

# Let Justice Roll

**Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Dorothy May Emerson**

*January 15, 2006 - First Parish in Arlington, MA*

## **READING: The Legend of Tikkun Olam**

As adapted by Dee to accompany a photograph in an exhibit at the Barnstable UU church

*A very long time ago  
Way back in the beginnings of things  
In the sweet darkness of the mystical cosmos  
There floated a primeval vessel.*

*This ancient vessel  
Was being filled  
With divine presence.  
A sacred, holy and divine light poured into the vessel  
From all directions.*

*The vessel became full,  
So full and ever expanding  
That it shattered.  
Sparks of divine light flew everywhere.  
Shared of the vessel  
Were scattered throughout all creation.  
Bright, blazing light  
Rained far and wide  
Through the cosmos.*

*Many sparks fell like shooting stars  
All over this blue, marbled, spinning world  
That we call earth  
That we call home.*

*It is the great task of human beings  
To gather up the sparks  
And raise them back to their divinity.  
We are called to find them in ourselves,  
Each other, and all things.*

*It is our great task  
To shine together again.*

*Only then  
Will the lost and in exile  
Return home.  
Only then  
Will the divine presence  
Of peace be restored on the earth.  
Only then will the primeval vessel  
Be repaired and take its place again  
In the safe haven  
Of the mystical cosmos.*

*It is our great task to shine together again  
As one.*

## **SERMON**

Today we honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The best honor we can give a great leader is to continue the work that leader inspired us to do when alive. At the end of his life Dr. King's leadership directed us to work for economic justice, so that is the focus of our service today.

In his Nobel Prize speech, "The World House," which he later adapted as a chapter in one of his last books, Dr King calls us to address the causes of poverty and take action:

*A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will only be an initial act. One day the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men [and women] will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice, which produces beggars, needs restructuring.*

The World House Dr. King describes is very much like our UU 7 th Principle, calling us to affirm and promote "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." He gives that principle flesh and blood with these words:

*When we rise in the morning, we go to the bathroom where we reach for a sponge which is provided for us by a Pacific Islander. We reach for soap that is created for us by a European. Then at the table we drink coffee which is provided for us by a South American, or tea by a Chinese, or cocoa by a West African. Before we leave for our jobs we are already beholden to more than half the world.*

This description of our interdependence with the rest of the world was written nearly 40 years ago, before we began talking about economic globalization. How much more true it is today!

The idea of the World House, King says, comes from a plot idea discovered among the papers of a famous novelist who had just died. It goes like this: A widely separated family inherits a house in which they must live together. To accept the inheritance, they must all live in the house forever. King imagines that we are that family and have inherited that "great 'world house' in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn to live with each other in peace."

The title of the book in which "The World House" became a chapter asks a question that is very much on our minds today as we continue to struggle to live together in our "world house:" *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Right now, many of us would probably say we are far closer to chaos than to community. We can relate to the Jewish story of Tikkun Olam, because we experience—almost on a daily basis—the shattering of our world into a million fragments. We despair of ever being able to bring them back together again. Community is a dream we may seek to achieve in certain places, like this congregation, but to imagine that the world could be a community that cared for all its people is far from even our wildest imaginations. Yet that is the vision Dr. King brought to our world. Perhaps by attending to the guidance provided by this great leader we honor today we might discover ways to shift our direction once again toward community.

The quotation on your order of service, written by 13th century Muslim poet Saadi, describes the human race as "a single being, created from one jewel. If one member is struck, all must feel the blow." The recent outpouring of help and generosity when members of our world house family were struck by hurricanes, earthquakes, and a tsunami is evidence that we do care for the pain of others. This is what the poet says makes us truly human.

The very immediacy of natural disasters gives rise to this great response, but the more systemic issues Dr. King was fighting—like racism and poverty—are much more difficult to confront. The world was stunned when 3,000 people were killed in a single day on September 11, 2001, but we are numb to the 30,000 children who were killed that same day—and the day before and the day after and every day since—by causes stemming directly from poverty. We tend to deal with such staggering numbers by turning away, believing there is nothing we can do to make a difference.

