

Sermon What Do We Do Now?

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“The ground of faithfulness is the love that will not let us go.” (Excerpt “From Cage to Covenant” by James Luther Adams *The Prophethood of All Believers*, edited and with an introduction by George K. Beach, Boston, Beacon Press, 1986)

Looked at it another way, it is our holding on to one another, or to the divine embodied in each of us, that holds the world together. How strong are your arms? How much will they hold?

Do you see us as I see us: stepping forward with our arms linked together – not letting each other go for love of the world? Do you see us in all those protesters, arm in arm, demanding that “Black Lives Matter” as they disrupt our commute for love of the world? How strong are your arms? How much will they hold? Do you see us on the borders, arm in arm, bearing witness to injustice? How strong are your arms, how much will they hold?

Do you see us marching arm in arm to Selma? We were there, you know. I am at a serious disadvantage this morning because I have not yet seen the film “Selma.” I know there has been controversy about it, but I want to see it for myself. I want to see it for its power, despite its inaccuracies and omissions. I want to see it even though they are important to me. I want to see it because it is about the implacable power of the people to bring about change.

I speculate that Ava DuVernay has chosen to focus on the inspiration and empowerment of African Americans within the political universe; empowerment came about in the face of a culture of violence and “overpowerment.” I hope that in the sorrow and agony of that political universe, the film is a testament to their wisdom, passion and conviction.

But I also believe in the power of the love that will not let us go. I believe that empowerment came in large part from the profoundly *religious* nature of the movement. I believe that it was out of faithfulness that thousands of religious leaders and volunteers of all colors – ministers, priests, rabbis, nuns, and people from all walks of life and traditions and political views – were drawn from all over the country to join with their sisters and brothers to bring about the birth of civil rights for all. The unifying power of their conviction came out of the religious and ethical universe. “You cannot worship God,” the great Rabbi Abraham Heschel once said, “and then look at a human being, created by God in God’s own image, as if he or she were an animal.” There are echoes of the concentration camps in that lament as much as there are echoes of the slave quarters. Martin Luther King, Jr. embraced Heschel as his rabbi.

In that religious universe, we Unitarian Universalists played a part. Whitney Young, one of the Big Six leaders of the movement, was Unitarian. Viola Liuzzo, the Michigan mother and activist who was murdered, was Unitarian Universalist. These distinctions are lost in the movie. At one point, James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister, is killed by racist thugs. “Selma” moviegoers find out with the line “The priest from Boston has been killed.” His faith, their faith, and the faith of other volunteers and martyrs was not a minor attribute for the filmmakers to get wrong, but a major reason these men and women dropped everything in their lives and put themselves in danger in order to change the political universe.

DuVernay has said that “This is art; this is a movie; this is a film. I’m not a historian. I’m not a documentarian.” The filmmaker recreated famous scenes of religious leaders marching arm in arm with King; featuring almost everyone but Rabbi Heschel. I am not sure why her artistic vision led her to eliminate Heschel from the movie. And I need to see it to appreciate her intent. If she wanted to focus on political activism, I understand. But why reach for error? Why not simply write the line “the minister from Boston has been killed.” And why, for heaven’s sake, not include Rabbi Heschel and his glorious white beard? His was the face of interfaith solidarity and covenantal sorrow. If it was shared rage against the system that fueled the protest; it was shared faith that fueled the vision of what to do about it. And it was the witness born by leaders of all faiths, as much as the media, that carried the message of civil rights into our churches and temples and synagogues and town halls, and halls of academia.

Giving the eulogy at James Reeb’s funeral, King asked: “Who killed Jim Reeb?” He answered: A few ignorant men. He then asked, “What killed Jim Reeb?” and answered: An irrelevant church, an indifferent clergy, an irresponsible political system, a corrupt law enforcement hierarchy, a timid federal government, and an uncommitted Negro population. Rev. Richard D. Leonard (author of *Call to Selma*) wrote of the moment: “We rose to sing “We Shall Overcome” yet one more time, and close to a thousand voices united in a mighty chorus. The verse “Black and white together” took on a deeper meaning for us as we thought of Jimmy Lee Jackson and James Reeb united in the democracy of death. As we hummed a final chorus, the Hebrew prayer for the dead was intoned and then translated for us, with its phrase, “Peace for all with justice.” (The view from the balcony: A witness's diary captures the torment and magic of James Reeb’s eulogy. By Richard D. Leonard, UU World May/June 2001 5.1.01)

By the end of Reeb’s service, on March 15, 1965, a federal court had upheld their right to march to the Dallas County Courthouse, and march they did. And at nine o’clock that evening, President Lyndon Johnson in front of the nation publicly urged Congress to pass a voting rights bill.

Fifty years ago. This was fifty years ago. Perhaps Ava DuVernay sees faith in action as one unified groundswell of purpose, and that excitement of believers and non-believers overcoming their own boundaries to overcome oppression was secondary to the greater story. Perhaps she does not care about such things – as is her right. Selma is her work of art and her message to give. Perhaps she is right and no one cares.

Perhaps we liberal and progressive people of faith have recycled back to our beautiful attitudes. I pray that we have not. Perhaps we have decided that as long as we are on our island of liberalism, we can stand and “watch the others from separate shores.” (Jim Wise *Lord, Lead Us to Pray*) I pray that we have not. Perhaps we have decided that our arms can rest and grow weak from letting others carry the load. I pray we have not. Complacency is the enemy of faith. I don’t care if you are theist, humanist, atheist, pantheist or panentheist or no kind of –iest at all. Complacency is the enemy of who and what you are. Complacency is the enemy of who and what we are. We need to express ourselves against sorrow and injustice to be who and what we are. And I don’t mean express ourselves so that the world knows how we feel and how we are important. That’s what family and friends are for. We as a society need to express that we are an integral part of the whole. We need to be the promise-keepers. We need to keep covenant with the world. We need to act with conviction out of the love that will not let us go. Let it not be said about us that what killed the spirit of our fellow human beings was an indifferent church. Let us be a church that makes a difference.

Come with me to see *Selma*. And then share your dreams with me and let’s find out how strong are our arms and how much we can hold; how we will express our collective spirit and purpose; how we will live

out who we were meant to be, right here, right now. There is much to be done in all this weary world. Let us hold on to each other's dreams and accomplish it together.