

“Co-Workers With God’: MLK, Ministry and Community”

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“When the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say ‘there lived a race of people, a black people, a people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights.’”¹

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke these words on December 5th, 1955, before a gathered assembly at the Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. This was what was then considered as “the day” of the bus boycott; No one in that sanctuary knew that black bus riders would walk, carpool, even ride mules around town for more than a year instead of continuing to tolerate abusive drivers and laws that privileged white and denigrated black patrons on the city buses. No one knew that the boycott would end when the US Supreme Court would declare the bus seating policy unconstitutional, thereby striking another blow to Jim Crow laws and moving the south one step closer to desegregation.

Many history books *have* been written about this civil rights campaign as have been written about one of its most famous leaders, Martin Luther King. We gather before the national holiday, celebrating his birth, remembering King and the principles he championed throughout his all-too short life.

But let us not forget that, as one of my history professors once said, “history changes all the time.” The reality of a King holiday proves his point. At the time of his assassination, King was reviled, his challenges to urban poverty and the war in Vietnam alienating many who once supported him. Somehow, through the crucible of assassination, King transformed from marginalized agitator to saint in our national consciousness.

In preparation for this year’s recognition of King, I revisited his first book, a memoir of the bus boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. Through journeying through this civil rights odyssey in King’s own words, history did not change but my understanding of King did. I left the experience with greater awareness of King not as a larger-than-life civic savior but as a man, subject to the vulnerabilities of being human, and as a minister, his leadership grounded in the Christian gospel but also in the context of his congregation. I learned that congregational ministry and community organizing was as messy, frustrating, improbable, difficult and subject to human shortcomings as it is now.

As we celebrate King each year, we often forget that he did not take risks alone. He did not utter wisdom such as “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” and watch institutionalized racism crumble before him. King and countless people employed non-violent resistance to manifest change.

¹ King, Martin Luther. *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*

And we often forget the heritage of this strategy, beginning with Henry David Thoreau's "On Civil Disobedience," leading to Mahatma Gandhi's leadership in India to contemporaries of King, Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley, tutoring King in Gandhi's techniques. King's approach was not new, nor was it universally accepted by his peers. We often don't hear about the delicate ego politics among the black clergymen in Montgomery or the many times King and others actively intervened so the black community did not counter its public commitments and respond with violence.

Nor do we recall that the history that is told and retold is shaped by sexism and "respectability politics." Claudette Colvin, not Rosa Parks, was the first person arrested in Montgomery for not yielding her bus seat to a white rider.² Yet, Colvin was a young woman, not someone like Parks, that King describes as, "ideal for the role assigned to her by history. She was a charming person with a radiant personality...Her character was impeccable..." After Colvin's arrest, the bus company agreed to make changes but did not follow through, subsequently fueling outrage in the black community and cementing their commitment when Parks was arrested. There might have been no boycott without Colvin's arrest. There might have been no boycott if the Women's Political Council had not called for it first, not the Montgomery Improvement Association, run by King and other men.

A number of decisions led young preacher Martin Luther King to serve the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. As his doctoral studies wound down, he explored different career options. King considered teaching and working as an academic dean. But he felt most called to the pulpit. King's search for a congregation yielded opportunities in New York and Alabama. He felt most drawn to Dexter Avenue but was wary of returning to the south. Choosing Alabama was choosing life under Jim Crow which was also a choice that limited his wife Coretta's music career. But he sensed the potential for positive change and chose Montgomery.

King's first objective at Dexter Avenue was to challenge its reputation as an upper-class, "silk stocking church" by living into the social gospel ministry that called him to congregational leadership. Under King, the church deepened their voter registration engagement. He also writes of the day-to-day work of a pastor – attending committee meetings, visiting the infirm, officiating weddings and baptisms, scraping together time to outline his Sunday sermon – all while completing his doctoral thesis and being a husband and father to their first child.

As racial tensions came to a head and King became leader of the organization driving the boycott, the demands of this civil rights campaign swept away the quiet life of the parish. Instead, King's time was absorbed by the incredible minutiae of the boycott. Beyond participating in public hearings and leading standing-room only assemblies, King publicly navigated false embezzlement accusations by a colleague. King and other

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claudette_Colvin

leaders were tasked with moving the Montgomery Improvement Association office four times as no one would rent to them and securing auto insurance through a British company as no domestic company would carry the car pool. They led a national fundraising campaign to sustain the boycott, which cost five thousand dollars per month. The fact that people called Martin Luther King at home before dawn because a driver failed to show at the car pool is astounding, never mind that the Kings eventually changed their phone number as they regularly received threatening calls, threats that culminated in an attempted bombing of his home.

In *Stride Toward Freedom*, King articulates the theology that grounds his commitment in the midst of this danger and chaos. King frames Gandhi's ethos of non-violent resistance as an expression of Christian love. But he elaborates further on what responsibilities we human beings have to one another. While speaking of the need to deliver racist whites from their prejudice, King states that this is not just to liberate the black person but to allow the white person to fully live into their humanity. If the object of racism responds with hate, their own humanity suffers. In King's words, "personality can only be fulfilled in the context of community."

Yet the divine plays a role in this transformation. In an off-hand comment, King describes human beings as "co workers with God." This dynamic is further illustrated through his affirmation that:

A religion true to its nature must...be concerned about man's social conditions...Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate men with God but to integrate men with men and each man with himself. This means...that the Christian gospel...seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed.

