

Miracle of Justice Sermon
 Sunday, August 16, 2020
 read before a Zoom-gathered congregation
 in northwestern Washington

I start with an observation, an admonishment and a challenge: That we reach beyond our cloistered class and walls, be larger and be braver, take the initiative and act for justice.

Not many of us are Christians and few of us know the Bible very well. I am not and do not, but if I read the Bible closely I am certain I would not find the term social change. Social change is a safe term, a 20th century middle class construction. In the Bible Micah calls to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

In our movement, Theodore Parker, one of our best ministers ever, has words made famous by Martin Luther King, Jr.: "the moral arch of the universe is long but I believe it bends toward justice."

So today I am speaking of the miracle of justice and ways that we humans pull it toward us. Justice is not a given and like every birth it is hard and like life itself it is an ongoing process of becoming.

Holly Near has a song in our hymnal, “We are Singing, Singing for Our Lives. One refrain: “We are a justice-seeking people / And we are singing, singing for our lives.” She wrote that after San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk was assassinated in 1978. Seeking justice is a journey. Arriving at justice is a dream. It is not a destination to reach. It is a goal to work toward.

Now, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we are in a moment where more people are both open to and seeking justice. The bad news is that gains in justice are not certain and that many who are against justice are absolutely committed to maintaining the status quo. They will kill to get their way.

How do we advance in these times? By what miracles do moments of justice get created?

I will start with reflections from my journey.

If you want peace, work for justice. I heard and learned that from nuns involved in the Nuclear Freeze movement in Toledo, Ohio in the early 1980s. I was in my late twenties and had given up on Democratic Party electoral politics after years of election campaigns. The Party leadership was making nice with Wall Street. There was no philosophical or ethical place for me. There has never been a path forward to peace or justice in the Democratic Party, but that's another sermon.

Peace is gained through justice.

That starts with the personal peace reached when one sees clearly, has a clear understanding of one's self and the arrays of power and control in the human-built world around her. She has more than a sense of things do not have to be this way.

We each need an analysis built on the values of our lives. We need a framework of ethics and, spiritual beings that we are, theology. Our Unitarian Universalist principles offer such a grounding. We are most familiar with the first and last:

First, believing in the inherent worth and dignity of all creatures. Last is the interdependent web of life, in which we are a part. The second principle is Justice, equity and compassion in human relations. The sixth also champions justice: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

And the fifth is very American, transcendentalist, really: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

As principles, these are the foundation of our theology today, our little movement of almost 200,000 souls, including 40,000 children, mostly in the United States.

Maybe it is a miracle we are still here, as small as we are.

Here is the biggest miracle of all: that the United States is not a slave nation. If I was speaking to you 161 years ago, in 1859, let's say we lived in the center of the country, population-wise, that would have been Cincinnati. In August 1859 most people in the country, north and south, thought slavery implacable, would be with us forever. That decade started with the Compromise of 1850, crowned by the Fugitive Slave Act requiring slaves caught in the north to be returned to their owners. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 allowed each of those territory's citizens to vote to come into the Union as slave or free states. The Supreme Court ruled in its 1857 Dred Scot Decision that slaves and their descendants were not U.S. citizens. Slaves were ruled by state law, not covered by the Constitution.

In 1858 Lincoln said in a speech: "I believe there is no right, and ought to be no inclination in the people of the free States to enter into the slave States and interfere with the question of slavery at all." In 1860 the Republican platform was to not extend slavery into free states or the territories.

So, in August 1859, our Universalist congregation might have been Abolitionist, but we were no more powerful then than we are now. Our just cause was not going anywhere.

In 1859 four million people were enslaved and the country was stuck. Neither a solution nor compromise to slavery was in the political cards. Yet 20 months later South Carolina cannons were bombing Fort Sumter. That was April 1861. South Carolina had led five other southern states out of the Union. Eleven states formed the Confederate States of America.

Why did that day come? Because in October 1859, out of nowhere, well, actually out of Bleeding Kansas, John Brown and a band of 21 men attacked a U.S. army arsenal at Harper's Ferry Virginia. No one else wanted to start a slave rebellion, but John Brown did.

My high school English teacher, Harold Feltner, said John Brown was a fanatic. Jesus, too. Both men went knowingly to their deaths, Mr. Feltner said to my class back in 1972. Rational people don't volunteer to die. Maybe rational people don't create miracles.

