

# " Intimate Justice "

Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs

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## READINGS

"My brothers and sisters, what use is it for us to say we have faith when we do nothing to show it? Can that faith save us? Suppose a brother or a sister is in rags with not enough food for the day, and one of you says, 'Good Luck to you, keep yourselves warm, and have plenty to eat', but does nothing to supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So with faith; if it does not lead to action, it is in itself a lifeless thing."

from "The Cure At Troy" by Seamus Heaney

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Why are we still talking about inclusivity and diversity when we have done so little to make them real? Why are we still looking pained about the lack of diversity in the liberal church? Because diversity, inclusivity, is terribly hard, terribly uncomfortable, definitely unsettling, and often quite frustrating.

What I know about being inclusive – crossing from culture to culture, learning the language of diversity – is that it's the work of a lifetime. It is hard to accept people who aren't like you, who don't tak the way you do, or believe the things you believe, or dress or vote as you do. It's even harder to appreciate them for the things about them that are not like you, to find them interesting and fun, to enjoy the learning that's part of the experience, and to acknowledge, finally, that you may have to agree to disagree.

The truth is this: If there is no justice, there will be no peace. We can read Thoreau and Emerson to one another, quote Rilke and Alice Walker and Howard Thurman, and think good and noble thoughts about ourselves. But if we cannot bring justice into the small circle of our own individual lives, we cannot hope to bring justice to the world. And if we do not bring justice to the world, none of us is safe and none of us will survive. Nothing that we need to do is more important than making justice real – here, where we are. Hard as diversity is, it is our most important talk.

"It's Hard Work," Rosemary Bray McNatt

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## RESPONSIVE READING

MINISTER: When the Spirit struck us free we could scarcely believe it for very joy.

CONGREGATION: Were we free , were we wrapt in a dream of freedom?

MINISTER: Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with pure joy.

CONGREGATION: The oppressors were awestruck;

MINISTER: What marvels the Lord works for them!

CONGREGATION: Like a torrent in flood, our people streamed out.

MINISTER: Locks, bars, gulags, ghettos, cages, cuffs, a nightmare scattered.

CONGREGATION: We trod the long furrow, slaves, sowing in tears.

MINISTER: A lightning bolt loosed us.

CONGREGATION: We tread the long furrow, half drunk with joy, staggering

MINISTER: The golden sheaves in our arms.

Daniel Berrigan

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## SERMON

In the spring of nineteen forty-eight the members of the Women's Alliance of the First Unitarian Society of Chicago did a most peculiar thing. They placed an advertisement in the Chicago Daily News announcing they were fed up with segregation and inviting people-of-color who shared their liberal values and were looking for a church home to consider becoming part of a newly integrating church. How utterly naïve! How charming! Looking back we can hardly imagine how they could have been so unaware of the social and cultural complexities which made success unlikely if not impossible.

Chicago was then, as it still is now, like Grand Rapids, a largely segregated city. But by dint of liberal democratic politics, inspired by the firm, abiding example of Eleanor Roosevelt and compelled to action by the theological mandate to live out the unity of God by seeking unity on earth, the Alliance women set aside their doubts and fears. They simply tried to do what they thought was right. Knowing what we now know, we must assume their plan was doomed to failure. The truth, however, is, they succeeded. It turned out there were, and I can guarantee you there still are, those whose spiritual seeking and intellectual curiosity had led them to leave their childhood churches. No doubt, as it was for so many of you, that severing of ties, however liberating, was also painful. We know how it feels to be cut off, cast adrift without a rock to cling to. The invitation in the Daily News must have seemed like some bright candle burning or a soft bell sounding in the night. Hesitant but curious they followed the glow of the candle. Full of longing and understandable suspicion they came to the sound of the bell. They arrived to find a congregation primed to greet them not as saviors but as neighbors, not as symbols but as friends.

That church remains today one of only a handful of liberal congregations which are genuinely interracial. Here at Fountain Street Church you pride yourselves on openness. We have every reason to celebrate the vibrancy and spiritual strength of this great congregation. And yet, I sense among you and among liberal congregations in general,

an underlying sadness, a deep sense of impoverishment at the degree to which we don't reflect the full diversity of the cities we seek to serve.

