

Marching on the Side of Love Framing Sacred Activism

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Reading *Jesus and the Woman Taken in Adultery*

John 7:53-8:11, New Revised Standard Version

Then each of them went home, while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to him to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Sermon

Yesterday, more than a thousand or even fifteen hundred Unitarian Universalists including our own Vicki Chessin and Michelle Whitney took part in a Moral March in Raleigh, North Carolina. They joined several thousand others -- a diverse gathering of as many as 80- to 100-thousand according to USA Today -- in a march to the state capital. The UU's were there in their bright yellow Standing on the Side of Love shirts to stand with the poor and people of color who will be disproportionately effected by the barriers to voting put in place by the current state legislature. They were there to stand with women who will have less control over their own reproductive lives because of restrictions put in place by the current North Carolina legislature, restrictions which will close as many as 15 of the 16 clinics in the state that offer abortion services. They are there to stand with public university students who facing a governor who wants to

determine what can and what cannot be studied at North Carolina state universities. The governor doesn't want public money supporting gender studies, for example.¹

It makes me proud that so many Unitarian Universalists were part of this march. I loved following the hashtag #seaofyellowshirts on Twitter and Facebook. It is important that they went as Unitarian Universalists. It was as religious people that so many UU's showed up in Raleigh and had the support of so many more who could not themselves be in Raleigh. The Unitarian Universalist faith calls UU's to Stand on the Side of Love.

Because we value so highly the capacity to reason, because we value self-determination -- and also because so many of us participate in Unitarian Universalist congregations because of the harm and the wounds we've suffering at the hands of religion, Unitarian Universalists are a religious people who are wary of religion and wary of being religious people.

This wariness is an important part of Unitarian Universalist faith, ironically enough. It calls us to be humble whenever we think we might have the answer. And believing as we do in our capacity to reason, humility can be a challenge for us.

Let me do some reasoning about religion: Here's how I understand religion: It's about making meaning. The human impulse to create and discover meaning I understand as our religious impulse. I am fascinated with how meaning happens, and this is probably a large part of why I became a minister.

My dad is an artist. I don't think he'd call himself that, but I will. In his retirement, he became a very talented nature photographer. He takes beautiful pictures. Pictures of waterfalls and flowers, birds, trees in their fall colors. It struck me that when he works with the pictures he's taken, so often it's where he crops the picture -- what gets left in the frame and what is outside the frame -- that makes the biggest difference. And he told me about the "rule of thirds" which is about where things are positioned within that frame. Framing is what makes the pictures as striking as they are.

We frame things all of the time. For example, we frame the civil rights hero Rosa Parks. The birthday of Rosa Parks was this past Tuesday, February 4. At the funeral of Rosa Parks, held in Detroit in 2005, there were many speakers. The biographer Jeanne Theoharis notes that:

In their tributes, Democratic hopefuls focused on Parks's quietness: Senator Barack Obama praised Parks as a "small, quiet woman whose name will be remembered," while Senator Hillary Clinton spoke of the importance of "quiet Rosa Parks moments." [Theoharis]

¹ Much of this information comes from the tv episode Bill Moyers. "North Carolina: Battleground State." January 3, 2014. <http://billmoyers.com/segment/north-carolina-battleground-state/>

Theoharis points out that this safe, quiet, demure version of Rosa Parks is the one that we mostly know about. Theoharis's critique of the memorial service for Parks is worth quoting at length.

The public memorial promoted an inspirational fable: a long-suffering, gentle heroine challenged backward Southern villainy with the help of a faceless chorus of black boycotters and catapulted a courageous new leader, Martin Luther King Jr. into national leadership. Mrs. Parks was honored as midwife--not a leader or thinker or long-time activist--of a struggle that had run its course. This fable is a romantic one, promoting the idea that without any preparation (political or psychic) or subsequent work a person can make great change with a single act, suffer no lasting consequences, and one day be heralded as a hero. It is also gendered, holding up a caricature of a quiet seamstress who demurely kept her seat and implicitly castigating other women, other black women, for being poor or loud or angry and therefore not appropriate for national recognition. Parks's memorialization promoted an improbable children's story of social change--one not-angry woman sat down and the country was galvanized--that erased the long history of collective action against racial injustice and the widespread opposition to the black freedom movement, which for decades treated Parks's extensive political activities as "un-American." [Theoharis]

It matters how we frame things.

The linguist George Lakoff describes "frames" in this way:

[...] frames are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality – and sometimes to create what we take to be reality. [...] they structure our ideas and concepts, they shape the way we reason [...] For the most part, our use of frames is unconscious and automatic.

I believe that what religion does is help us to frame and reframe. It's no coincidence that it was the Unitarian Universalist publishing house Beacon Press that published the Pentagon Papers and helped the nation re-frame the debate on the Vietnam War. It's Beacon Press that published Jeanne Theoharis's reframing of Rosa Parks to help us to understand Parks as a political thinker and life-long activist. And it is not a coincidence that Beacon Press just announced that they are going to publish a new selection of Martin Luther King Jr.'s work edited by Cornel West which will re-frame King. Cornel West argues that we've sanitized and "santaclausified" King. The book to be published in January 2015 is called *The Radical King*.

