

Praying for Justice

It is no secret that social justice movements have been deeply aligned with religious life. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi were both obviously deeply religious leaders. Also, many of the leading Suffragists were women of deep faith. Olympia Brown for example was a Universalist minister, the first woman ordained by a religious denomination in the United States. After a short but very successful time working in the parish she became a full-time activist working for women's suffrage. And now within the gay and lesbian movement leaders are coming from faith communities, most notably Rev. Mel White and Rev. Gene Robinson, who will be speaking today as a part of the first inaugural event.

It's tempting, especially for the minister in me to say, "now look, see all these great people have been moved to fight for justice by their faith. Their faith has made them better people in the world. We should all do the same."

To be honest that was my first line of thought for this sermon, to simply say prayer leads to justice. But there is a problem. I can't say that in good conscience and you wouldn't let me say it anyway. The truth is that people of faith have been on both sides of every debate. We see Christianity used this way in the United States and I'm willing to bet that other faiths have been used the same way in other countries, one side claiming that their faith demands and expansion of equal rights or fair distribution of resources, while the other side claims that faith tells them to maintain the status quo.

Obviously we cannot claim that prayer makes people right. I do however think that prayer or meditation is a very powerful thing for us to lean on as we try to make our world a better place, day by day. Prayer or meditation can provide some much-needed sustenance for the journey toward justice.

I want to acknowledge that the word prayer is not comfortable or meaningful for all of us. Unfortunately, the word prayer is weighed down with so much baggage that it's hard to take seriously. It's like the word "God". It means so many different things to different people. Both of those words, prayer and God, can be defined in ways that frankly sound absurd to the modern mind. However, they can also be defined in ways that

are pretty compelling. I want to talk a little bit about the way I find prayer to be compelling.

A couple of years ago I did a wedding for a friend of mine. This was the first wedding I had ever conducted and the bride had been my close friend since kindergarten. I had just begun seminary and was a pretty baffled by the whole plan. As I worked with the couple to put together the service, my friend had just one request. It was a Bible reading that she really like and that had special meaning in the family.

From Philippians 4, we hear what Paul writes to a quarreling church. He says:
Whatsoever things are true,
Whatsoever things are honorable,
Whatsoever things are just,
Whatsoever things are pure,
Whatsoever things are lovely,
Whatsoever things are of good report;
If there be any virtue, and if there be any praise,
think on these things.

-Philippians 4-

It was perfect, and this is what I told the family and friends gathered for the wedding. If there were a perfect answer, an instruction manual for a successful marriage, we would have given it to the bride and groom in a heartbeat. Unfortunately there isn't one. The best we can do is keep reminding ourselves of our highest ideals.

I love this advice that Paul gives in this ancient writing. It's not a theological statement about the nature of God. It's not a statement about how one must have faith and relate to God. No, this simple and straightforward passage advises the community to focus on their highest ideals. He says, "If there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." That to me is the core of what prayer is about. It is thinking on these things, these highest ideals.

I'm probably not supposed to admit this, I'm not sure, but my personal prayer life has a natural ebb and flow, according to my theology at the time. There have been times when I find it deeply fulfilling to have the sort of "conversation with God" prayer,

running through the days events, offering gratitude, and hoping the best for my friends and family. During those phases of my life I talk to God as a friend, in a very casual way.

Then there are other times, actually I'd say I'm in one of these phases now, when praying in such personal language doesn't feel right. Rather than a personal conversation with a God who may or may not exist, and most likely doesn't speak English, I'm more inclined to simply meditate about my life and celebrate my place in a beautiful universe.

Month to month, my prayer life changes, but it doesn't go away. I always set aside some time for gratitude, time to measure my actions against my ideals and time to determine what I want in my heart for myself and the world. That's the kind of prayer, or meditation that I find compelling, just taking a moment to experience gratitude, a time for self-reflection, and looking deeply at your priorities, all in conversation with our highest ideals.

But let's get back to social justice. The most affective way of creating change is to just do it, to be the change you want to see in the world. At least that was the advice of Gandhi, a deeply religious man. "Be the change you want to see in the world."

In some ways, being the change you want to see in the world is very easy and taking action is clearly more affective than prayer. Take this pen for example. If I want to see this pen move through the air, I'll do a much affective job picking it up and making it move through the air than I will praying for it to do the same thing. It's a simple matter of observation. Unfortunately, the change that we want to see in the world is a little bit more complicated than that. Usually we care most deeply not about material things, not about moving a pen through the air. We care most about deeper change.

One of my colleagues told me a story of how one day she found the profound challenge of being that change that you want to see in the world. Obviously we all want more peace in the world, but being that change can be very difficult. As my colleague told me, she was participating in a peace rally one day around the San Diego area. If you have done any peace demonstrations, you know that you get a pretty wide range of responses. They are usually positive, waving, some horn honking, that sort of thing. Then there are the occasional folks that seem angry that you are promoting peace. They will often feel a need to display one of their fingers for you, or sometime even yell objections.

