

Sermon A Matter of Conscience

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The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough

September 17, 2017

10:30 a.m.

Responsive Reading by Martin Luther King Jr., adapted

This is where we are.

Where do we go from here?

First, we must massively assert our dignity and worth.

***We must stand up amidst a system that still oppresses
and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values....***

What is needed is a realization that

power without love is reckless and abusive,

and that love without power is sentimental and anemic.

Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice,

***and justice at its best is power correcting
everything that stands against love.***

And this is what we must see as we move on.

Sermon *A Matter of Conscience* Rev. Sarah Person

The events of the past spring and summer in our denomination and our nation have affected all of us. On the one hand, it has opened our eyes to the deeply ingrained attitudes we all have about race, gender and ability – attitudes that distress our souls. On the other hand, it has opened our hearts to the upwelling of resistance to the public face of intolerance. Where do the “-isms” come from, and what can we do to free ourselves of them?

His words are intended to move nations.

But this is impossible unless they can move hearts.

This morning is about taking that first step in our hearts

so that we can move on to something better.

Okay, MLK, where are we, where do we start from?

I was trying to figure out a way to get into this idea today,

when fate dropped a gift in my lap

in the shape of four earnest young people

who smuggled a huge white on black banner

into Wednesday's game at Fenway Park

and unfurled it in the fourth inning.

And held up a mirror to Red Sox Nation.

“Racism is as American as baseball.”

What was your first reaction?

What!!! Are they saying be a racist?!!

No, they're saying it's here, it's not okay, own it, and do something about it.

"The banner came in response to the racist comments at the beginning of the season at Fenway," one of the banner holders, who remains unnamed, said, citing the story Orioles star Adam Jones shared in May about getting peanuts

thrown at him and being called the N-word on multiple occasions. "Overall, we saw, we see Boston continually priding itself as a kind of liberal, not racist city, and are reminded also constantly that it's actually an extremely segregated city. It has been for a long time, and that no white people can avoid the history of racism, essentially. So we did this banner as a gesture towards that, to have a conversation about that." [Zachary Ripple & Nicholas Parco NEW YORK DAILY NEWS Updated: Thursday, September 14, 2017, 12:23 PM]

On site news cameras televised the reactions of fans leaving the park.

A white man's response was basically that he didn't go to games to get into politics and didn't think it was appropriate.

Another, a white woman, said she came to the games to have fun and didn't think it was appropriate.

TV viewers didn't see anyone leaving the game who thought it was appropriate.

TV viewers didn't see anyone of color being interviewed

From *Skip and Shannon*, and *First Take* on ESPN. The commentators suggested that it did what it was supposed to do: obstruct daily life, make people uncomfortable, and take advantage of a captive audience. *And* it was white kids. People "have to be woke about what's happening around you." It gives black people an opportunity to remember to keep an open mind about white people.

People who are facing mirrors that do not reflect kindly upon them rarely welcome conversation.

So let's think about that for a minute.

You may be thinking: what does this have to do with me.

I don't throw vile epithets and peanuts at people, I'm not a racist!

Don't you be painting me with that brush,

just because I'm a member of Red Sox Nation!

Thank goodness you don't throw epithets and food.

Liberal bastions of society don't throw things.

Liberal bastions of society toss out thoughtless comments, make insider jokes, offer platitudes instead of promises, offer charity instead of respect.

We can still reflect badly in that mirror

when we are unaware of how we act

toward the people holding the mirror.

I think I do and say the same thing with everyone,

and with some people I inspire gladness

"Oh, Rev. Sarah you came back from sabbatical! Great to see you!"

Others I inspire caution

"Oh, Rev. Sarah, you're back already!

Are you really back, or just kind of back?"

In a few I inspire intense dislike,

until the next week when I do or say something okay.

My only comfort is that

it's this way for all of us.

In this grand interconnected web we're a part of.

Despite our best intentions:

We are not who we mean to be.

We are not who we think we are.
We are not experienced by others the way we intend.

It hits us:
What we say is more important to others than who we are.
Who we are and the language we use gets mixed up with perception.
Suddenly, we're in this role whether we like it or not.
Big sister. Authority figure. Wimpy kid. Parent.
And who we really are, the person inside,
the real and the true, the divine spark,
the one who knows right from wrong,
gets a little lost. We do not recognize our own needs and motives.

What do we all want?
We want to feel like we belong.
We want to feel we are of worth.
We want to feel invulnerable.
We want to do the things that will make us feel worthy,
and of course if they make us feel worthy, they must be right.

