

The Redeeming Power of Sin

A Sermon for MLK Day by Reverend Lynn Strauss

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”
MLK, Jr.

Each year of my nine years of ministry in Knoxville Tennessee, our congregation marched in the MLK Day parade in East Knoxville. Most years we walked along side the St. Luke Episcopal Church marchers, a small African American congregation with which we shared a summer church camp program. Kids and teens from both churches joined in the march.

We marched through the poorest part of town, down Martin Luther King Blvd, past the liquor stores, the abandoned gas stations, past the storefront, pentecostal churches. Every few blocks we would take up the chorus of “We Shall Overcome”.

Mid-January was usually pretty cold for Tennessee and the marches in the 1990s were small and unorganized. Nevertheless, residents lined the streets to cheer us on...and the local high school marching band was always a highlight.

Year after year, I questioned the efficacy of the march. Year after year, I almost didn't show up. But also year after year, I was glad I did. We were upholding Dr. Kings' legacy, we were keeping his dream alive. In an imperfect fashion, in the gray cold, walking down streets of broken pavement, through neighborhoods neglected by elected officials. However futile it might seem- we were attempting to keep the faith.

The sins, the evils of racism and poverty still breathed on the streets and in the halls of power in Knoxville, 25, 30 years after Kings' assassination in another Tennessee city, and they continue still in DC and in Montgomery County...and everywhere across our land.

Once a year...(and I know it's not enough) it matters to me, to remember Dr. King, by marching for equality, like he did, by praying for guidance and courage, like he did, by working for racial and economic justice like he did, by singing the songs that he also sang.

Once a year, (and I know it's not enough) it matters to me, to put cynicism aside, to remember the words and the spirit of those years of the civil rights movement...to tell the younger generation what it was like...how much we hoped for, how much we dreamed was possible, how long the journey the struggle has been and how it continues- how every day since Dr. King's death, every day, and every night, people in America continue to suffer the violence of racism and poverty.

Each season we are offered holy days to engage in moral conversation. Martin Luther King Day is January's opportunity.

And so I challenge us this morning to think about sin, about racism, and poverty and to give an accounting.

For no one of us is without sin... sin is a separation from wholeness- whether we call wholeness, God or Creation, or the Human Family- sin is a separation from that larger whole...and we all are broken, we all are partial, we all stand in need of healing and forgiveness.

I have often wondered why so many evangelical preachers, so many of those TV evangelists' preach about their own sin and salvation...preach about how far they had to fall, before they came up...why so many admit to being alcoholics, or cheaters, or liars.

Perhaps they do it to remind us that we all collude and are responsible for the broken, places in society, for the institutions of which we are a part. Perhaps they do it because they know that we all stand in need of healing the separations in our lives. Because they know there is only one place to start when it comes to sin.

When it comes to racism, to the inequities of class...when it comes to the realities of privilege and poverty, we all stand accountable.

In the Bible it is written "Where sin is great, grace doth much more abound".

A good preacher, a good leader, a good healer starts with the diagnosis, with naming the brokenness, with speaking the truth of how things really are.

Grace doesn't stand a chance until a prophetic voice is heard.

Black and White together didn't stand a chance until Dr. King stood firm and led the way. Civil rights didn't stand a chance until the truth of racism and poverty was broadcast into every home in America.

Before we can speak of the dream- before speaking of how we imagine things might be- before we speak of faith in the possibilities to come...before we can count on grace- first we must stir deep compassion for the suffering that is before us. First we must stir outrage, and prime the conscience to acknowledge and pay attention to sin.

So yes, evangelical preachers and liberal preachers too speak of their own sin, their own despair, their own accountability because to talk with integrity about sin...we must first confess our own separation from wholeness, our own story of privilege, our own chasm of fear and denial.

To make room for abounding grace, we must clear out the cobwebs of lies and half-truths, clear out the dust and dirt of complacency and silence, clear out the muddy and muddled accumulation of our hearts and minds own racial stereotypes and class privileges.

Only then we can turn toward a healing of spirit.

There was a moment when change on a spiritual level was possible... The signing into law of the Civil Rights act in 1965 could have been/should have been a beginning, instead it proved to be an end. It was a structural solution, not a spiritual change.

There was a moment, when Dr. Kings' assassination brought all of us to our knees in sorrow and contrition...in that moment, there could have been/should have been a beginning, but it proved to be an end. A end of peace, an end of hope.

Perhaps today we are at another moment when change on a spiritual level is possible...with an African American man engaged in a serious race for the presidential nomination of his party and a potentially transforming conversation about race in America...perhaps this will be a new beginning.

We are inheritors, not only of Dr. Kings' dream, but also of the heavy, burdensome legacy of racism. In the book "Soul Work" which some of you have read and discussed, there is an essay by theologian and professor, Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor. Rasor speaks of the need for a spiritual dimension in anti-racism work...he says that, "racism is an evil that holds us in it grip."

Liberal theologian Walter Wink also believes that we are held in unconscious captivity by our middle class values...he puts it this way... “we are possessed by the values and powers of our unjust order”.

How is it that we can go along living our privilege, living our prejudices, as if we didn't know what we know...how is it that we need to be reminded again and again of the sins of racism and economic injustice... (at least we white people need to be reminded, we middle class people need to be reminded)

How is it that some days we see and are bothered by the evils of our unjust order...and some days we don't see it at all?