When I thought about what religious reframing looks like, that's when the Jesus story came to mind. They bring a woman they say they caught committing adultery. Knowing that the law calls her to be stoned, they ask Jesus what to do. They know he's this lovey-dovey softie and they expect him to go against the law. Then they can declare him an outsider and get him out of their hair. But Jesus does something different. He sees how they are out to demonize him. He sees that what they are asking him to assent to is demonizing this woman brought to stand before him. Jesus won't join in the demonizing game. He doesn't say not to stone her. He asks them how they are different from her. Anyone here who couldn't be demonized for one thing or another, they can throw a stone. And everyone can be demonized. What has happened is a re-framing. Instead of an us-against-them situation, the re-framing has people realize it's all us. There's no "them" here.

We attribute a few tools of reframing to Martin Luther King Jr. One is the idea of beloved community. "Beloved community" was the term King used to describe the goal of his activism. When in 1956 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the seats on Montgomery's buses could not be segregated, at a victory rally after that decision, King described the goal. He said, "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men."² Please forgive him the gendered language.

There's a reason that the face of public social justice action for Unitarian Universalists is called "Standing on the Side of Love." Beloved community is what we are striving for. And that means we are striving for a revolution. For Martin Luther King Jr., revolution is a "radical redefinition of our relationships." That is the beloved community. The radical redefinition of our relationships.

One of the concerns among those working for the transformation of the world -- and that's you, right? -- is that it is hard to sustain it. It is tiring work. And it can be draining.

Here's where the reframing comes in. What often is the main thing that motivates people into action? I think it is fear and anger. We get scared about the way things are going -- the planet's warming up (yes, it is -- take the globe's temperature, not just your

² "The King Philosophy." The King Center <<http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>
<http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>>

backyard's) and that is scary. People are going without food and shelter, without the support they need for medicines, mental health care, for confronting addiction. And we get angry that the rich just seem to get richer, buying up politicians as they go, so if you don't have money, you don't get a voice in what is supposed to be a democracy.

But it takes a lot to sustain anger. And fear? That's just stress, and stress can take a terrible toll on us. Stress is not nurturing. It is not about healing and flourishing.

Reframe it. The Universalist educator Angus MacLean said about religious education that "The Method is the Message." This is the insight that the religious educator Maria Harris says: "The congregation does not *have* a curriculum, the congregation *is* a curriculum." I'll say it in one more way that you'll probably have heard before. This is Gandhi: "Become the change you want to see in the world."

When over a thousand Unitarian Universalists participated with thousands of others, that's what I think they were trying to do. They were trying to be the change that they want to see in the world. The beloved community is a goal, but it's also a means. It's something that gets created on the way to the goal. It's something that can happen *now*, however imperfectly or partially. Right now, we can stand on the side of love.

And doing love -- if social transformation is doing love -- that's something that's sustaining. There's only so far we can go if we make demonizing the current governor of North Carolina -- or the current governor of Michigan -- the goal. If we're just reacting out of fear and anger. If all we are doing is creating an us-versus-them situation.

The Unitarian Universalist theologian and ethicist Sharon Welch says, "People are empowered to work for justice by their love for others and by the love they receive from others."

The Unitarian Universalist marchers in Raleigh were urged to be open to other forms of religious expression at the march. Because the point -- the root religious call -- was to create community. To be part of a bigger "we" and not just an "us" with "them." A bunch of people in North Carolina called out for help and the goal is to stand with them, to be in beloved community together. The goal was and is to become a bigger "us." The goal was to stand on the side of love. March on the side of love. Dance and sing love. To be love for one another. Part of what can empower Unitarian Universalists is claiming this explicitly as our religious expression.

The change we're looking for isn't just out there. It's here, too.

Think about the goals that you have for this congregation in the middle of Michigan. We've discovered that members of this congregation really value the sense of community that they find here. There are times when it breaks down because, well, you're a bunch of humans. But what happens here is that you love others and you receive love from others. That's empowering.

Sometimes that can be inward-focused. But it doesn't have to be. At least in part it is practice for how to make beloved community. But the goal is always to broaden the circle. This is a time of purposeful transition for this congregation. You have a talent for building community. How might you make that stronger? Is the congregation organized in a way that nurtures this place as a place of beloved community? And look outside these walls. What ways can you join together with others to help create more beloved community here in Mount Pleasant?

And since the change we're looking for isn't just out there, it's here in this room and in you, too -- how could you participate with this congregation in a way that helps you to be the change you want to see in the world? What would free you, empower you to be the change you want to see in the world? To build beloved community here in this congregation, at home, at work?

UU minister Tom Schade posted on Facebook after marching in Raleigh yesterday: "Relax. The America we are trying to give birth to will be better and more joyous than the America you are trying to hang on to. For everybody."

Let go. Be more joyous. And stand, march, sing, organize on the side of love. It's your religious calling.

Blessed Be.

Closing Words

The method is the message.

Become the change you want to see in the world

Welcome the beloved community

Work to create beloved community, now

Stand, march, sing & dance on the side of love

May it be so.

Amen

Resources:

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