Dr. King's message to the world is just the opposite: By working together, we can change the way things are. He loved to quote Theodore Parker and invite us to be part of bending the long arc of the moral universe toward justice. To do this, however, we must choose concrete goals and develop specific strategies to attain them.

That's why Dr. King went to Memphis to support sanitation workers who were on strike for union representation after two workers were killed in an accident on a city truck. Here was a specific strategy to attain a larger goal—a living wage and safe working conditions for every American worker. That larger goal led Dr. King to organize the Poor People's

Campaign, which was to culminate in a march on Washington to pressure the government to redirect its budgetary priorities from pursuing the Vietnam War to ending poverty.

We can engage in these same sorts of concrete actions today to address the large issues of economic injustice that permeate our world. For instance, right now in this area there is a campaign we can support to gain safe working conditions and fair wages for security guards. On the national level is a campaign to raise the minimum wage, one of the goals of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

Unless you work in a minimum wage job, you may not realize that that amount has not been raised since 1997, making this the second longest period without an increase. The current national minimum wage is only \$5.15 an hour. That's a total of only \$876 a month or \$10,700 a year for full-time work—\$5,000 below the official poverty line for a family of three. Massachusetts has raised the minimum wage to \$6.75, but the total is still below the poverty line. I'd like to challenge anyone in this room to live on that sort of income. One reason it is nearly impossible for a person to live on today's minimum wage is that inflation has eroded its original value by nearly 20%. If the prevailing minimum wage of 1970 had simply been adjusted to keep pace with the economy, it would be over \$11 an hour today. By the way, in the eight years since Congress last raised the minimum wage, they have raised their own salaries seven times.

The first minimum wage laws were formulated in the 1930s, with the idea that a four-person household with one adult working full time should be able to stay out of poverty, if only barely. It was a place where society would draw a line. Today many communities have chosen to go beyond the concept of a minimum wage and work towards paying all workers in their areas a living wage, based on what it costs to live in their community. For instance, in Brookline the living wage ordinance established in 2005 will automatically raise the basic hourly wage to over \$11 later this year.

Since most of the country is not as progressive as Brookline, the national campaign to pass the Fair Minimum Wage Act has been selected as a goal of this year's celebration of the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday. The Unitarian Universalist Association, the UU Service Committee, and UU Urban Ministry are all sponsors of this interfaith effort, called Let Justice Roll. You can learn more about this campaign tomorrow afternoon, when Senator Kennedy speaks at the celebration at our UU Church of the Presidents in Quincy. (and yes, there are flyers available after the service)

Dr. King was a master at incorporating Biblical quotations into his speeches, as in his 1967 "Beyond Vietnam" speech, a speech that has many parallels to our current situation. He begins the speech by making the connection between poverty and war. He talks about the "shining moment" when there was "a real promise of hope for the poor," which he then watched be "broken and eviscerated, as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war." He came to realize "that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive

suction tube." He then outlines a program for withdrawing from Vietnam and negotiating a just peace, and ends by saying:

*If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to speed up the day, all over America and all over the world, when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.*

This Biblical quotation comes from the Hebrew prophet Amos who denounced the economic inequities of his time, not unlike King himself. But King didn't just denounce injustice; he gave us a vision of the beloved community, where people of all races, religions, and countries live together in peace, with justice for all. This vision continues to inspire us today. It is a joyful vision, a vision of hope, a vision of justice and peace.

Dr. King proclaimed "I have a dream," **not** "I have a nightmare," even though he knew full well the terrible problems the world was facing. What do you suppose gave him the courage to dream in the face of misery and defeat? Can his faith inspire us to keep on despite terrorism and war?

