

What They Dreamed Be Ours to Do

- a sermon compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, January 14, 2018

**Additional elements of the service are included here as they contribute to the whole of the message.*

Opening Words

Our opening words this morning were crafted by the Rev. Alicia Forde – an African American UU minister who currently serves with the UUA as Professional Development Director in the area of Ministries and Faith Development. Rev. Forde was born and spent her formative years in Trinidad and Tobago, a dual-island Caribbean nation no doubt included in the category of the unwelcome so vulgarly articulated by the president of these United States this week.

She writes:

When we pause to remember who we are:
 companions on this grand experiment called life,
when we take a moment to shed the ways we have
 been carefully taught:
to lead from fear...to punish the poor...to
 persecute
those who don't look like we do...to deny rights to
 those who love...
to believe that we are separate...that some people
are superior to others...

When we take a moment to shed all of that
and hear our stories
 hear and see each other into existence, into
 community,
when we take a moment to embrace...to practice a
 different way of being...

When we answer the call of love,
then we are living into the promise
 of building the world we dream about.

It is beautiful to dream...to cast a vision...to
 stretch our
minds into the future and imagine what may be if we
 were to
build a new way of being – not some day
but beginning again today

beginning again every day that we have breath
taking courage with these hands and hearts
to make real the dream of a more equitable world...
to journey together...seeking to be transformed,
even as we transform.

Becoming explorers and learners in this world
around us,
humbled by what we do not yet know,
fulfilling the promise of healing a fragmented world,
laboring not just in hope...but also in Love.

In this spirit, we commit.
In this spirit, we gather.
In this spirit, we pray.

Let us now worship.

Meditation

“To Embody the Dream of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”
- by Wayne B. Arnason

Spirit of Life, we have come into each other's presence this day
seeking a part of ourselves, knowing that we do not live alone,
and knowing we cannot live fully if we are for ourselves alone.
We gather in thanks for the life and ministry of Martin Luther King Jr.,
not because we wish to worship him as a saint,
but because we wish to embody his dream as a possibility we make real.

We gather with full knowledge of our shortcomings.
Our lives set before us many tasks and often we are not equal to them.
We fall short of our own expectations.
We find we do not know enough, we are not always patient, we fall into anger,
we cannot find the strength, we lack the vision, we wait in vain for wisdom.

It is painful to acknowledge our shortcomings — yet we are here, Spirit of Life.
We are here: not always perfect, not always wise, not always just,
but wonderfully and mysteriously human and alive.

We dedicate this time together to renewing our hope.
May the stories we share give us courage.

May the songs we sing give us hope.
May the words we speak give us wisdom.

And most of all, may the touch of hands, the sight of faces,
the sound of voices lifted in song and affirmation restore in us
faith that this world may be made whole, with all its people one.
May it be so. Amen.

Sermon Reflection

My sermon reflection for this day is composed of three parts. The first is personal reflection, the second is action-oriented, and the third is mostly story.

Part One

To borrow from, to echo the vulgarity - minus the intentional malice - that encompassed us all this past week – we are in the midst of a cultural and political shitstorm that is growing in magnitude and potential for continuing damage and deadly impact to our country and we, her people. And I say this with humility and in full consciousness that what I qualify as a shitstorm in our present time would likely bring a response from members of our not-white, not as privileged citizenry of “well, yes, it is, but this isn’t new...just the festering under-belly of our nation’s history and legacy of oppression more fully exposed.”

In the midst of my anger-infused fumbling effort this week to craft some semblance of a message for this morning, I came across a short poem titled “Abiding Anger” by Jonipher Kwong that helped me make space...make allowance for the intensity of my rage...and my grief. Kwong writes:

I need a fishbowl where I can bracket hope for a
 while
I need a container to let my grief fill the cup before I
 pour it out
I need to feel the pain, the sorrow, the crushing of
 my soul
From racism, sexism, heterosexism, capitalism
I need to be in touch with raw anger
I need to weep until my eyes become bloated
I need to stay awake at night, sleepless from the rage
 inside me
Don’t get me to hope just yet
Let me abide for awhile with my Holy Lamentation.

Part Two

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that “Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.” My

response to this is to offer two immediate action step recommendations – **one more inward-facing, one outward:**

My first recommendation is to make it your intention to attend our all-congregation retreat this next Saturday, January 20, from 8:30 a.m.- 1:00 p.m. We will be starting the day with a delicious and hearty hot breakfast at 8:30 a.m. sharp. Our theme this year is centered on the question “Is UUFCM Your Basecamp?” and is an opportunity to dig deep together into what it means to be in **intentional community** with one another and how that intent to build, to model the beloved community that Martin Luther King envisioned provides us sustenance and can lead to the qualitative changes we seek in our lives and our world.

The outward-facing action I want to recommend you take is to sign-up to participate in the upcoming Poor People’s Campaign set to begin on Mother’s Day, May 13. This bi-partisan, multi-faith, inclusive campaign, subtitled “A National Campaign for Moral Revival” is an intentional carrying-on of the campaign initiated by Martin Luther King, Jr. fifty years ago. It will be a forty-day long public witness justice campaign that will provide opportunity to engage in civil disobedience at our state and nation’s capitol and public squares. To sign-up and/or for more information go online to <https://poorpeoplescampaign.org/> or see me after the service – I have some hard copies of the sign-up forms available.

