

Return to Selma

a sermon by Rev. J. Mark Worth, March 22, 2015

Sometimes it seems that we have tried to boil down the great African-American Civil Rights movement to one man and one speech. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., told America that he had a dream, and after that, well, everything was all right. And we gave him a holiday.

Well, it didn't happen that way. The 1963 March On Washington for Jobs and Freedom – where King gave that famous speech – was just one event in a long series of marches, lawsuits, protests, campaigns, sit-ins, Freedom Rides, boycotts, and other actions. It took place in a time of murders, assassinations, bombings, and acts of police brutality against people who were asking for the right to vote, to go to school, to sit at a lunch counter, and to use the rest room.

The organizers of the 1963 March On Washington prepared 80,000 cheese sandwiches to feed the crowd, hoping that 80,000 demonstrators would show up and attract the attention of the nation. In fact, more than 250,000 people attended! Many speeches were delivered. But most of all we remember Martin Luther King's inspiring "I Have a Dream" speech. Using the Bible, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and the words and cadences of the great "Negro Spirituals," King was calling on us to become a better, fairer, and more just nation than we had been.

Only eighteen days after the March on Washington, in Birmingham, Alabama, terrorists exploded a bomb in the 16th Street Baptist Church, just before a Sunday morning service. Four little girls, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair, were killed. The murder of these children shook the non-violent Civil Rights Movement to its core. It was not until fourteen years later that one man was convicted, and thirty-seven years after the bombing two other men were convicted. All had been members of the Ku Klux Klan.

As you may know, Anne Ossanna and I were recently participants in a UU conference in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, "Marching in the Arc of Justice," and while we were there we visited the 16th Street Baptist Church. It was a very powerful, very holy, experience. We saw the spot where the bomb exploded, and the memorial to the girls. And we met Carolyn McKistry, the author of a book about the bombing, "While the World Watched". She had been fourteen years old, and present in the church, when the bomb went off.

Bloody Sunday ~

Rev. Dr. King became the first president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which harnessed the moral authority of the black churches to conduct protests in the service of civil rights reform. As many of us remember, King used the idea of civil disobedience, as practiced by Mahatma Gandhi, to organize non-violent action against racial segregation. Most whites, and many moderate blacks, thought Rev. King was too provocative, too confrontational, too radical. Other blacks, like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, criticized Rev. King for being too moderate, too middle-class, too non-violent.

In January of 1965, Rev. Dr. King and the SCLC joined a campaign to register black voters in Selma, Alabama, where fewer than 2 percent of eligible African-Americans had been allowed to register to vote. The campaign had already begun under the leadership of John Lewis, James Bevel, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Soon, Rev. King and more than 200 others were arrested.

Within a few days Unitarian Universalist ministers Ira Blalock and Gordon Gibson arrived in Selma to work with the SCLC. Rev. Dana McLean Greeley, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, sent a telegram to Rev. King in jail, praising King's work and calling him a "model of discipline and non-violence." King, writing from jail, said, "there are more Negroes in jail with me than there are on the voting rolls."

On Feb. 18, civil rights marchers and press reporters in nearby Marion were brutally attacked by

police, and dozens were injured. When police burst into a restaurant and started clubbing the black patrons, who were merely sitting at their tables, Jimmy Lee Jackson, a 26-year-old Baptist deacon, was shot and killed by a state trooper. Forty-two years later that trooper pled guilty to manslaughter and was sentenced – to one month in prison.

On March 7, 1965, now known as “Bloody Sunday,” SNCC and SCLC began a march of 600 people, including John Lewis and Rosa Parks, from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery, but a sheriff’s posse, and Alabama state troopers on horseback, charged into the marchers on the Edmund Pettis Bridge with tear gas, bull whips and clubs. Seventeen marchers were hospitalized.

The next day, the Unitarian Universalist Association office in Boston received a telegram from Rev. King asking for assistance. Rev. Homer Jack began calling UU ministers, asking them to go to Selma. Orloff Miller, Clark Olsen, James Reeb, and David Cole, were among the forty U.U. ministers who left for Selma that night. Eventually about one-fifth of all the U.U. ministers in the United States went to Selma.

On March 9, 450 religious leaders of many faiths joined 2,000 African-Americans for a second march over the Edmund Pettis Bridge. They marched over the bridge and prayed at the site of Sunday’s attack, then turned around and went back to Selma, obeying a court order that prevented them from continuing further. That night Rev. Miller, Rev. Olsen, and Rev. Reeb were attacked outside of a restaurant. Jim Reeb was hit in the head with a club. He was turned away from a hospital in Selma, and his friends took him on a two hour ride to a hospital in Birmingham. The siren on the ambulance didn’t work, and it had a flat tire. Reeb died two days later. He was 38 years old. No one was ever convicted for his murder.

On March 15, Rev. Dr. King gave the eulogy at Rev. Reeb’s funeral. Rev. King said, “James Reeb was martyred in the Judeo-Christian faith that all men are brothers. ... His crime was that he dared to live his faith; he placed himself alongside the disinherited black brethren of his community. ...

