

**PACIFIC UNITARIAN
CHURCH**

A Unitarian Universalist Community



Many Hands

A Sermon Delivered by The Rev. John T. Morehouse

on

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It had been three months since Ben and his father, Daniel, had seen Denise. Denise, Ben's mom and Dan's wife, was working in Washington on a temporary assignment. Ben and Dan were in London where the family lived and flew from for a two-week visit. After a joyful hello for a few days, Denise went back to her temporary job in downtown Washington, and father and son began their tour of the city. They went to the Capitol, the White House, when it was more a house of the people than it is today, the Mall and then took the Metro north to Georgetown to walk around the beautiful neighborhoods. While waiting at one corner, a police car and two officers approached Ben and Dan. "Hello sir," said the one officer, "do you live around here?"

"No," came Dan's reply, "we are visiting from England."

"Well, could we see some identification for you and the boy?"

"What for?" asked Dan innocently. "Did we do something wrong?"

The two officers looked at each other. "Are you the boy's father?" asked the other officer.

"Yes, I am," said Dan. I should explain at this point that Ben and his Dad are different

colors. Ben is a light brown and Dan is white; Denise is a dark Caribbean black. Dan was getting rather angry at the whole thing. “His mother is black and I am his father, is there anything else you want to know?”

The officer responded tensely, “Sir, if you cannot provide identification, then we will have to ask you to come with us.” Dan pulled out both of their passports and thrust them at the officers. After looking them over, they handed them back, said thank you and were on their way.

Dan was shaking with anger and fear and little Ben, age 10, was very quiet. “What did the police want, Daddy?” he asked.

It was one of those terrible moments in the life of any parent when you wish the truth weren’t so hard to tell. “They confused us with someone else they were looking for,” said Dan, but he knew it was lie. There was no confusion; they had just been victims of racial profiling. This ended their excursion.

Ben said, “I want to go home, Daddy.”

“We’ll go back to Mommy’s place now,” said Dan.

“No, Daddy, I want to go *home*.” Dan knew just what he meant.

Thoreau once said, the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.

How long? Not long, because mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. His truth is marching on....Hand in hand we are marching on.

Hands, your hands, my hands, our hands, many hands. Together.

So on this day I say to you, my people, we have come far but we have farther yet to go. Building the inclusive community here is only the first step; beyond this sanctuary we have more good work to do, joining hands with others to stand up to racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, economic injustice, fears of any kind. To tell people that their dirty mean jokes aren't funny. To write letters. To give our money. To work with this growing interfaith community to change lives. To join our many hands together. We are well on our way. I am proud of you already.

How long will this take? Not in your lifetime, I assure you. After his first march in Montgomery Dr. King addressed his weary marchers from the steps of the Alabama Capitol, once the seat of the confederacy:

How long will it take? I come to say to you however difficult, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because the truth pressed to the earth will rise again.

How long? Not long, because no lie can last forever.

How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow.

How long? Not long, because, as

That night after Denise got home, they talked about it and she made a call to the British Embassy to lodge a complaint, although they both knew it would have little effect. As Dan and Denise tucked Ben into bed, he looked up at them and said, "Is there something wrong with me?" His parents reassured him that he was all he should be and that he was loved unconditionally. The next day Denise cut her assignment short and the young family flew back to Britain. (Adapted from a story in the *Utne Reader*, September 2000).

When I first heard this story I wondered if Ben would ever really recover from that. I wondered how many other children, bi-racial or of any color, suffered from the same trauma without loving parents or a safe haven to go to. What was particularly painful about this encounter is that it was officially sanctioned. I have had some experience working with police departments to reduce racial tension, and I can tell you racial profiling is an accepted practice, especially now in the post-9/11 world. Oh, they might not call it as much, but it exists.

Just several months after this event, I witnessed another case much closer to the home town I was serving. An older car parked at the

end of a residential street. No big deal, an older car, but obvious to me, someone who had stopped to look at a map. A police car pulls up and a white officer steps out, hand on his holster, approaching the car from behind and keeping out of direct eye contact with the driver. As he is walking and he sees who is in the car, he calls for back-up and another police car pulls up; fortunately, a black officer gets out. The black officer walks up to the car and engages in conversation with the driver, who is, yes, African American and is asked to step out of the car. Drugs perhaps, but having watched him before the police pulled up, I don't think so. Racism is alive and well in America today. Even in the historic civil rights movement, of which Dr. King was such a central figure, there was a profiling of acceptance. Roy Wilkins, one of the earlier leaders of the movement, had tremendous appeal and power to sympathetic whites on account of his lighter brown complexion. And the greater tragedy of it all was that the organizers knew they had to exploit that fact to gain entrance into the echelons of liberal power. Wilkins was the primary liaison, sure to not scare away the white folks until King and others could at least make their claims (see *Parting the Waters* by D. Branch, Simon and Schuster, 1988).

hands in common good with those who are different from us. With these hands, your hands, others hands, many hands, God's hands—we will meet that destiny.

