

## **Draw the Circle Wide**

Sermon by Rev. Tracy Sprowls  
All Souls Unitarian Church  
February 19, 2017

### Reading

Our reading for the morning is an anecdote from a leadership conference Tracy attended. The reading is in her words but the actual experience belongs to another person at the conference.

*Because he worked for a nonprofit organization trying to unionize horse jockeys, a friend of mine had the opportunity to have dinner with Jesse Jackson. Much of the evening was spent on discussing the issue at hand, but as the night wore on the memories of the sixties began to surface. My friend, feeling bold, finally worked up the nerve to ask what was on everybody's mind. "What was he like? What was he really like?"*

*They all knew who the "he" was. Martin Luther King, Jr. My friend went on: "We all know he was talented and charismatic. We all know he could move a nation of people into action with his words and his beliefs. We all know he had a vision of peace and justice and equality for all, but tell us, what was he like?"*

*Jesse Jackson took a moment before he answered. "You have it wrong about Martin. He did not just have a vision of peace and justice and equality for all. The greatness that was Martin Luther King Jr. was this: he already lived in a circle of reality where everyone was equal and love and justice and peace already existed. He already lived it. He saw his task was to make the circle ever wider. Ever wider.*

## Sermon

In the reading, we heard that Martin Luther King Jr lived in a circle of reality where everyone was equal, and love, and justice, and peace already existed. He already lived it. That is the thing to get. He already lived in this circle of peace, and love, and justice, even though all around him he faced injustice, intolerance, and hatred. He saw his task was to make the circle he lived in ever wider.

Through many campaigns and decades of hard struggle, generations of sung and unsung heroes slowly etched out a place of fairness and justice. But the time finally came to ensure that every Black and Brown American who had been denied so long the right to vote finally had that right.

And so, in Selma fifty two years ago, some 600 people gathered to make that first walk across the Edmund Pettis Bridge. All the history of Black and Brown Americans – slavery, civil war, segregation, lynchings, and Jim Crow – was on that bridge with them and compelled them forward. They walked to expand that circle of freedom and justice that they knew, they walked to draw wide the circle of inclusivity and fairness. They knew to live inside that circle was to constantly be willing to expand it, to draw it wider.

Two years ago, hundreds of thousands of people again walked across that same bridge in Selma, including me, to be a witness to the past, to share in the experience of commemorating history but also to once again address the continued injustices that people of color face at the hands of police officers, our government and our institutions.

You see, while people of conscience work to draw the circle wide, there are always those who wish to keep the circle small, to close it off to Black people, to gay people, to immigrants, to Muslims, to poor people, to prisoners, to the differently abled, to women. In the years since Selma, we have made historic, positive changes in our communities and in our country, but for some groups those changes never really quite took.

And today, hatred and violence are on the rise and many, many people are at risk. In a time such as this, it is the most vulnerable people in our communities who will suffer the most, lose the most.

When I think about justice, I think about that circle that Martin Luther King Jr lived in. Within the circle all people were seen and heard. Within the circle all people were treated as equals. All people experienced justice, and hope, and love because every single person had the right to it. Even people we do not know. Even people we do not like. Even people who make us afraid. Even the people with power. In the circle, the Muslim is equal to the Christian. The Israeli is equal to the Palestinian. The homeless man is equal to the Wall Street banker. Every single person equal to one another.

But this is in the circle – a place that is a dream. A place that we can glimpse if we look and behave a certain way. The world, unfortunately, is not like that.

In his address at Madison Square Garden in his visit two years ago, the Pope said,

“...big cities...conceal the faces of all those people who don't appear to belong, or are second class citizens. In big cities, beneath the roar of traffic, beneath “the rapid pace of change,” so many faces pass by unnoticed because they have no “right” to be there, no right to be part of the city. They are the foreigners, the children who go without schooling, those deprived of medical insurance, the homeless, the forgotten elderly. These people stand at the edges of our great avenues, in our streets, in deafening anonymity. They become part of an urban landscape which is more and more taken for granted, in our eyes, and especially in our hearts.”<sup>i</sup>

If we are to draw the circle in which we wish to live wider, a circle of equality, justice, and love, then we must begin to truly see people. This is where change will begin. This is how justice will grow. Face to face, heart-to-heart with those unseen people standing on the edge of our awareness: the refugees, the young Black and Brown youth, the homeless... We must see them as human, as part of us or even as us.

