

Justice and Righteousness
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Yesterday morning, I went to the Bar Mitzvah of my college roommate's son. He became a bar mitzvah, literally, a son of the commandment. He did a great job in the service. It was incredibly moving for me, to see my friend and her family taking part in this important moment, even though it was far away, live-streamed from the other side of the state. I hadn't been to Jewish services in a long time, probably not since a memorial I went to maybe 13 years ago. I had forgotten how much action there is in Jewish worship. There was a big team of clergy moving sacred objects, including the Torah, offering prayers, readings, and other liturgy from different parts of the room, many speakers--it was complicated. If you haven't had the pleasure of attending Jewish worship, it is important to note that prayers, scripture, almost everything but the sermon are sung or chanted. So when we hear Amos, the Hebrew prophet, speaking out for the poor, reporting that God has declared: "Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps." Amos doesn't only mean songs for fun, he means prayers, and scripture, and worship. According to Amos, offerings and festivals, the gathering and gifts of the community are also rejected, until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like an everflowing stream. This is big. In this passage it is declared that more important than all the doing of religious life, is justice and righteousness, in Hebrew, *mishpat* and *tzedakah*.

Hebrew prophets called out their communities for not keeping their commitments, in the case of Amos, for the treatment of the poor. Amos preached in a time when his community experienced a period of peace which led to prosperity for a few. This prosperity dismantled the traditional ways the community understood landownership and wealth. A wealthy class emerged and was not fulfilling its commitments to God and their community.¹ Amos threatened that because of their choices, his people would experience the wrath of God, and the destruction of their society. In Amos chapter 2, he says, "I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way." (2:6-7)

Dr. King quoted Amos regularly and when he spoke of justice and righteousness, he drew on not only his experience and prayers for societal transformation, but from a deep prophetic well of 1000s of years of speaking truth to power. In his "I Have a Dream Speech" in 1963, Dr. King said, "There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights: "When will you be satisfied?" ... we are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."² In 1964 King wrote, "'Let Justice roll down like waters in a mighty stream," said the Prophet Amos. He was seeking not consensus but the cleansing action of revolutionary change. America has made progress toward freedom, but measured against the goal the road ahead is still long and hard. This could be the worst possible moment for slowing down."³ And in 1968, the night before his murder, he said, "We need all of you. And you know what's beautiful to me, is to see all of these ministers of the Gospel. ... Somehow the preacher must be an Amos, and say, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty

¹ Gene M. Tucker, "Amos", *HarperCollins Study Bible*, NRSV 1993.

² Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream", 28 August 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C.

³ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Let Justice Roll", in *The Nation*, 1964

stream.” Somehow, the preacher must say with Jesus, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to deal with the problems of the poor.”⁴

Every time I reread the words of prophets that are important to me, from Amos to King, I am inspired, and, also, a little crushed. How long o Lord indeed? Dr. King reminds us:

[R]acial segregation is a cancer on the body politic which must be removed before our moral health can be realized. And we don't have long to do this. It is urgent to do it now because the shape of the world today no longer affords us the luxury of an anemic democracy.⁵

And here we are. I would say an anemic democracy is a generous description. We are living at an inflection point. In a moment when violence has threatened the very seat of our democracy, I have been reflecting on the practice of non-violence. Nonviolent resistance--gathering people in action to shine light on injustice and show power in the numbers of people who will stand up to that injustice--has been instrumental in not only seeking change to unjust laws and the implementation of laws unjustly, but in lifting up leaders like Cori Bush who moved from being an organizer and leader in Ferguson and for Black Lives Matter, to being elected to Congress to shape the law. In the speech we heard from Dr. King earlier, he said that both legal and illegal segregation must be rooted out of our nation in order to save democracy. Not only because it would save democracy, but because segregation was morally unjust, and sinful. Similarly, the practice of non-violence is not only effective, it is morally righteous. It seeks to create change through transforming systems, changing the minds, and most importantly hearts, of those who are part of an unjust system. The practice of non-violence shows those who not paying attention to the struggle of another, because of their privilege to do so, how much those folks are willing to put on the line to make change. I think this is part of what made what happened at the Capitol last week so shocking. Rather than seeing coalitions of people march, protest, and call for justice, we saw people who largely looked like each other, march, chant hateful slogans, erect large symbols of hate and violence on the lawn, and then do violence against a democratic institution. Rather than quiet reflection, or signing, or chanting together, there was chaos, a mob mentality, and selfies of the mob with defaced statuary and symbols of our government. It was a group using the veneer of protest to do violence. And for myself, I was shocked how much the taking of those symbols of nonviolence and the will of the people hurt my heart. In Dr. King's 1967 book “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?” he wrote:

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love?

The practice of non-violence is dangerous. Those with power are not usually open to letting it go. Again, we have seen that in the actions not only of the white supremacists rioting, but in the response of the politicians who incited, appeased, and encouraged them.

⁴ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I've Been to the Mountaintop” April 3, 1968, Memphis, TN.

⁵ *ibid.*

And what shall we do? Amos might say that we need to upend traditions and the things that maintain power for those who have it. We need to look with new eyes at our institutions, and consider what influences and history are acting on us, our choices, and our society through our institutions. We need to pay attention, listen, and for those with privilege and power, to remember to whom we are accountable. Dr. King called to accountability, white people, and particularly white clergy. He asked where we were when we were needed, where we were when our voices needed to be heard. Accountability is vital to justice work because it is not only about the promises we make, and our intentions, but building relationships. Accountable relationships help us to reflect on how our choices, our policies, and our systems impact the oppressed, the poor--those without power. Accountability is included in the language for a proposed Eighth Principle for our denomination, under discussion in our congregations, "We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions." We are gathered in a community of faith for justice, which provides us with grounding and support in what we do. We too have 1000s of years of the call for justice and righteousness with us. With and to whom are you accountable in the call to justice and righteousness?

Each year, we mark the celebration of Dr. King's birth in our worship. We look to his words and life for wisdom and reflection, in part as a reflection of our source we shared this morning, the "Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love." There is a long line of prophets and leaders that Dr. King looked to, to inform his work, including our own Henry David Thoreau, all the way back to Jesus, Amos, Micah, and the Hebrew prophets. The work of Dr. King was transformational, and in recent history, this work has been transformed anew to Moral movements for justice and righteousness. Again lifting up, that what is most important is not whether we do the right things, or make the right offerings, but that we live in service of the poor and oppressed.

Violence *can* bring change, but it only stands as long as people remain afraid. It is destabilizing, narrowing, and unpredictable. We are at an inflection point. There are those who are ready to seek change through violence, change that will lead to deeper injustice, and whose aims are not righteous. One of the aspects of the practice of nonviolence in King's work was that the "nonviolent resister must have a "deep faith in the future," stemming from the conviction that "The universe is on the side of justice" (King, *Stride*, 88)."⁶ In the coming weeks and months, we will have opportunities to stand for truth, and for one another, for those to whom we are accountable.

May we live into this hope. May we be ready. open. brave. May "justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

So May it Be. Amen.

⁶ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/nonviolence>