded, in part, from a work-study program all students engage in, and, in part, from the generous donations of people inspired by the college's vision. Also, the college works to preserve and teach Appalachian cultural crafts and music, something I haven't been as much interested in until a couple of years ago when I started learning to play the dulcimer.

But I was thrilled to discover the story of John Fee and Berea College, because it gave me hope. Walking around campus and town, I imagined those brave people of the past traversing the same territory. Who was this John Fee who had a dream? Born in 1816, he was raised in Kentucky, in a slave-holding family. His father seemed to have had enough doubts about slavery to invest in lands in free states, but not enough doubts to emancipate his own slaves. John challenged his father's viewpoint, condemning slavery from an early age. In time, his father disinherited John because of John's abolitionist views.

John converted to Christianity at 14, eventually joining the Presbyterian church. He studied at Lane Theological Seminary in Ohio. Graduating in 1842, he returned to Kentucky, preaching abolition. His views made it difficult to find a church that would accept his leadership. He eventually broke ties with the Presbyterian church because he believed fellowship in the church should be denied to slaveholders – a position the Kentucky synod would not take up. From then on, Fee advocated a non-denominational, non-sectarian Christianity, and the church he founded in Berea was just that.

Because of his convictions, he sold land he owned in Indiana to purchase the freedom of the slave who cared from him as a child. Because of his convictions, he faced violence and exile, yet he held firm, even in hostile territory, with little support from his family, the law, or friends or associates. Through it all he remained rooted in the Biblical instruction to love one's neighbor as oneself.

The name Berea is a window into Fee's heart. Berea is town mentioned in the Biblical book of Acts. Arriving in Thessalonica, Paul and Silas caused a minor riot when preaching about Christ. That night, under the cover of darkness, they were spirited away to Berea where the people welcomed them. Perhaps for John Fee the name Berea conjured up visions of welcome in a hostile world. Perhaps it suggested a place where Christ's teachings were welcomed and taken seriously – where loving your neighbor meant loving *all* your neighbors, and doing the internal work that made that possible. You see, given his early years in a slave-holding family in a slave-holding region, Fee must have done his own internal work to arrive at his dream. He knew that inner work was possible. And critical.

My guess is many of you didn't know Fee's story until now – and that is precisely the point. History is made up of many stories of relatively minor and mostly long forgotten characters who, in their small ways, help to birth something bigger. Most people will never achieve the stature of someone like

Martin Luther King, Jr. But all of us have the opportunity to change our world, even if our efforts may seem so small as not to matter. All of us have the opportunity to examine our own hearts and to root out the detritus of hurtful, hateful messages we have received in the past. Never believe your efforts, our efforts, don't matter.

People like King emerge – not in isolation, but because they stand on the shoulders of those many, many less well known people who did their internal work and exercised the courage of their convictions. Though my theology differs from John Fee's, he and I both prize the same justice and equality that have inspired people in every age to pursue a better world. I suspect in this room I am not a solitary person with those convictions. Indeed, our Unitarian Universalism is built on those values.

Probably none of us will ever enjoy the stature King had. Regardless, what we do, large or small, in the pursuit of justice matters. What we say to promote justice, with steadiness in our voices and resolve in our hearts, in large groups or small, matters.

Have courage, friends. Open to the work of transformation. Have a heart for justice and a soul of commitment to make a difference. Be part of a positive answer to the question: *What will we do, now that the King of love is dead?*

Benediction

As we go into the world,
let us vow to carry the light of freedom and justice with us.
Let us be people of conviction and courage
Let us carry in our hearts this flame
that symbolizes the heart of our faith
and that travels with us wherever we go.