

Bending Towards Justice

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First Parish in Brookline

We begin with a poem by Mary Oliver: “Who made the world? Who made the swan, and the black bear? Who made the grasshopper, the one who has flung herself out of the grass, the one who is eating sugar out of my hand, who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down, who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes. Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face. Now she snaps her wings open and floats away. I don’t know what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through fields, which is what I have been doing all day. Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” In times of transition and change, when we might be apt to act out of anxiety or fear, impatience or doubt, Mary Oliver reminds us to stop and notice, pay attention to the world, and remember our one wild and precious life is all we have to offer to justice, peace, and truth, all we have to find our joy and our wellbeing. We may never achieve complete justice in this life, but we will have succeeded if we can bend life just a bit towards justice.

Life is complicated. We made plans that assumed we would have more financial wherewithal than it appears we may have, yet we face the future with hope, remembering our abundance. The United States of America elected Barack Obama, its first person of color, as President, and he is our first post-boomer President as well, formally ending 400 years of hate, fear, and bigotry for America. It represents a truly massive shift in American consciousness. Yet we are still the same people, still have the same fears, have done the same wrongs, we will not all change overnight, the wrongs of the past are not made whole by this one act, we still struggle against bigotry and bias to become our best selves. So how do we live our lives in this time of transition and change?

The significance of this election has been compared to the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, and his emancipation proclamation which ended American slavery. Before 1860 many Christians understood their Bible as supporting equality for all people, and many Christians understood their Bible as supporting slavery. Slavery ended only after most Christians in America accepted that it was wrong. A revolution in American thought was possible because many people, some of whom were Unitarians, were willing to dedicate their lives to bring about change. I am thinking of Theodore Parker, who insisted upon what is good and permanent about Christianity (truth of Jesus’ teachings) and what is transient or temporary (Christian creeds and doctrines), including those concerning slavery. In the 1850s Parker wrote sermons advocating freedom for blacks with a gun at his side to protect the fleeing slaves who passed through his

house, a part of the underground railroad. This is truly living your faith in deeds as well as in your creeds. In an 1853 sermon “On Justice and Conscience” Parker said, “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but a little way; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.” This is important; if we believe that Barack Obama’s election as president has suddenly transformed America into a land of justice, truth, and peace upon which the whole world may now depend, we will soon be disappointed. However if we see his election as an important bend in the arc of the universe just a little towards justice, then we can take heart, and continue our work towards helping America to become a more just and righteous people; and though we—and he certainly—will often fail to live up to our expectations, we can with courage choose how to live our one wild and precious life.

We should remember that the same Christian people of color who registered and voted in record numbers to ensure Obama’s win in California also largely voted to end same-sex marriage in California’s state referendum. This also appears to be true of the Florida vote to prevent same-sex marriage and the Arkansas vote to prohibit adoption by unmarried couples (where same-sex marriages are not recognized). So this new proto-alliance of progressives and moderates who elected President Barack Obama has much to do together to agree on what justice looks like and what justice demands. For many, this election, as wonderful as it was, was still justice deferred. For some the long wait to be recognized as fully human, fully American, and fully worthy of love continues its long hard slog through prejudice and disdain to come to their bend in justice. For the majority of Americans to accept marriage equality, it remains true that many American Christians would need to come to believe that this belief is consistent with their faith. This is one reason I want this congregation to be well versed in the theology and the language of Judaism and Christianity. For most of the people who voted for California’s proposition 8 were Christians voting consistent with their Christian beliefs. And most of the people who voted against proposition 8 were Christians voting consistent with their Christian beliefs. We need to be able to enter into this conversation, helping our potential allies to see why Judaism, Christianity, and other popular American value systems as well, are consistent and supportive of equal marriage rights for same-sex couples; are consistent and supportive of programs to help the least advantaged; and are consistent and supportive of UU values. It is time we came in from the margin, and lent our voices in the great American debate about truth, peace, and justice. Obama is a Christian, as was MLK, as are many of you who sit in our pews here; we need to be part of this national discussion. We won’t get there in a day, nor will everyone come to see the world like us, but we can build an alliance for peace and justice.

