

“Love and Justice”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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You may have noticed that the New Hampshire presidential primaries were this past week. Living as we do within the range of New Hampshire radio and television markets, it's been hard to *not* notice! If you've been paying attention to any degree, you have likely noticed that there is a lot of *anger* in politics right now. Angry politicians denouncing other candidates. Angry voters declaring their support for candidates they believe “get it” and will do something to make “it” change. Even the political pundits are angry—ridiculing candidates or even each other for their opinions. Anger is everywhere.

I once had a professor who would help students come up with a paper topic by asking them, “what pisses you off?” Personally, I found this to be a helpful way to identify a topic that had some energy behind it. Anger can tap into a well of emotions that can drive us to action, to commitment, to staying power. Indeed, anger can run *deep* within us and be a *powerful* emotion. And, as my professor knew, anger can be also be clarifying—naming and exploring our anger can teach us what we care about, what we value, and what we hope will change.

But, as NPR journalist Michel Martin [noted recently](#), “what about the dark side of all this anger? How do we reconcile this public anger with what we know about the destructive force of that emotion left unchecked in our own lives? How it obscures logic, tears relationships apart and makes reconciliation difficult, if not impossible.” Given this dark side, one wonders if *anger* is the best path forward to the change we seek.

In the same piece, Martin also notes that anger *does* have a place. She says, “It's a warning sign to self and others. It's a call to arms.” In fact, she continues, “Throughout our history, we've been told that are times when if you aren't angry, you aren't paying attention.”

There is plenty to be angry about in our world today. Rising economic inequality. Repeated examples of systemic racism. Islamophobic rants and violence. Persistent sexism and homophobia. Intractable conflicts and wars across the globe. And, a changing climate that has initiated the sixth great mass extinction in our planet's history.

And this is just the national and global picture. Undoubtedly, there are other issues and situations of a smaller, perhaps even personal scale that make you angry.

What pisses *you* off? [makes you angry?]

Asking this question, listening to your anger, can lead you to a better understanding of what you feel is right and wrong. You can feel your conviction that inequality among people because of their race or gender, sexual preference or religion is *wrong*. You can feel your restlessness to make it better, to effect a change, to make it right.

Such anger can indeed be a righteous anger. As Martin wrote, “Even the scriptures denounce those who refuse to be angry when the situation warrants, calling out those who cry peace, peace when there is no peace.” Sometimes there are situations when we do need to get angry . . . to notice what’s happening and to be moved by it. As the famous [Buffalo Springfield](#) song charges, “We better stop, hey, what's that sound/ Everybody look what's going down.”

Working together to build a better world is not only a part of our new covenant, vision, and mission statements, it’s part of our religious tradition. Since the 19th century, Unitarians have rallied around the cry for “deeds not creeds.” We’re a part of a long stream of religious folk who have expressed their faith in their actions.

A great example of faith in action has been the way Unitarian Universalists rallied around the issue of same-sex marriage. In 2004, as UU’s in Massachusetts fought for same-sex marriage, a new rallying point emerged—the call to “stand on the side of love.” In the same year, UU composer [Jason Shelton wrote a song](#) of the same title, “[Standing on the Side of Love.](#)”

While the idea of Standing on the Side of Love was born out of the fight for same sex marriage, in subsequent years, it has ballooned into an interfaith campaign to “harness the power of love to fight oppression” of all kinds. Today the Standing on the Side of Love campaign is a widely recognized public advocacy campaign across the nation. Their bright yellow t-shirts and banners are a presence at many gatherings of social witness and protest. Sponsored by the UUA, many, but not all of those affiliated with the campaign are Unitarian Universalists. So, scanning a crowd at a protest and spotting bright yellow often means there are other UU’s in the crowd. Honestly, it’s a bit of a bright yellow. But when you gather in a crowd of hundreds or thousands and see that yellow pop, it’s a stirring feeling to know that you are not alone.

Now each year, the Standing on the Side of Love campaign promotes [30 days of Love](#) between Martin Luther King holiday in January and Valentine’s Day in February. This year the focus of the campaign is 30 Days of Love: Towards Racial Justice. Indeed, if you go to the [homepage](#) of Standing on the Side of Love, the banner reads “Faith, Race, and Justice: A Call to Action.” The call today is to harness the power of love to fight *racial* injustice, to stand with those who face hate, exclusion, and unequal access to the rights and privileges of citizenship because of the color of their (non-white) skin.

According to longtime scholar-activist Cornel West, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” This connection between love and justice is powerful and transformative. This connection between standing on the side of love and fighting oppression has the potential to change our world for the better. So what *is* this connection between love and justice? What does Cornel West mean when he charges us to “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public”?