*There is a story I heard about a woman who goes to a restaurant with her husband and young child. She puts her child, Erik, in the highchair and immediately he squeals with glee and says hi. He pounds his fat baby hands on the tray and his eyes crinkle with laughter and merriment. The mother looks around for the source of such happiness and notices a man whose pants are baggy with a zipper at half-mast and his toes poking out of would-be shoes. His shirt is dirty and his hair uncombed and unwashed. His whiskers are too short to be called a beard and his nose is so varicose it looks like a road map. He looks dirty and surely he smells. He his waving his hands and flapping them at the baby.*

*"Hi there, baby. Hi there, big boy I see ya, buster," the man says to Erik. The parents exchange looks. The baby continues to laugh and say hi and tuck his head down in that flirtatious infant way.*

*Everyone in the restaurant notices. A few people are uncomfortable. There is a dirty, homeless man creating a nuisance with beautiful baby. What right did he have? The meal comes and the man begins shouting from across the room, "Do ya patty cake? Do you know peek-a-boo? Hey, look, he knows peek-a-boo."*

*Nobody thought the homeless man was cute. He was maybe drunk; the parents embarrassed. Mom and dad eat in silence; the rest of the restaurant quietly murmured. And then there is Erik, the delighted baby, who is running through his whole cuteness repertoire for the admiring homeless man, who in turn reciprocates with his cute comments.*

*Finally the meal is done and the family prepares to leave. The father pays the check and goes out to get the car. The mother is left alone with the baby. And the homeless man who is poised between her and the door.*

*'Oh please, oh please,' she pleads to herself, 'just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik.' As she draws closer to the man, she tries to sidestep him and avoid any air he might be breathing but as she does, Erik leans over and reaches out with both arms in a baby's "pick-me-up" position. Before she can stop him, Erik has propelled himself from her arms to the man's.*

*Erik in an act of total trust, love, and submission, lays his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes close, and there are tears beneath his lashes. His aged hands full of grime, pain, and hard labor, cradled the baby's bottom and stroke his back. No two beings have ever loved so deeply for so short a time.*

When we know someone directly or experience them through some encounter our feelings about 'the other' can change. Something in us can shift and we can make our circle of kinship wider or at least our hearts more open. These are significant and not unimportant moments. Justice takes shape and becomes reality out of expanding our circles of kinship through these personal experiences with the other, out of these very moments.

What would the world be like if we noticed first before nationality or accent, before ability or age, that the person before us has a beating heart and that their life is a gift? What would a walk down the street be like if with each person we encountered we recognized *us* in another form? What if we already lived in a circle of reality where everyone truly was equal and love, and justice, and peace already existed?

Fifty years after Selma, the world has changed and yet, in so many ways the challenges are the same. I think today in the face of Ferguson and Baltimore and so many other cities here around the world;  
and Muslim deportations  
and possible eroding rights for the GLBT communities,  
and the growing prison industrial complex and militarization,  
and the culture of fear we live in,  
and the amount of money in government,  
and the fact that power is held by a few.

*Voting is not enough to affect change and marching is only one part of the necessary work we are meant to do.*

What has never changed and will not change is the justice principle, and our Unitarian Universalist principle, that says every person has inherent worth and dignity. Put another way, a person's life matters. Black lives matter. Gay lives matter. Differently abled people's lives matter. Muslim lives matter.

Our task as a church is to always be saying this, living this, being this. Gandhi said we must be the change we wish to see in the world. So we are called to live as Martin Luther King, Jr. lived. We are called to live in a circle where every life is precious, where each

life matters, where we all are loved and held by God. And we are called to make that circle ever wider.

A sign at the woman's march in DC from the Unitarian Universalist Association reads:

**Love is hard.** Love for people, especially those who are different from you.  
 Love that says **I see you** as a person.  
 Love that says "let your unique light shine in the world!"  
 because each of our souls touches the divine mystery.

Love that says we're on a journey together and my fate is tied up in yours.  
 Love that grabs you and won't let you go  
 until your whole life is dedicated to **standing on the side of love.**  
 Love that changes the world.  
 Love is hard.  
**Do it anyway.**

And who better than Unitarian Universalists to make this their faith work? We already practice this, our first principle that all have inherent worth and dignity? We are not perfect at it, living this first principle, but it is something we already carry in our hearts and to which we aspire in our living and in our loving. We strive to live it already as part of our religious tradition and so our faith calls us to cast the circle ever wider.

If we want justice in the world, if we want peace and equality, then we start where we live, the small circle around us. Then we grow the circle with each person we meet. It begins with living in the reality we already wish to see. It begins with people like Martin Luther King, Jr. It begins with you and me. And then drawing the circle a little wider. A little wider.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Madison Square Garden Address by Pope Francis