

Modern Scripture, Part 1: *From a Birmingham Jail*

— Jaco B. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD — Nov. 4, 2007 —

CALL TO WORSHIP —

My sermon will focus on the deservedly famous *Letter* written in 1963 from a Birmingham, Alabama, jail cell by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who had been arrested as he and others defied the status quo of segregation in the middle of the Civil Rights Era.

Dr. King was renowned for his evocative use of imagery and language, so I want to call us into worship today in a similar style, using the poetry of an earlier Unitarian minister, William Channing Gannett, whose life spanned the second half of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th [1840-1923].

William Channing Gannett also had a way with words, and is perhaps best remembered for authoring a delicate document that, in 1887, attempted to bridge the emerging divide between more orthodox Christian Unitarians and the Free Religious Association, an upstart, proto-humanist group that he affirmed. That lyrical statement, which did indeed lead to greater unity among late 19th century Unitarians, was notably titled, “The Things Most Commonly Believed To-day among Us.”

Gannett’s last and longest ministry was at the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY, where he actively supported one of his more courageous congregants, Susan B. Anthony, the influential advocate of voting rights for women.

But it is Gannett’s eloquence that draws our attention here, and these three verses of his poetry work on multiple levels, like much of Dr. King’s imagery. Morning is the obvious and opening subject, but listen as the author then adds depth to the metaphor of morning, bringing to it the power of *truth* to ignite a following and of *meaning* to dispel fear and launch a new day...

The Morning Hangs a Signal:

1. The morning hangs a signal upon the mountain crest,
while all the sleeping valleys in silent darkness rest;
From peak to peak it flashes, it laughs along the sky,
till glory of the sunlight on all the land shall lie.

2. Above the generations, the lonely prophets rise,
 while truth flares as the daystar within their glowing eyes;
And other eyes, beholding, are kindled from that flame,
 and dawn becomes the morning, when prophets love proclaim.
3. The soul has lifted moments, above the drift of days,
 when life's great meaning breaketh in sunrise on our ways;
Behold the radiant token of faith above all fear;
 night shall release its splendor that morning shall appear.
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SERMON — **Modern Scripture, Part 1: *From a Birmingham Jail***

I believe any writing—from any source—that positively inspires us to give expression to our values can be considered holy “scripture.” You can no doubt assemble worthy candidates for your own set of sacred passages, as Unitarian Universalists are free to do. Henry David Thoreau’s 1849 essay on “Civil Disobedience” [referenced earlier in the service] would likely be included for many of us. But the modern piece I will now focus on, which is in the lineage of Thoreau’s thinking, might count among the holiest of holies for many of us.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s provocative 1963 *Letter From Birmingham City Jail* has been translated into more than 40 languages and at least counts among the classics of world literature. It is one of the most frequently collected items in college English anthologies. Inspirational it was—and still is.

Thanks to the prodding of Paint Branchers Mike and Kim Stark, who purchased the right to dictate a minister’s sermon theme at last year’s church Auction, I have been delving into this astounding document and will offer some of my own angles on its power, which has not diminished, even as we head toward its 45th anniversary this coming spring.

Let me first note the rather dramatic context in which Dr. King was moved to write what is perhaps his most influential *text*, this *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*—which is often held up alongside what has been deemed his most influential piece of *oratory*, the “I Have a Dream” speech.

That loud call to action—a more sermon-style presentation so memorably captured on film—came in August of 1963 and it is deservedly honored as a beacon of moral strength

and leadership. It might have fit the image offered by the earlier poet William Channing Gannett:

“Above the generations, the lonely prophets rise,
while truth flares as the daystar within their glowing eyes;”

But Dr. King’s *Letter* was quietly written the previous April—four months *prior* to that vivid speech—over Easter weekend, no less, while he was about as alone as one can get in society. He was being held in the notorious jailhouse of the most notoriously segregated city of Birmingham, Alabama, where the notorious police commissioner, Bull Connor, terrorized civil rights protesters with bombs, snarling dogs, fire hoses, etc. The city had become known as “Bombingham—the Johannesburg of the South.”

Dr. King had been invited there by local leaders to help lead peaceful, if disruptive street protests as part of a concerted nonviolent campaign that was well underway, attempting to crack that city’s segregationist core.

Things were ugly and dangerous in “Bombingham,” Alabama, and nonviolence was still a fragile, emerging strategy in this fight, especially in the face of such fierce oppression and intimidation by authorities and white residents. Remember that at this time, April of 1963, there had been no “I Have a Dream” speech to motivate and galvanize widespread support; the Civil Rights Act was more than a year away; the monumental March on Selma and the Voting Rights Act were still two years distant.