This obligation to connect and serve with the holy also transcends social and geographic location. When King affirms that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," he names his audience as those beyond the south. Specifically, he calls on "white northern liberals" to become engaged in the south's struggle for racial equality, proclaiming that true liberalism moves beyond intellectual understanding to action. King bemoans that:

In all too many Northern communities a sort of quasi-liberalism prevails, so bent on seeing all sides that it fails to become dedicated to any side...I am not calling for an end to sympathetic understanding and abiding patience; but neither sympathy nor patience should be used as excuses for indecisiveness. They must be guiding principles for all of our actions, rather than substitutes for action itself.

As we focus on the social justice ministry of one clergyman, I am inspired to consider the ministry of another, the Rev. Bob Storer, who served the Winchester Unitarian Society from 1950-1969. While there are few remaining who remember Bob, the stories shared are with such fondness that his legacy is evident. Storer's ministry bridged the apparent stability of the 1950's and the more tumultuous times of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War.

In this time, black residents left Winchester in great numbers, leading to the closing of the town's only black church. Historian Bruce Stone observes that, "Some...worried that Winchester was making a hermetically-sealed island of itself, isolated from contemporary realities."³ He continues by acknowledging that, in response, local clergy supported the formation of a fair housing commission, led by Emmons Ellis who, at the time of his recent death, was a life-long member here.

I am grateful to my colleague, the Rev. David Pettee, for sharing his memories of growing up in this congregation during Storer's ministry. In a sermon Pettee preached in this pulpit in 2009, he observes that:

Winchester was a pretty good place to grow up. The schools were good, the world felt safe and I had good friends. I also learned my first lessons about race growing up here. This was a challenge because until I entered high school, I knew no people of color. Come to think of it, the thing I did learn was to avoid talking about race. At all! There were few topics that generated so much fury... Even as a youngster, I knew it was okay to talk about race at church, *as long as the talk was polite*. Yes, we could talk about it here.⁴ (Emphasis mine)

While Bob Storer is remembered most for infusing the congregation with the arts, he is also remembered for taking prophetic stands about contemporary issues. I recall long-time member Stephen Parkhurst once observing that, when the town was deeply divided about welcoming African American children into the school system through the METCO program, he knew as a school board member he had to vote for integration as, if he didn't, he "wouldn't be able to look Bob Storer in the eye."⁵

Similarly, Storer's niece, Bonnie Ouellette, recalled in an email that, "Uncle Bob made it very clear to the members of the church that just because riots and murders were happening elsewhere that it was very much our business...I think Bob participated in numerous demonstrations, [and] had [an] influential speaker come to keep the

³ Stone, Bruce Winchester. *History of Winchester, Volume 2*. 189-190.

⁴ Pettee, The Rev. David. "Crossing Borders: Slaves in the Family." Preached at Winchester Unitarian Society, Winchester, MA, October 11, 2009.

⁵ Janules, Heather. "The Closets We Live In." Preached at Winchester Unitarian Society, Winchester, MA, October 11, 2015. From a conversation with Steven Parkhurst.

membership informed and offer suggestions that would solve problems without violence.”⁶

Yet there were limits to what Storer and the congregation would do to pursue justice. I first reached out to David Pettee to learn more about a notation in the book *The Selma Awakening* by Mark Morrison-Reed, detailing Unitarian Universalist responses to King’s call to the march on Selma. Morrison-Reed acknowledges that Bob Storer was one of 386 signers of a petition supporting passage of the Civil Rights Act and planned to respond to King’s call.

But, as Morrison-Reed notes, “he was privately told by some congregational leaders, ‘If you go to Selma, take your boyfriend and don’t come back.’”⁷ You see, Storer was a gay man, whose ministry dwelled in the tension of a “don’t ask, don’t tell” understanding with those congregational members who knew his truth. This was a time when it was career suicide for any minister to be openly gay.

David Pettee followed up with his father, the source of this information, who is now a little unsure about the details of this long-ago incident, relayed second-hand. But David’s impression is that it was not resistance to racial justice that motivated congregational leaders to blackmail Storer into staying home. It was more that going to Selma would violate the unspoken but strictly enforced practice of politeness around discussing race in Winchester.

I tell these stories of two ministers, two congregations, two communities together, as they reveal the intrinsic power of a community of faith, a power that can be used for justice or in service to human pettiness and fear.

And I tell these stories as, just one week ago, we voted to lend aid to undocumented immigrants and to erect a banner proclaiming “Black Lives Matter.” This special congregational meeting was the culmination of conversations and processes that might be described as “messy, frustrating, improbable, difficult and subject to human shortcomings.” And, yet, we used our collective power – our human power and our power through collaborating with all that is greater than ourselves – to make commitments. In a time when society is ever-more divided about race, we chose a side, the side of the marginalized.

I know the votes were not unanimous; I abstained from both. I know there was significant uncertainty about how to best articulate our racial justice commitment. And I know that neither action will cause institutionalized racism to crumble before us.

I also know that, together, we voted to risk. As spiritual people, we voted for our “personalities to develop in the context of community,” within and beyond these walls.

⁶ Email from Bonnie Ouellette, sent to Heather Janules, January 6, 2018.

⁷ Morrison-Reed, Mark. *The Selma Awakening: How The Civil Rights Movement Tested and Changed Unitarian Universalism*, 164-165.

These votes do not redeem the homophobia Bob Storer suffered. And, yet, we voted to set aside politeness in favor of potentially making the neighbors uncomfortable with a collective moral truth.

I wonder what the history books will say about this era we live in now. And I don't know if the recorders of the more parochial history of Winchester and surrounding towns will even register our congregation's decisions and whatever emerges from these commitments.

But I do know that we always may serve as "co-workers with the divine" towards making our world a place we wish to pass on to the next generation of history, no matter our doubts, vulnerabilities, human limitations and amid the uncertain miracles that can emerge through the sacrament of prophetic risk.