Well one day my colleague was participating in a peace demonstration of this sort. She noticed a car drive by that flipped her off. She graciously held her peace sign higher and smiled. Later, the same driver drove back by, offering the same finger of resistance. This time, baffled by the rejection of peace, my colleague began to *shake* her sign at the driver. And still later that day, the same driver came back to offer yet again the same gesture of offense. And something cracked. From within her rose a voice so loud and clear she shocked herself. And she belted out “Peace Your Jerk!” Actually her words were much more aggressive than “jerk” but I’ll leave that up to your imagination.

Yes, being the change that we want to see in the world is more difficult than lifting up a pen or holding up a picket sign. Because often the change that we hope to see out there, is change that we also hope to make in ourselves.

When I decided to write this sermon about the connection between prayer and justice, I knew immediately that I needed to talk about the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. The story, perhaps it is legend at this point, of his ministry speaks to the amazing marriage of faith and action.

Parker was a cutting edge theologian. Against the grain even within liberal Unitarianism of the time, Parker squarely pointed out that there were significant inconsistencies in the Bible. Most importantly for our discussion, Parker resoundingly rejected the concepts of miracles, especially as they are upheld in the Christian tradition.

We must remember however, that Parker was on the cutting edge of theological thought, not because he wanted to deconstruct faith. Parker was deeply committed to a religious expression that eliminated all the extra baggage. He wanted faith to be on its strongest foundation possible. And that effort paid off. While Parker’s words were rejected by the Unitarian mainstream he drew crowds of three thousand people when he preached in Boston.

But more than his theology or faith, Parker is known for his defiant action for Justice. He had several different justice commitments, but by far the most profound commitment was the abolition of slavery. In violation of federal law, Parker harbored fugitive slaves in his own home and encouraged others to do the same. He was a fierce defender of the rights of all people, even while risking his own imprisonment.

It is said that Parker even wrote his sermons with a loaded gun in his desk drawer for the protection of slaves he harbored. I'm sure we all have a different emotional reaction to that level of weaponry. It makes me only slightly uneasy. He is also said to have set a pistol on top of the pulpit where he preached to make it clear to any slave catchers who came looking in his church that any slaves there would be protected. Presumably he was protecting people. But placing a gun on the pulpit... For the life of me, I cannot fathom bringing a gun into the pulpit. It seems to cross a line.

In his quest for justice, Theodore Parker made some tough decisions, and probably made them through prayer. My point is, working for justice isn't always a morally straight forward event. Real meaningful change, real justice work is ethically messy.

As King wrote in his powerful Letter from a Birmingham Jail, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." That's because freedom for all, means that those in power have to give up some control. When slavery was abolished and Blacks gained the right to vote, whites lost a bit of power. Some day, when women finally earn an equal wage, men will make a little bit less money. Justice movements are not just about gaining more for those who are oppressed. They also involve redistributing political and economic resources. Struggling for justice means taking power and wealth away from someone, and that is ethically tricky business. This I think is an important piece of prayer or meditation.

Humility is one of the most powerful fruits of prayer, and perhaps the most important fruit as we relate prayer to the struggle for justice. Our brothers and sisters in Judaism and Islam have amazing expressions of humility in their prayer and relationship with the divine.

In Judaism, the name of God is more than a title; it is sacred. For that reason, God's proper name is never actually said, out of respect. And within Islam images of Allah are forbidden, but more importantly they are considered meaningless or impossible because Allah doesn't resemble anything. I am fascinated by both these traditions' recognition of the elusiveness of the divine and certainly could go into much more detail

about them. But what I hope to point out is the power in admitting that God cannot be captured simply in name or in image is very important.

Similarly, our highest ideals cannot be simply boiled down into a black and white world, a world of easy answers that grants free reign to do what is “right.” A relationship with the divine is far more complicated than black and white answers, as is any real engagement with our ideals. A genuine experience of prayer or meditation involves humility, just enough to make it clear that we don’t have all the answers, and we certainly are not perfect, even as we struggle to bring more justice into the world.

In conclusion, let me say that yes, the clearest way to affect change in the world is to pick up a phone and call your representative, stand up in a protest, speak your truth to the world. Real change requires people like you making it happen with your feet on the ground.

But being the change we want to see in the world is hard work, and prayer or meditation can help us along the way. I don’t care if you pray in the sense of having a conversation with God. For many of you I know that just doesn’t make any sense. I do care that you take some time for yourself every once in a while to be grateful, time to do some self-reflection, and determine what you really hope for yourself and the world.

It’s that’s simple. Prayer doesn’t have to be some complex ritual. It’s just a moment for gratitude, self-reflection, and examining priorities. It is just a moment to pause on the way to making our world a better place.

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