On March 25, 1965, when racial progress in America seemed unspeakably slow, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said, “I know you are asking today, how long will it take? I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long,

because truth pressed to earth will rise again. How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow. How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” So whether the night seems unbearably long, or if we see the first glimmers of dawn, we remember that while the arc of the universe is indeed long, it bends towards justice only if we help it to do so.

Barack Obama, speaking on the anniversary of MLK’s death, in a speech on April 2008 added: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice; but here’s the thing, it does not bend on its own. It bends because each of us, in our own ways, put our hand on that arc and we bend it in the direction of justice, because we organize, we mobilize, we march, we vote, we parent, we’re active in our community, we’re active in our schools. So on this day of all days let us each do our part to bend that arc, let’s bend it towards justice, let’s bend that arc towards opportunity, let’s bend that arc towards prosperity for all. And if we can do that, and march together as one nation and one people, then we won’t just be keeping faith with Dr. King’s dream, all he lived and died for. We’ll be making real the words of [the Hebrew prophet] Amos that [Dr. King] invoked so often and said, ‘Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.’” You know, it is wonderful to again be able to quote an American President Elect on living our moral values, and sacrificing for our dreams. Will we do our part, putting our efforts into bringing more justice, and so ensuring that justice and righteous are true American virtues?

There is still so much to be done. The stock market may have explored its bottom for this cycle, but for conservative stock portfolios it may be several years before they again see the high valuations of 2007. Many who hoped to retire on their savings will need to work far longer than they had hoped. There will be further cost cuts and drops in consumption every where we turn. Much leverage has come out of the financial system over the last two months, accounting for much of the falling values and volatility during that time, and it appears the worst impacts of deleveraging are now behind us. However President Obama will not inherit a strong and robust economy. Unemployment is likely to rise further in the coming months and earnings are likely to be quite poor well into 2009. We still have a country where the few have wealth and resources beyond imagining while the many live in inner-city poverty and where financial despair remains rampant. A sense of financial security may never return for many who once expected it as a birthright. This is an America which has squandered its brief century as the richest and strongest nation on earth. This is an America with which we should be truly dissatisfied, for we still have the resources collectively to be and to do so much more. Even in our euphoria over the end of the Bush era, we should be aware how much more there is yet to accomplish, and we should be dissatisfied with America falling short of its promise.

Dr. King, in a 1967 sermon entitled *Where Do We Go from Here?* said: “Let us be dissatisfied until America will no longer have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds. Let

us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort and the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice. Let us be dissatisfied until those that live on the outskirts of hope are brought into the metropolis of daily security... Let us be dissatisfied until integration is not seen as a problem but as an opportunity to participate in the beauty of diversity. Let us be dissatisfied until men and women, however black they may be, will be judged on the basis of the content of their character and not on the basis of the color of their skin. Let us be dissatisfied until every state capitol houses a governor who will do justly, who will love mercy and who will walk humbly with God. Let us be dissatisfied until from every city hall, justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Let us celebrate today, and bring audacious hope to an Obama Presidency; but let us also recognize that we all co-participate in defining the arc of the universe. As President-Elect Obama said the night of his election, “The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. There will be setbacks and false starts... We know the government can’t solve every problem... Above all, I will ask you to join in the work of remaking this nation, the only way it’s been done in America for 221 years – block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand. This victory alone is not the change we seek. It is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. It can’t happen without you, without a new spirit of service, a new spirit of sacrifice. So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism, of responsibility, where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves but each other. In this country, we rise or fall as one nation, as one people.” So I ask you, what are we prepared to sacrifice for our dream? Let’s redouble our efforts to help to bend the universe just a little bit towards justice; a little bit more towards fair and equal rights for all Americans; thereby helping to build a land where the emerging creative force of the universe is employed to create peace, joy, and wellbeing for all. This is a deep and worthy dream as we enter into this new time together. Blessed Be and Amen. I love you all very much.