Six years later, April 1865, the Civil War was over and almost four million enslaved people were free. That is a transformation that can only be described as a miracle. How did it come about?

My message to you on miracles? People are forced into them. They are not planned. The South, ruled by fear instead of embracing hope, panicked at the prospect of Lincoln becoming president. He was inaugurated in March 1861 to lead an already divided country. The South was frightened to death that Lincoln would what? End slavery? He wouldn't. He did not hold that position or political belief.

The South forced the miracle of freedom, of justice for four million enslaved Blacks into the reality of American society in 1861 at a time when no one thought the day would ever come, certainly not in their lifetimes.

One determined fanatic, John Brown, and his commitment to freeing the slaves by taking over the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, changed everything. Well, that and Southern fantasies about reality. A doppelganger miracle, South Carolina seceding from the union in December 1860, three months before Lincoln took office, is the most astonishing fact creating the Civil War.

From the cauldron of crisis miracles might bubble up, the miracle of being, naming and performing as our true self. Southern leaders reacted to Lincoln's November election by proving they were racist and undemocratic, more committed to owning people than living in a democratic society.

I will repeat that: Southern leaders proved they were racist and undemocratic. A system of slavery, a slave nation, is by definition, not democratic. Slaveholders had no interest in negotiating an end. Not only is their way of life taken away from them, they love their way of life.

So, they left the Congress, they withdrew from the Union.

And that is a miracle, in its own way. It is a miracle when we know and act our true selves. People who act for justice must plan and deal with people who are committed to inequality and injustice. We live in a country today where perhaps 20 to 40 percent of the population stands against equal rights for all. This has become very visible these last four years.

I am helped by my simple definition of evil: Evil occurs when people do bad things on purpose. Evil is in actions, it is a verb and not a noun, a person or a thing.

We want miracles to produce good results. That is part of the definition of miracles.

But the ingredients that form the condition of a miracle are both good and bad. Or, as my ex-wife said, to use a very simple example, "you have to kiss a lot of toads before you find the frog who becomes your prince." Neither the frog nor the prince is in every pond, or kiss.

But it is a blessing to have the miracle of recognizing others that are acting on their true selves for what they are. We need to believe what we see and hear and not rationalize or excuse evil actions under the veneer of our being polite or holding civilization together. That is not helping.

John Brown helped. He acted against evil actions. He meant to start a slave rebellion.

Who was this man? His biography, briefly.

Brown was born into a religious, anti-slavery family. This environment, ethic, and theology followed him from his birth in 1800 in Connecticut to Ohio in 1805, then to Pennsylvania, back to Ohio, to New York and eventually to Kansas, where he moved in 1855 to fight pro-slavery forces as the territory battled to become a free state.

Brown's anti-slavery views grew stronger as he grew up, from seeing a Black boy beaten with a shovel, which made him "a most determined' foe of slavery from then on." At 19 he hid a runaway slave. The barn he built in Pennsylvania had a secret room for runaway slaves.

Famously, Brown responded to the 1837 murder of Elijah Lovejoy, an anti-slavery newspaper editor. He “stood up, stood up, raised his right hand, and vowed that here, before God, in this church, in the presence of these witnesses, he would consecrate his life to the destruction of slavery.” He did.

In 1849, Brown moved to the free black farming community of North Elba, New York. In 1855 Brown moved with his sons to Kansas Territory. In response to the sacking of Lawrence, Kansas, John Brown led a small band of men to Pottawatomie Creek in May, 1856. He is guilty of the terrorist murder of five pro-slavery settlers. There is no escaping that fact.

Frederick Douglass reported that Brown told him in 1847 he was organizing a slave uprising in the Alleghany mountains. Brown had that idea from the early 1840s, at least.

Brown had years of financial backing from Boston and New England abolitionists, including Franklin Sanborn, a good friend of Henry Thoreau’s. Brown planned and fundraised in the region and spoke with Thoreau several times.

In 1859 Brown made his way to the area near Harper’s Ferry with a band of some 20 men, both Black and White. They planned and trained for months to free slaves, raid the federal arsenal, capture arms to pass out as the start of a slave uprising. The October 16 attack did not succeed. As Neil Gustafson wrote, “Brown was an incompetent general and tactician.”

That is the history and a bit of the intense anti-slavery life of John Brown.