Part Three

I would like to share with you now a piece written by Congressman John Lewis that served as the prologue to his autobiography titled *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*.

This little story has nothing to do with a national stage, or historic figures, or monumental events. It's a simple story, a true story, about a group of young children, a wood-frame house, and a windstorm.

The children were my cousins - about a dozen of them, all told - along with three siblings. And me. I was four years old at the time, too young to understand there was a war going on over in Europe and out in the Pacific as well. The grownups called it a world war, but I had no idea what that meant. The only world I knew was the one I stepped out into each morning, a place of thick pine forests and white cotton fields and red day roads winding around my family's house in our little corner of Pike County, Alabama.

We had just moved that spring onto some land my father had bought, the first land anyone in his family had ever owned - 110 acres of cotton and corn and peanut fields, along with an old but sturdy three-bedroom house, a large house for that part of the county, the biggest place for miles around. It had a well in the front yard, and pecan trees out back, and muscadine grapevines growing wild in the woods all around us - *our* woods.

My father bought the property from a local white businessman who lived in the nearby town of Troy. The total payment was \$300. Cash. That was every penny my father had to his name, money he had earned the way almost everyone we knew made what money they could in those days - by tenant farming. My father was a sharecropper, planting, raising, and picking

the same crops that had been grown in that soil for hundreds of years by tribes like the Choctaws and the Chickasaws and the Creeks, Native Americans who were working this land long before the place was called Alabama, long before black or white men were anywhere to be seen in those parts.

Almost every neighbor we had in those woods was a sharecropper, and most of them were our relatives. Nearly every adult I knew was an aunt or an uncle, every child my first or second cousin. That included my Uncle Rabbit and Aunt Seneva and their children, who live about a half-mile or so up the road from us.

On this particular afternoon - it was a Saturday, I'm almost certain - about fifteen of us children were outside my Aunt Seneva's house, playing in her dirt yard. The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed far off in the distance, and suddenly I wasn't thinking about playing anymore; I was terrified. I had already seen what lightning could do. I'd seen fields catch on fire after a hit to a haystack. I'd watched trees actually explode when a bolt of lightning struck them, the sap inside rising to an instant boil, the trunk swelling until it burst its bark. The sight of those strips of pine bark snaking through the air like ribbons was both fascinating and horrifying.

Lightning terrified me, and so did thunder. My mother used to gather us around her whenever we heard thunder and she'd tell us to hush, be still now, because God was doing his work. That was what thunder was, my mother said. It was the sound of God doing his work.

But my mother wasn't with us on this particular afternoon. Aunt Seneva was the only adult around, and as the sky blackened and the wind grew stronger, she herded us all inside. Her house was not the biggest place around, and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside. Small and surprisingly quiet. All of the shouting and laughter that had been going on earlier, outside, had stopped. The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. We were scared. Even Aunt Seneva was scared.

And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then a corner of the room started lifting up.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. None of us could. This storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it. That was when Aunt Seneva told us to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she said, and we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift.

And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies.

More than half a century has passed since that day, and it has struck me more than once over those many years that our society is not unlike the children in that house, rocked again and again by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart.

It seemed that way in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, when America itself felt as if it might burst at the seams - so much tension, so many storms. **But the people of conscience never left the house.** They never ran away. They stayed, they came together and they did the best they could, clasping hands and moving toward the corner of the house that was the weakest.

And then another corner would lift, and we would go there. And eventually, inevitably, the storm would settle, and the house would still stand.

But we knew another storm would come, and we would have to do it all over again. And we did. And we still do, all of us. You and I. Children holding hands, walking with the wind. That's America to me - not just the movement for civil rights but the endless struggle to respond with decency, dignity and a sense of brotherhood [and sisterhood] to all the challenges that face us as a nation, as a whole.

That is the story, in essence, of my life, of the path to which I've been committed since I turned from a boy to a man, and to which I remain committed today. **It is a path that extends beyond the issue of race alone, and beyond class as well.** And gender. And age. And every other distinction that tends to separate us as human beings rather than bring us together.

That path involves nothing less than the pursuit of the most precious and pure concept I have ever known, an ideal I discovered as a young man and that has guided me like a beacon ever since, a concept called the Beloved Community. That concept ushered me into the heart of the most meaningful and monumental movement of this past American century. ***We need it to steer us all*** where we deserve to go in the next.

May it be so. Amen.

Closing Words

“Be About the Work”

- by Andrea Hawkins-Kamper

May we see all as it is, and may it all be as we see it.

May we be the ones to make it as it should be,

For if not us, who? If not now, when?

This is answering the cry of justice with the work of peace,

This is redeeming the pain of history with the grace of wisdom,

This is the work we are called to do, and this is the call we answer now:

To be the barrier and the bridge,

To be the living embodiment of our Principles,

To be about the work of building the Beloved Community,

To be a people of intention and a people of conscience.