Dr. King believed in that destiny; I think we believe in it as well. Towards the end of 1964, Martin Luther King was approached by a Hollywood producer about doing a film on his life and work. The producer wanted to know how Dr. King thought the film might end. "It ends," he said with resignation, "with me getting killed." Prophets are never known in their own country says the Bible. The destiny is still waiting to be fulfilled by our hands joined together beyond these dark times. But it requires us to give our money and our time to the work of making that destiny manifest. While imprisoned in a Birmingham jail, Dr. King was roundly criticized for being too radical by his mainline white colleagues. He condemned the moderates, saying that "shallow understanding from people of good will is worse than complete understanding of those of ill will." He admonished them to go deeper into the well of the soul and bring up the cool waters of righteousness. If not to feel the pain, than at least to respect the pain of any discrimination that keeps people from being whole.

The Jews, the Unitarians, and the secularists? No they were drawn beyond the limits of one faith to the heart of what we proclaim as a faith: as King's biographer, Marshal Frady, wrote, "The mystical understanding in every human being, that there exists, however dimly, a certain natural identification with every other human being." (*Martin Luther King, Jr.* Marshall Frady, Penguin Lives, 2002) This is the heart of our humanist tradition. This is the reason we strive to welcome others. It is our faith as well.

For over 500 years, Unitarians and Universalists have believed in the greater whole that King proclaimed—call it God, the Universe, Spirit, Humanity. And that whole has many colors, joined by many hands, tied, as he echoed the words of the great Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson, into a single garment of destiny. What we know we cannot always see, but we are drawn towards the end. This is the depth of who we are, this is what proclaims our faith. The imperative of our faith is to weave this garment tighter and brighter than it was before. Dr. King's legacy is not lost—perhaps hidden—but not lost. We are moving towards the promised land.

We live first by respecting the difference of those who come here and then by joining

In all my years of ministry and facing this devil we call racism in our society I am struck with just how variable our hate is with the shade of our skin. Those of you who have adopted children from around the world, who face this every day, know what I am talking about. If it weren't for your strength and your love, their world would be a lot sadder than it is today.

On this anniversary of Dr. King's life I want to talk about the spiritual lessons of his work and message. The first is the love that we must show those we know closest to us. Dr. King watched as his own father, a respected black clergyman in Atlanta, was treated with hatred. Reluctantly but motivated by seeing the ones closest to him hurt, King came to embrace satyagraha, the Hindu concept of non-violence that is based in the belief that by meeting force with love, face to face we can overcome hatred. Like the teachings of Jesus, we turn the other cheek, not in submission, but for our enemy to know we are people before they strike us again and to be humbled before that realization. The more we know of the other, the less afraid we are. One of the reasons I so often close meetings with holding hands in a circle is based on this sacred principle: know thy neighbor and they

cease to be thy enemy. Hands joined with people we have just met means our hands are not available for violence.

Toward the end of his short life, Dr. King began to realize that we need to join hands over more than just race. Classism is as much an issue of justice and spiritual growth as any other. More than race, I believe, is the inherent class distinctions which keep us separate, especially in our churches. Part of this for us is theological; as religious searchers we tend towards the intellectual middle, but I have seen—far too often—people who walk through our own doors with, say, a thick Southern accent, dismissed. It is one of the reasons I never ask someone what they do for a living; I will do all I can to accept them as they are. Ask instead, “What brings you here?” As our ministry expands I hope we will be able to not only welcome people from across the class spectrum, but reach out in service as we have done here so nobly in the past. I am sensitive to this bias for another reason: I once worked in the blue collar world—construction and even as a janitor for a while. I do know what it is like to be on food stamps and not have enough money to pay the bills, much less pledge to a church. The immortal spiritual lesson of Dr. King rings in my ears every time I hand out

money to someone in need: “The negro cannot free be as long as white people are poor....Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

The challenge for us as a church is to truly open our eyes to the many hands that could join us. Not just those of different colors, not just those of different class backgrounds, but those who ground their faith in something very different from what we accept as the norm. Imagine moving beyond smug arrogance that a Pentecostal Christian is an ignorant bible thumper. Did you know that Pentecostal churches do some of the most innovative social outreach work? Did you know that, like this holy flame behind me, it is a doctrine of Pentecostalism to believe that everyone has the holy flame of God burning in them? I can tell you there is a lot more diversity of color and class in the average Pentecostal church, despite their reactionary politics, than we have here. To build the inclusive community means we have to move towards the higher ground of respect. “To find common ground,” Dr. King preached, “we have to go to the higher ground.” Do you think that those who eventually joined hands with him in the civil rights movement agreed with his Southern Baptist doctrine of fall and redemption?