Both justice and love are profoundly compelling ideas. Both can be difficult to define—with vast discourses of debate and discussion surrounding each term. Yet, at its simplest, justice conveys a notion of fairness, of a relationship that has a sense of right balance and good order. Justice, in other words, is a term of right relations. Love, at its simplest, conveys a sense of care and concern for another. Love is a term of compassionate regard, the recognition of the dignity and even the delight found in another.

Many, many religious traditions call for us to love one another, to recognize the presence of others and to treat others with care and concern. Yet, love takes different forms. Love manifests in different ways. Love can be tender and sweet. Love can be fierce and protective. Love can be passionate and sensual. Love can be silly and even a bit goofy. Love responds to the need of the beloved—with a joke or a kiss, a hug or a listening ear. Committed to the wellbeing of another, love seeks to know its beloved and to meet their needs as fully as love is able.

Often, when we invoke the name of love we think primarily of intimate love. We think of love between parent and child. Or, love between spouses or partners. We may also think of love between friends or even between a person and their pet. Love can be so intimate—a deep knowing of another that fuels care and concern for their wellbeing.

But, religions often call us to love not only those near to us, but to also love the stranger. Even to love our enemy. Such notions of love pull us even further out of our own self-concern to consider the wellbeing of those whose names we may not know, whose lives and bodies look so different than our own. How do we love a stranger? How do we love someone we do not even know?

I think this call to love the stranger is related to Cornel West's claim that justice is what love looks like in public. Showing love to a stranger is seeking justice and right relations among persons—even those whose name or story you may not know. Seeking justice is showing care and concern for the wellbeing of strangers. Justice is the public form of love's desire to promote the wellbeing of another.

What would it mean to stand on the side of love for racial justice? How would we show our love in public for black lives? For the lives of brown-skinned immigrants? For the lives of all those who face discrimination, exclusion, or hatred for the color of their skin or the contours of their culture?

I think we are living in a time where we as a predominantly white community are being called to wake up, to hear “hey what's that sound, everybody look what's going down.” We are living in a moment of great anger. And there's good reason for this anger. Black men and boys are being shot and killed with very little accountability by the system sworn to protect them. Mass Incarceration rates are disproportionately skewed by race—as are poverty rates. We simply do not live in a racially just society. We live in a society that too often tolerates ongoing patterns and legacies of racial injustice. We live in a society that

declares all lives matter, but then systemically undervalues and punishes the lives of black men and women as well as other persons of color.

In response to this injustice, a new rallying cry has emerged, “Black Lives Matter.” To focus on black lives is not to say that other lives do not matter. Rather, the focus on black lives is an indictment that “all lives matter” simply is not true when you look at the streets, the schools, the prisons, or the statistics.

Over the last year or more, you may have noticed Black Lives Matter signs appearing on the lawns and buildings of some of our neighboring [Unitarian Universalist congregations](#)—including Bedford, Concord, and Cambridge. Last summer at the General Assembly of Unitarian Universalist congregations, the delegates from congregations all across the country [voted to support](#) the Black Lives Matter movement. Citing our shared principles to “affirm justice, equity and compassion in human relations” as well as to “have a goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all,” the statement urges congregations to get engaged in local discussions and organizations pursuing racial justice.

What about us at First Parish in Wayland? Would we consider hanging a Black Lives Matter banner? It’s a genuine question. And, it’s also a question to invite us into a deeper conversation as a congregation—not only about Black Lives Matter and racial justice, but also about the role of this congregation in the larger community.

I know that there are differing viewpoints in the congregation about the role of social justice. We have a range of views about how to address various issues from racial injustice to economic inequality to climate justice. And, we also have a range of views about whether or not we as a congregation as a whole should or should not take a stand on any given issue. I wonder what it would look like to talk with one another not only about the issues, but also about what it means to live into our *congregational* vision, mission, and covenant to make a better world. What would it mean for each of us as persons and for First Parish as a congregation to show our love in public? What would it mean to stand on the side of a love that seeks racial justice?

We live in a moment of anger. And anger *can* help us to wake up to a world in need. But so can the commitment to love, to show care and concern for others, to seek the wellbeing of another. We may even find that we are angry *because* of how undervalued, hated, or excluded some people are from the resources that they need to live with dignity. Using this anger to fuel action for positive change is what I understand to be harnessing love’s power to fight oppression. Let us continue to live out the old credo of “deeds not creeds” even as we live into our new covenant to care for one another and to work together for a better world.

So may it be.
Amen.