Our social realities are not in keeping with our theological understanding. We're far too sophisticated to take out an ad. We are so self-conscious, so suspicious of our own internal motivations, so fearful of diluting or, worse yet, actually losing the sweet blessings that we've found here, we don't even want to open up these questions. Yet the scourge of racism is America's original wound. As people of faith we have no right to turn away. What's broken must be mended. What's bleeding must be stanching and cleaned and sown up well for healing. Lord knows, we've tried. Lord knows, we're tired. We don't want to open all this up again.

These are the words of the Irish Noble Laureate, Seamus Heaney from his "Chorus from the Cure of Troy":

Human beings suffer.  
They torture one another.  
They get hurt and get hard.  
No poem or play or song  
Can fully right a wrong  
Inflicted and endured.

My meager words cannot begin to hold the weight of all our failure. No poem or play or song or even sermon can begin to right the wrong of racial disparity. Nor can we deny the interconnectedness of all the ways we categorize, divide, disparage and thereby torture one another. Racism, like every face of prejudice, is a form of what psychologists call, repression and projection. We see magnified in others those aspects of ourselves with which we are least comfortable. Each time we're asked to get involved we find ourselves wondering who needs us most. Is racism the most serious problem? Or should we start with homophobia, or economic injustice, educational disparity or prejudice against the old or the young or those who live with disabilities? "Whose lot is worse" is just another game we play to distance ourselves from the theological demand that we enter into authentic, committed relationships across all lines of race and creed and economic circumstance. This is not some progressive rhetorical flourish. This is the ultimate agenda of the church.

We are called and compelled by who we claim to be to heal what is broken in ourselves and to bind up the wounds of the nation. I believe our ministry is to be lived out at the intersection of spiritual development and social justice. This morning, as we gather to remember and acknowledge and take up again the message and the ministry of Martin Luther King Junior, its not nostalgia that inspires us but the promise of a better day.

Seamus Heaney continues:

History says, Don't hope  
On this side of the grave,  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up  
And hope and history rhyme.

We cannot begin this work again without confessing our despair. "History says don't hope on this side of the grave." On this weekend every year we're more mindful of

martyrdom than of ministry, more aware of the deferment of the dream than of the dream itself.

When a Unitarian Universalist minister enters the search process he or she is asked to provide a written profile to help present him or herself to congregational search teams. The profile asks candidates to describe a mistake they've made over the course of their ministry and discuss what they might have learned from it. I wrote the following:

I worked for five years to establish a non-profit housing development corporation to build subsidized, service-enriched housing for homeless families. The organization was founded with the understanding that it would be led by homeless and formerly homeless people and that the professional organizers were there in a support role. As board president I found myself living in the tension between that mandate and the demands of actually building housing. Once the money began to flow, the funders, the contractors and the consultants wanted to avoid dealing directly with homeless people. It was just too difficult. The professionals simply didn't have time to deal with the incredible inefficiency. Meetings never started on time. Every detail had to be explained and then explained again. The homeless activists had no experience to prepare them for the challenges of housing development. They became suspicious. The gaps of experience and education between us, the well-meaning liberals and the homeless members of the board caused us to begin to meet separately and in secret. Racial tensions drove us further apart. We made every effort to address the difficulties. But finally, I opted to build the housing in spite of the suspicions and resistance of the homeless majority. Two buildings were built. Forty-eight units of transitional housing for homeless families are up and running but the organization has never recovered from our betrayal of the original vision. How have I addressed this failure? It's a complex question. I continue to carefully monitor my own assumptions. I no longer make decisions on the basis of political ideology. I've come to believe that justice, which isn't intimate, isn't truly just. When I find myself beginning to avoid direct communication in the name of expediency I always stop to calculate the cost.