Nonviolent laborers in the vineyard of civil rights had been at their task for years already without legal recognition for their cause, facing virulent, vitriolic, vicious aggression from many white people who viscerally resisted the notion of integration and equal rights.

On Good Friday, 34-year-old Dr. King was summarily thrown in jail for “parading without a permit,” and it was unclear what would happen next. It was his 13th arrest, and he was put in solitary confinement without mattress, pillow, or blanket. His spirit was sorely tested for nine days behind bars. Again, the poet’s words echo:

“Behold the radiant token of faith above all fear;
night shall release its splendor that morning shall appear.”

What *did* happen next was an Easter gift, even though it appeared at first to further push him down. With his great faith, the struggles of night would indeed lead to very expressive clarity of the morning.

Dr. King was allowed to read the Birmingham News in his cell, and what should he find in those pages but an open letter from eight white Alabama clergymen, who gently but firmly urged patience and an end to the “unwise and untimely demonstrations,” which, they noted, were “directed and led in part by outsiders”—a veiled but clear rebuke of the unnamed Dr. King.

The message, from top Catholic, Protestant and Jewish leaders of the region, derided the “technically peaceful” and “extreme measures” of the demonstrators and actually commended local law enforcement officials for their “calm manner...protect(ing) our city from violence.” Finally, the writers urged the use of “common sense,” suggesting that “a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets.”

It was this statement by his ordained colleagues, ironically titled, “A Call for Unity,” that drew the incarcerated Dr. King’s response, also in the form of an open letter—and the rest is history. He scribbled his first thoughts in the margins of the newspaper that carried the rebuke, continued writing on scraps of paper smuggled in to him, and finally on legal pads provided by his attorneys.

His writing unfolded fully from heart, mind and spirit, and rose to carry the philosophical banner of the civil rights movement from then on.

And other eyes, beholding, are kindled from that flame,
and dawn becomes the morning, when prophets love proclaim.

Dr. King’s *Letter*—born in the nighttime of his mistreatment, but emblematic of loving, dedicated leadership—signaled a dawn of new energy for the nonviolent civil rights campaign.

Some momentum came from sheer volume, size. His letter was long—the length of two or three sermons, really—and near the end he apologized for this, sort of:

Never before have I written so long a letter... I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?

But its weight is carried well throughout the piece—powerfully well paced, never stalling or overworking any point. In fact, as I searched for commentary on this historical document, I found scholarly treatments of its excellent rhetoric. It is evidently a great model of a

convincing argument—by analogy, appeal and justification—all arrayed to refute, point by point, passionately and intellectually, the status quo positions put forth in his colleagues' much shorter rebuke.

But as I now take a quick tour through some of the *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, what I want to lift up and what feels particularly pertinent in our religious consideration is Dr. King's convincing expression of a set of **ethics**. This is actually not a word he uses in any of his 50 paragraphs, yet the entire piece breathes deep ethical pronouncements that continue to challenge both the status quo and...us.

Ethics are moral principles that govern personal or group behavior, and the word "moral" *does* appear in various forms 20 times in this foundational document. That's one reason why I think it has abiding value as holy "scripture"—as a guiding inspiration toward the best of human intentions.

In the *Letter* he first off methodically addresses the complaint about "outsiders coming in," but notice how he rises from the particular to the universal ethic.

A: He was invited in.

B: He is called to confront injustice and there is injustice in Birmingham.

And C:

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states... Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

These gems come in just the 4th paragraph of this missive, and have resounded ever since, including in our emphasis on the 7th Unitarian Universalist Principle: "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part," which *we* didn't get around to stating until 1985.

More than two decades ahead of that, in 1963, very few public figures were willing—or even *able* to articulate a vision of such vital interconnectedness, let alone that its implications are mightily political.

The ethical foundation Dr. King stands on is cosmic and universal.

And today, we can find never-ending examples of this still too-often ignored reality,

certainly at least in the current debates about the immigration of “outsiders.” Listen to the voices raised in this raucous cultural conversation and see which ones advocate a narrowing ethic of separation and which recognize “an inescapable network of mutuality.”

Next up in the *Letter*, Dr. King tackles the demand for patience, for working through the legislative system and courts rather than the streets. He describes how he and his associates utilized a careful, respectful process that only eventually led to the current nonviolent direct action campaign. He especially details numerous unsuccessful attempts at negotiation. So yes, now they employ the essential element of tension:

Nonviolent direct action seeks to...foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue... I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.

Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

He also explains, pointedly, that without such tension, delaying tactics usually served vested interests.

*Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, **groups** tend to be more immoral than **individuals**.*

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was “well timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation.

For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

That quotable jurist was allegedly Thurgood Marshall, the first African American to serve on the United States Supreme Court. Note how Dr. King also references other well-known and respected thinkers, such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Socrates. He knows he's writing to learned religious leaders and challenges them with appeals to the positions taken by great minds.

The ethical foundation Dr. King stands on is careful and creative, deep and broad.

Additional significant historical characters step forth as Dr. King makes another very important and eternal point. Look at Adolph Hitler, he suggests. Everything Hitler did to the Jews in Germany, although universally condemned as immoral and unjust, was nonetheless completely *legal* at the time. So there has to be a distinction made between just and unjust laws, which is an ethical quandary of the highest order.

One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? ...

*To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that **uplifts** human personality is just. Any law that **degrades** human personality is unjust.*

All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.

Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things.

Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and awful.

Dr. King goes on to cite the early Christians,

who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire.

So there is nothing new about the kind of nonviolent civil disobedience he advocates. And far from being improper, it is, in fact, the most ethical, even if demanding path:

One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

The salient moral aspect to this, in my mind, is the willingness to accept the consequences of breaking an unjust law, so as “to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice.” That is what gives moral heft to nonviolent direct action. It’s why Dr. King went to jail for the 13th time, and why we pay so much attention to his writing from that cell. He was talking the talk *and* walking the walk (although not necessarily in that order).

The ethical foundation he stands on is respectful and courageous.

Certainly today, we are confronted with new and ongoing dilemmas that call us to determine the just or unjust nature of government actions, say, in the name of fighting terrorism or, again, in controlling immigration, or in allotting resources to support military operations and/or fighting poverty. To what authority do we appeal for moral guidance in our contemporary postures, especially when what we believe to be just might run against the majority opinion or legal code?

Dr. King was called an “extremist” yet his ethical behavior stood on the strong shoulders of many accepted moral authorities throughout history. He aligns himself with other leaders who were seen in their day as “extremists” but who emerged otherwise in history—most notably, of course, Jesus, whose inspiration created an entire religion.

This leads me to my last ethical illustration from the *Letter*, one that hits a little closer to home, perhaps. Dr. King’s frank disappointment in the lack of support shown by his white religious colleagues flows fiercely. It stirs up an abiding and legitimate moral inquiry:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress...

We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability...

Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with...

How do we justify silence and complicity in the face of obvious injustice and societal tension? I doubt that this question ever goes away, so each generation must come to terms with it anew, especially religiously-oriented people who profess an ethic of larger concern. I know it gnaws at my conscience and illuminates some harsh angles that occasionally glare at me until I can shield myself again with all the comforting devices available these days.

In his *Letter*, Dr. King does honor the few white church leaders who have been active in the civil rights campaign up to that point, but notes how

too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.

Remember this is a full two years before his clarion call for clergy to march with him in Selma. Many white Unitarian Universalist ministers and others *did* respond to that invitation, perhaps because they had felt the sting of perspective contained in this forthright *Letter*. But the query abides: can religious people live up to their creeds and principles by acting to correct injustice?

Dr. King sets a sobering example before us, and we will, no doubt, often fall short of this noble witness, but his moral call to us is nonetheless still present in our world today, especially perhaps for Unitarian Universalists who would forge a 21st century religion based on the interdependence of all life. If we were to truly behave as if “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” what would that look like?

The ethical foundation Dr. King stands on is prophetic.

But his vision is uncompromisingly positive, holding America to account for its own revolutionary value of freedom, freedom for all. Certainly, the *Letter from Birmingham City*

Jail is reflective of its era, but it is also rather timeless, as many holy scriptures are, with insights that inspire us anew to keep pursuing the promise of equality and fairness for all people.

*We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always **ripe** to do **right**. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and... lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.*

My reengagement with this *Letter* reminds me that there is very good reason why Dr. King is so revered as a religious leader and heroic American. His eloquence, intellect, passion and personality all served a greater good then and continue to help the rest of us draw on our best selves to face the inequities of this day.

Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

For Martin Luther King, Jr., much of his own inspiration came from Jesus, both his own love of Jesus and the love embodied by him. He felt that the church that had emerged in the name and memory of Jesus could do better than it was, and he challenged it accordingly, very much in the spirit of Jesus, I think.

There was a time when the church was very powerful, not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.

Let us take the inspiration of modern scripture to heart and strive to be a thermostat raising the odds for transformation toward the good of the whole, as we behold the radiant token of faith above all fear.

Go in peace. BE peace.

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