Two weeks later, Thoreau rented the Concord meeting hall and gave the talk “A Plea for Captain John Brown.”

He was all in on Brown. He called him “A man of rare common-sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles, -- that was what distinguished him. Not yielding to a whim or transient impulse but carrying out the purpose of a life.”

And Thoreau said “He did not value his bodily life in comparison with ideal things. He did not recognize unjust human laws but resisted them as he was bid. For once we are lifted out of the trivialness and dust of politics into the region of truth and manhood. No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments.”

In 1848 Thoreau had been arrested for refusing to pay a tax, his protest against the war against Mexico. He wrote the essay we know as “Civil Disobedience.” Thoreau’s thinking was consistent. In 1848 he said – this was also a lecture: “A very few – as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men – serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it.”

Brown did what Thoreau did. Thoreau wanted “Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divided States and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine.”

And he said: “Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men, generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority?”

This is the thinking of people who know themselves, who have analyzed and understand the world around them, and act for justice out of principle. They act, not knowing the outcome of their actions. They act in the time and at the place they live, responding to the reality of their society. Their actions are a surprise, a gift and in the case of John Brown and Henry Thoreau, miracles.

Blacks have been Brown’s advocates for the past 160 years.

In his 1909 assessment of Brown, W.E.B. DuBois wrote, “John Brown worked not simply for Black Men, he worked with them, and he was a companion of their daily life, knew their faults and virtues, and felt, as few white Americans have felt, the bitter tragedy of their lot.”

Lerone Bennett, Jr., editor at Ebony magazine, wrote in 1964, 105 years after Brown was hung: “It is to John Brown we must go, finally, if we want to understand the limits and possibilities of our situation. He was pure passion, pure transcendence. He was an elemental force like wind, rain and fire.”

Purposefully or not, that echoes Frederick Douglass' 1857 speech insisting “If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.”

That is such an important analysis I had it read at my wedding. Struggle is a necessary part of life.

Maybe the progress that bends the arc toward justice always requires human forces of nature, be it civil disobedience or violent confrontation.

People insisted Black Lives Matter in Minneapolis, Chicago, Portland, Seattle, a dozen other cities this spring and summer. Others asked why are they rioting, why are they getting arrested, why can’t they protest peacefully?

As we work to create the miracle of an antiracist future we need learn and act on the understanding that "the principal producers and defenders of racist ideas will not join us," as Ibram Kendi wrote in "Stamped from the Beginning, the Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America." There will be no miracle transformation of lions laying down with sheep. Those embracing racial discrimination find Blacks unequal, Kendi writes, and will not be changed by facts or logic. Racist ideas and racism disparities are defeated by ending racial discrimination through policies that treat Blacks and people of color equally.

But the road to justice is neither easy nor smooth. Elaine Weiss’ history, “The Woman’s Hour,” is subtitled “the great fight to win the vote.” Women were not given the vote. They had to fight for it.

This generation now fights for their rights. It is a story as old as America, where nothing pertaining to justice is given to anybody.

I end with the miracle, whether seen from 1848 or 1920, of women gaining the vote. Tuesday is the 100th anniversary of the passing of the 19th amendment, white women winning suffrage. Today's closing words are by the Universalist Minister Olympia Brown, the first woman ordained by a major denomination in the 1860s. She became a suffrage organizer and was one of the few 19th century advocates who lived to vote.

At the 1848 Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, for the first time in the United States, a resolution was proposed and passed that women "secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise."

"Secure to themselves:" women would spend the next 72 years fighting to win the vote. None of the 100 people who signed the Declaration of Sentiments lived to vote under the 19th amendment.

The miracle of advancing justice is realized in not giving up while being clear that the opposition will not change. Miracles happen when the masses in the middle change and accept change.

The miracle is for whites to see and accept others as equal and end policies that do neither.

Opening Words

"The Central Task of the Religious Community"

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for Justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

by Mark Morrison Reed

Reading

From "West India Emancipation Speech"

"...The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.

"This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

//

... In the light of these ideas, Negroes will be hunted at the North and held and flogged at the South so long as they submit to those devilish outrages and make no resistance, either moral or physical. Men may not get all they pay for in this world, but they must certainly pay for all they get. If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others. ..."

-- Frederick Douglass, August 3, 1857

Closing words

"Stand by this Faith"

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals, which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost. Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves.

Olympia Brown

Reading 569, "Singing the Living Tradition"