When asked to describe a mistake in my ministry I spoke of my own racism. I told how a breach began in an organization I helped build and how I couldn't bridge it because I was afraid to try to tell the truth. I was unwilling to hold my partners, who were black and poor, to the standards to which I try to hold myself, for fear I'd be accused of racism. As you can see, I was committing the very sin I was afraid I would commit. So the chasm grew until it was so wide we walked away in hopelessness.

I've not yet healed enough to step back into the fray but when I do I pray I'll find the strength to tell the truth, keeping in mind Cromwell's vivid admonition, "By the bowels of Christ remember, you could be wrong." Heaney goes on:

So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge.  
Believe that a farther shore  
Is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells.

We cannot simply set aside the agonies of the past. Nor can we allow past agonies to paralyze the present. It was in nineteen forty-eight, in the same year the Women's Alliance placed their ad, that M.L. as the family called him, graduated from Morehouse College and headed north to Crozer Seminary up in Chester, Pennsylvania. He was nineteen years old. Having been ordained by Ebenezer Baptist Church two years earlier, and having been raised in the home of his father who was Senior Minister of that great Atlanta congregation, M.L. already had a taste of what awaited him. What he could not have known was that the alchemy of southern roots and northern study, the blend of rhythm, rhetoric and cutting edge theology which would inform his preaching, would prepare him to be swept up in that "longed-for tidal wave of justice," in that "sea-change on the far side of revenge."

At Crozer he was steeped in Christian ethics and in particular in the social gospel movement then at its height. He read Marx and Hegel, Neibur and Raushenbusch in an attempt to find his way through a thicket of theologies to a clearing he could make his own. It was in the fall of his senior year that M.L. attended a Sunday evening lecture at the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. The speaker was Dr. Mordicai Johnson, President of Howard University, who had just returned from fifty days in India. In the words of Stephen Oates from his Let the Trumpet Sound: the Life of Martin Luther King Jr.:

"The lecture was a stirring presentation of the life and teachings of Gandhi. As King sat rooted to his chair, Johnson explained how Gandhi had forged Soul Force- the power of love or truth, into a mighty vehicle for social change. Gesturing from the lectern, Johnson argued that the moral power of Gandhian non-violence could improve race relations in America too, King was spellbound."

Gandhi's life was changed when he discovered Henry David Thoreau's essay On Civil Disobedience, east meets west, and Martin King's life was changed forever when he encountered Gandhi and realized that Soul-Force, Satyagraha could help to make "the sea-change on the far side of revenge," west meets east. Is it any wonder our liberal religious tradition seeks to gather the whole world into its embrace?

Soul-Force, non-violent action, is the methodology, which King espoused, but the daily practice which makes change possible both he and we would call, community, beloved community. Its in how we take care of ourselves and of each other that the possibility of peace begins. Plan, as we will, pray as we might, march as we must, we ourselves still lack the power, let alone the wisdom, to bring in the reign of justice. For that strength, for that wisdom, we will need to find new partners, we'll need to make new friends, we'll need to turn and turn and turn again 'til "hope and history rhyme." We can still prepare ourselves. We can still grow strong by daily practice. We can live out the covenant for intimacy we claim here by trying to tell one another the truth, by helping and healing and honing one another through, honest, open conversation, through loving confrontation. We can hold each other and ourselves accountable to the self-same values we publicly proclaim. And yes, we can open our hearts and the doors to this house of the spirit to all who seek its solace and its inspiration.

Heaney concludes his Cure of Troy with a reminder of the inseparable connection between intimacy and justice:

Call miracle self-healing,  
The utter self-revealing

Double-take of feeling.  
If there's fire on the mountain  
And lightning and storm  
And a God speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing  
The outcry and the birth-cry  
Of new life at its term.  
It means once in a lifetime  
That justice can rise up  
And hope and history rhyme.

So, this morning I honor the radical, naïve hospitality of the Women's Alliance. I don't know how we'll get there but thanks to them and thanks, I'm sure to many of you, we've had a glimpse of where we're bound. In spite of failure, pain and yes, despair and hopelessness, we cannot turn away. So work and plan and pray with me today that we might be prepared the next time "hope and history rhyme."

So be it and Amen.