“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 tailgate rather than a headlight, an echo rather than a voice. He was murdered by 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.”

Viola Liuzzo ~

The day after Rev. Jim Reeb was killed, Viola Liuzzo, a white Detroit housewife and a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Detroit, decided to go to Selma. The drive to Selma took three days. When she arrived, she went to the Roy Brown African Methodist Episcopal Church, known as “Brown Chapel,” and volunteered for the cause. She was given a job at the hospitality desk. Finally, a federal judge decided that the marchers would be allowed to march all the way to Montgomery. On March 21st, many religious leaders, white and black, joined the march, and a prominent rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and other clergy, walked arm-in-arm with Rev. Dr. King.

Viola Liuzzo was also among the marchers going over the Edmund Pettis Bridge on their way to Montgomery. When the march was over on March 29th, Liuzzo met civil rights worker Leroy Morton, and the two of them drove five passengers back to Selma. On the way to Selma a car full of whites drove up behind them and banged into the bumper of Liuzzo’s Oldsmobile several times before passing. When the passengers were dropped off, Liuzzo volunteered to drive Morton back to Montgomery. Four Ku Klux Klan members spotted the car stopped at a traffic light in Selma. They followed it for twenty miles. Attempting to outrun her pursuers, Liuzzo sang “We Shall Overcome” at

the top of her lungs. About half way between Selma and Montgomery the four men pulled their car up next to her and shot her in the head. She was killed instantly. Her car rolled into a ditch, and Morton, covered with blood, played dead until the Klansmen left.

President Johnson called Jim Liuzzo, Viola's husband, the next day. Jim told the president, "My wife died in a sacred battle, for the rights of humanity."

One of the KKK members in the car was an F.B.I. informant, and he testified against the other three men. Nonetheless, they were all acquitted. But within five months, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the most effective piece of civil rights legislation ever enacted in the United States.

The Promised Land ~

The Civil Rights movement was a response to terrorism, plain and simple. America's original terrorists were the slave owners themselves, and the Ku Klux Klan was a terrorist organization, racists cloaked with a thin veneer of religion and patriotism, designed to perpetuate white supremacy and black subservience. The lynchings, beatings, murders, bombings, assassinations, all were acts of terrorism. And all too often, the police and courts and state governments aided and abetted the terrorists, and even participated in the lawlessness.

One of the great gospel songs of the Civil Rights Movement said, "Paul and Silas bound in jail, had no money to go their bail, keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!" Keep your eyes on the prize – that promised land of freedom, fairness, equal treatment under the law. Despite many victories, the struggle for the full dignity of African-Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, women, gays, lesbians, and transgender people continues.

On April 3, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, Rev. King, supporting black sanitary workers, told a gathering, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

The next day, Rev. King was shot and killed.

At the conference Anne and I attended, we heard from Rev. C.T. Vivian, one of the organizers of the Selma protests, and from Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, an African-American UU historian. We heard from some of the UU ministers who went to Selma, including Orloff Miller and Clark Olsen, who were with Jim Reeb when he was killed.

Selma was a pivotal moment in our history as a nation – and as Unitarian Universalists. Mark Morrison-Reed says that many times in the past we UUs stood at the brink of making a difference for racial justice, and all too often we wavered. But not this time. At Selma we found ourselves called by our faith, compelled, and hundreds of us responded. When we left Selma, we left behind two UU martyrs – and those who had been there had their hearts changed.

Earlier, however, we UUs had missed a slightly different opportunity. When studying at Boston University, Martin and Coretta Scott King often attended Arlington Street Church, the historic Unitarian Church in downtown Boston which was then led by Rev. Dr. Dana McLean Greeley. Greeley, a good man, a very white Boston patrician, failed to notice the Kings, although they attended often. The Kings considered becoming Unitarians, but they eventually concluded that, while they had much in common with us, we didn't have a sufficient understanding of the evil that humans are capable of. We were intellectually alive but emotionally impoverished. And, of course, it would have been nice if Rev. Dr. Greeley had *noticed* their frequent presence in church!

Don't let the dream die. In 2013 the Supreme Court struck down some portions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Our dysfunctional Congress is unable to act to restore those portions. Today,

tensions between police and the black community still linger. Blatant discrimination and rampant violence against African-Americans was nothing new in the 1950s and '60s. What was new then was that we saw it happen on television. Television brought the injustice into the living rooms of white people. And the continuing problems between police and minority communities is not new today. What is new today is another technological advance – many confrontations are being recorded on smart-phones, and are being posted on the internet.

Black lives matter. Hispanic lives matter. Native American lives matter. Women's lives matter. LGBTQ lives matter. And yes, police lives matter. We have not reached the promised land. Keep your eyes on the prize. The struggle to achieve fairness and equal treatment is not finished. As we observe the 50th anniversary of the events in Selma, let us not forget the great struggle and its great cost.

....Amen.