In the church where I served as a lay leader and chair of the parish committee,
another leader,
who had always been a particularly strong personality,
was becoming increasingly argumentative, aggressive and intolerant of others.
Longtime members of the congregation seemed to accept his behavior.
Our little Prussian, they would say.
"Love without power is sentimental and anemic."
But newer members, like me, and the new minister,
were becoming upset and confused.

Finally, I told him
that I no longer accepted the way he expressed himself.
He asked if I was physically scared of him.
I said no, but every time he opened his mouth,
all forward movement in the church stopped.
He was not making the points he wanted to make
because no one could listen to him anymore.
'No more,' I said.
'If you're willing, we can try to figure out a way for you
to say the things that are important
without making people want to leave the room, if not leave the church.'

To give him credit, he stayed for the rest of the meeting, quiet, but there.
Afterwards, he asked if I would talk with him in the parking lot.
We talked for hours.
What it boiled down to was,
he wanted the members to like him.
He did everything they wouldn't do for themselves,
and he knew they still didn't like him.
He thought that if everyone saw the light and met his standards,
they would appreciate him more.
He had grown up in the church and he was not loved.

When we think certain others are keeping us
from feeling like we belong,
that we are worthy,
that we are invulnerable,
we are absolutely capable of lashing out.
It doesn't matter whether we're throwing a peanut or an insult
to justify our fanhood and manhood
or throwing our weight around to justify that we're indispensable.

This church leader was lashing out at people he knew.
What if the "certain others" are people we don't know
but we can lump them together into a group?
By the color of their skin, or the way they talk, or dress or – you fill in the blank.

The words are always there,
the ideas are always at the back of our minds.
They're part of the air we breathe.
We heard them growing up,
we heard them from our friends:
"You'd better watch out if so and so moves next door."
"There goes the neighborhood."
"They'll rob you blind."

The –isms are floating in our cultural soup.
Tribalism, racism, colonialism, nationalism, classism.
They are the manifestations of power without love.
They are the poison.
They are the fallback when
our sense of worthiness,
our sense of belonging,
our sense of invulnerability are under threat.
They are lies to make us feel secure, to make our actions okay.

The lies are always there,
hiding and waiting for us to grab them like weapons and feel justified.
Waiting for us to grab weapons and feel justified.
When we give in to this,
And use these weapons as a community,
a movement, a country,
the injury we can inflict is enormous.
It can tear us apart – inside and out.
We know this:
Racism is as American as Baseball.

It all starts with us, with you and me, with our hearts.
How did Martin Luther King say it:
"Massively assert our dignity and worth."
That's in the collective.
How do we individually assert our dignity and worth
so that we don't hurt others,
allow others to be hurt, or
hurt ourselves by doing so?

It starts with mindfulness,
it starts with becoming aware,
being woke not just about what's going on around us
but also what's going on inside of us.

This doesn't come naturally, and it doesn't come without help.
We need one another.

This is a church, this is an intentional community.
Where we honor our intentions in ourselves and each other
and learn and work together
to do something better without shame or blame.
Where we can do more than react, we can
Clear away everything that stands in the way of love.

Let me tell you about how growth happens with us:

Unconscious incompetence –

is when I'm at the mercy of what I don't know.
Making others angry, making others want to leave.
Out of my element without realizing I have an element.

Conscious incompetence –

is when I become aware of what I don't know.
Reflecting on the way I am, why I say and do things.
Asking for help. Receiving it without blame or shame.

An intentional community assumes best intentions.
If those intentions aren't coming across,
we don't scold, we say:
"I'm feeling or I think this isn't working,
help me understand where you're coming from."
We listen when the other asks,
What were your expectations?

If I'm going to be liked, I want it to be for something I stand for,
something I've really thought and said.
Something I really did.
If I'm going to be disliked, I want it to be for
something I stand for, something I've really thought and said,
rather than for what I haven't said,
or for assumptions about my motives, or how I look,
or because of my clumsiness, or teasing, or poor timing, or poorer sense of humor.

Conscious competence –

is when we start to build skills,
start to be interested in
building something new between us and others.

Unconscious competence –

is that point we reach after time,
when we begin to pass on skills and cultivate mindfulness;
reach a point where mindfulness is second nature.

Give a gift of our presence and what we've internalized from others.

A matter of conscience is:

Awakening, seeing things differently,
bringing our new awareness home to here.

Live intentionally, with curiosity,
aware of what we don't know,
mindful of who we really are or what we really want.

Words are intended to move nations.

This is impossible unless they move hearts.

This morning is about taking that first step;
opening our hearts so that we can move on.

It's good to be with you.

It's good to be with you
especially while we begin
the intense, messy, exasperating, illuminating, self-fulfilling
work before us.

Where are we, where do we start?

Let's start here.