I read some of St. Augustine yesterday...this Bishop of the early Christian community wrote that sin is an averting of ones' face from God – from the whole of creation. He wrote that sin is essentially a turn toward self...he wrote that pride is the beginning ,the origin of all sin.

Pride, focus on self, is also a common source of sin of the 21st century.

For too long we liberal religionists have accommodated to our culture, to our times...for too long we have put self-esteem too high on our list of priorities, for too long we have settled for intellectual pride and social comfort, for too long we have failed to turn toward the whole of the common good and speak with a prophetic voice.

For too long we have been afraid to sacrifice for the larger good, to give something up for the sake of true community of equality.

For too long we have confused our priorities. Augustine wrote that sin evidences a disordering of loves...that when your loves are rightly ordered- you are in a strong, spirit centered place.

But there is good news for “where sin is great, grace doth much more abound.” Sin offers an opportunity. Sinners can be redeemed...separations can be repaired...we can turn back toward the common goods of creation.

Sin and evil, racism and poverty are opportunities to be engaged...not just horrors to lament. To speak of these things is not to speak of the past, but to address our loving concern to the future. The acknowledgement of sin and evil opens a moral conversation...points the way to moral action.

What we need as progressive liberal religionists is a deeper understanding of community. A clearer confrontation with our fears. A willingness to give up some of our dearly held autonomy for the sake of love-based community. A rightly ordered set of loves.

How do we create the Beloved Community? How do we address our fears of “the other”? How do we learn to sit together in spiritual discernment leading to a praxis of justice making? If we are caught in the grasp of the evils of racism and privilege...how do we do the work that Dr. King and so many others gave their lives for? They gave their lives...what will we give?

My small suggestion this morning is that we give up guilt...and embrace instead the possibilities that emerge if we acknowledge sin and the pain and misery of separation.

My small suggestion is that we confess that we are still possessed by the evil of racism...that we are still held- by fear of those different from ourselves, that we are still stuck in intellectual and social comfort...and we don't know what to do....

Collectively, our sin is great...and we don't know what to do.

But I have faith in the good...I have faith in Dr. Kings' dream. I have faith in the human spirit to choose love and community- (and we know community is messy and uncomfortable sometimes) but I have faith that someday we will all choose love and community- that we will turn toward the common good rather than toward our self only. I have faith that someday we will be willing to make meaningful sacrifices in order to be free of the grip of racism and privilege.

In the meantime there is still much to learn about community. St. Augustine reminds us that we are given the good of this life as gifts to be held in common. We were given the earth, the sun, the stars, the sea, the trees, the animals, the fruits, the tools, the herbs – given to the common good. Truth and wisdom are among these goods. None of god-given, nature-given, unearned gifts can be owned...in our turn toward self, in our grasping of parts of the whole, in our belief that we can own gifts, we ourselves suffer privation, separation...lack of wholeness and spiritual health.

Two remedies come to mind to heal our broken, self-centered spirits...one is humility and the other is community. And community for Unitarian Universalists does not mean increasing our count of racial diversities...for that is just another form of self-centeredness.

This is what I ask of you this morning...and tomorrow in celebration of Dr. Martin Luther Kings' life, I ask you to reflect with your loved ones on the possibilities that might grow from the sin of racism and privilege....to reflect on humility and community.

I offer an illustrative story in closing...it comes from a collection called "Facing Evil" edited by Paul Woodruff and Harry Wilmer...it is a personal story told by Samuel D. Proctor, Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor emeritus of Rutgers State University and pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church of NYC. Rev. Proctor emphasizes that there is more to be learned about the nature and reality of community.

He tells about how he found out about the death of Martin Luther King. He writes:

"I was coming into Dallas on that April day, way back in 1968, to take part in a conference on how to strengthen the faculties of the Black colleges.

There I was, coming with my briefcase. I went outside the airport looking for a taxi and they pointed me to a taxi. A Black fellow was in charge.

'You want a cab? Here's a cab.'

I looked and there was this scrawny, thin White fellow-hair stringing down his back; tattoos crawling up his arm; had a dirty little juicy brown cigarette butt; pimples on his face. He looked so grimy and ill-kempt, I started to say to myself, 'Sam, you don't need to get a cab like that, do you?'

There I was standing in my pressed blue pinstripe suit; my button down shirt. I almost waved him along, joining in the whole business of perpetuating prejudice. I started to say, 'go ahead fella, but the Lord wouldn't let me do it.'

'Sam, don't do it. Get in the cab.'

I got in the cab. I didn't know King had been shot. The driver was so quiet. "where are you going?"

‘To the Sheraton, downtown.’ He went on, turning out of that airport. And finally he said, “Mister, must be you don’t know what done happened today.’ He could hardly talk.

‘What did you say?’

‘Must be you don’t know what done happened today.’

‘What happened?’, I asked.

I thought this was some dirty kind of a racial thing he was going to pull on me. The stereotype was there. He trembled. He shook. I looked in the mirror. His head was hung down over the steering wheel, and in a cracked voice, this fellow whom I’d already learned to discount in the world said, “Somebody killed Martin Luther King today.”

That’s how I found it out. From a person I least expected to be broken- up in tears about it; from a person I least expected would want to tell it to me. He looked so poor, so out of it. He’s the one who said that to me.

Why is it that my information about human beings did not allow me to be open to that possibility? We don’t know enough about the ingredients of community yet, and we need to spend a lot of time laboring on that.”

So let us reflect on the sin of racism and the possibilities of redemption. Let us remember the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Who said; “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

May we meditate upon these things in our heart.
Amen.