Perhaps Dr. King knew the words of Helen Keller: "Joy is the holy fire that keeps our purpose warm and our intelligence aglow." (*Out of the Dark*, 1914) Certainly his sense of purpose was strong. His fire still has the power to inspire us today.

We know Dr. King was inspired by the words of the prophets, like the third prophet of Isaiah who believed God had anointed him:

*To bring good tidings to the afflicted ...  
To bind up the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives ...  
To comfort all who mourn ...  
To give them a garland instead of ashes,  
The oil of joy instead of mourning,  
The mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit,  
That they may be called oaks of righteousness ...*

With faith and joy like this, the prophet proclaims:

*They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.*

This is what we are called to do. Somehow we must find the faith and joy within ourselves to transform our world. There is nothing more important in our lives.

Massachusetts poet and critic Louise Bogan struggled with all sort of problems and setbacks throughout her life. Yet she writes:

*I cannot believe that the inscrutable universe turns on an axis of suffering; surely the strange beauty of the world must somewhere rest on pure joy!*

Like Theodore Parker's image of the long arc of the moral universe bending toward justice, the poet finds beauty and joy in the midst of trouble. How do you understand the universe? Is it beneficent or evil? If you sense a saving grace at the core of the universe, how do you access it on a daily basis? How do you stay connected to joy?

Richard Sibbs, an early 17th century English Puritan, wrote "We can do nothing without joy, and a good conscience which is the ground of joy." If today's world sometimes seems joyless and hopeless, perhaps it is because in our souls we know that something is terribly out of balance when many of us try to enjoy our abundant lives while so many other members of our world house family struggle in extreme poverty.

If we can break through the natural, seemingly protective, resistance to acknowledging this reality, and begin to take action, even small action, perhaps we will by so doing break through into joy. As we seek ways to address the systemic issues that create the problems faced by our world house family with whom we share this precious planet, perhaps we will be surprised by the joy that comes to us. As Peter Gomes points out:

*Joy is elusive; it cannot be summoned forth like an actor's tears. Joy is a response, not an initiation, and it comes at those moments of encounter with thin places, when we see more than we have reason to believe. (The Good Book, 233)*

William Wordsworth describes this sort of experience in his poem "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey":

*While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.*

Gomes says: "Joy is when it all becomes clear, a *Eureka!* moment.

For me *Eureka!* moments are often those when I realize that something I am doing really does make a difference, maybe just to one other person, or maybe to a group or a social movement. I can't make those moments happen, but I'm learning to appreciate the joy when it comes.

And I want to share that joy with you—the joy of being part of something larger than ourselves, of working for a larger goal of moral arc-bending toward justice, by participating in small actions, specific strategies, to bring about justice and peace for our world house family—the joy of being part of creating the beloved community.

Dr. King articulated his vision of the beloved community early in his career. In his 1959 "Sermon on Gandhi" he talks about the need to choose how we will respond to violence:

*The way of acquiescence leads to moral and spiritual suicide. The way of violence leads to bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. But, the way of non-violence leads to redemption and the creation of the beloved community.*

Today it may be extremely difficult for us to even imagine a non-violent response to terrorism, and yet we can see that violence has indeed led to further brutality on the part of the destroyers. The sort of non-violence I believe we are called to do echoes the words of the prophets that so inspired Dr. King and that have become the words of one of our most beloved hymns: "We'll build a land where we bring good tidings to all the afflicted and all those who mourn. And we'll give them garlands instead of ashes. Oh we'll build a land where peace is born." (Hymn # 121, words by Barbara Zanotti, music by Carolyn McDade)

The reality of the times we live in, with all the personal, community, and global problems we must face, does not diminish the possibility of joy. As the poet Djuna Barnes writes: "The unendurable is the beginning of the curve of joy."

May we find the shattered sparks of divine light in our own hearts today, and may we be surprised by joy as we take small steps to bring the broken pieces of the world together to recreate the wholeness of our holy vessel, our world house where all live together in justice and peace. Amen. Blessed Be.