

“A Witness to the Truth”

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
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As you undoubtedly know, tomorrow is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday. Fifty years ago, in 1965, King was celebrating his thirty-sixth birthday. By that age, he had already helped to usher in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and won the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize.

Yet, of course, Dr. King did not stop there. He went to Selma in 1965. In Selma, Dr. King joined with many other leaders and activists in an effort to overturn a whole host of racist policies and practices that prevented most African Americans in the South from voting. The events surrounding this campaign in Selma are the focus of the movie *Selma* now playing in theaters. If you’ve not yet seen the film, I strongly encourage you to do so.

In the film, the first person to die is Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young African American man who had repeatedly tried to register to vote in his Alabama hometown. After participating in a peaceful protest march, the state police attacked the protesters under the cover of darkness—the street lights having been turned off. After trying to defend his mother and grandfather from the police, the unarmed Jackson was shot. He died a week later from an infection of his gun wound.

Jackson’s death spurred the idea for a march from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery to stand up for the right of African Americans to vote. On Sunday, March 7, protestors made their first effort to start the 5-day march from Selma to Montgomery. However, when the protestors crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, state police met them with an avalanche of violence—violence that was televised across the nation. Recalling the events of that day, UU minister Mark Morrison-Reed writes, “ABC had interrupted [. . .] the broadcast of *Judgment at Nuremberg*, a drama about the war-crime trials in Nazi Germany, to cut to footage of the vicious attack by Alabama state troopers and local vigilantes on 600 black citizens of Selma, Alabama. The connection couldn’t be missed.”¹

In response to this violence, Dr. King put out the call for clergy to come to Selma. One of those to respond to this call was the Rev. James Reeb. Rev. Reeb was not alone. Indeed, as a *UU World* article reports, “About 500 Unitarian Universalists, including nearly one-fifth of all Unitarian Universalist ministers, plus laypeople like Viola Liuzzo, went to Selma and Montgomery to participate in the civil rights campaign.”² Having seen the televised

¹ Mark Morrison Reed, [“Selma’s Challenge”](#), *UU World*, Winter 2014. Adapted from Mark

² Christopher Walton, “So Nobly Started,” *UU World*, May/June 2001.

accounts of the violence, there were no illusions about the danger of this decision. Still, they came by the hundreds. For Rev. Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, their decision would be deadly.

As you heard in the reading, Dr. King began his eulogy for Rev. Reeb by lauding how he had lived his life—“as a witness to the truth that [people] of different races and classes might live, eat, and work together as brothers [and sisters].” Searching for answers about Rev. Reeb’s death, Dr. King asks two questions: “Who killed James Reeb?” and “What killed James Reeb?” To the first question of *who*, Dr. King said, “He was murdered by a few sick, demented, and misguided men who have the strange notion that you express dissent through murder.”³ Although three men would stand trial for Reeb’s murder, they would be acquitted by an all white jury. And when the FBI reopened the cold case in 2006, it led nowhere.⁴

To the second question, *what* killed James Reeb, Dr. King responded:

“When we move from the who to the what, the blame is wide and the responsibility grows. James Reeb was murdered by the indifference of every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows. He was murdered by the irrelevancy of a church that will stand amid social evil and serve as a taillight rather than a headlight, an echo rather than a voice. He was murdered by the irresponsibility of every politician who has moved down the path of demagoguery, who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. He was murdered by the brutality of every sheriff and law enforcement agent who practices lawlessness in the name of law. He was murdered by the timidity of a federal government that can spend millions of dollars a day to keep troops in South Vietnam, yet cannot protect the lives of its own citizens seeking constitutional rights. Yes, he was even murdered by the cowardice of every Negro who tacitly accepts the evil system of segregation, who stands on the sidelines in the midst of a mighty struggle for justice.”⁵

In other words, Reeb was killed not only by three men who beat him, but by a whole system of racial inequality. A system Reeb found unjust and simply untrue.

<http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/2356.shtml>

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Witness to the Truth,” [Eulogy for the Rev. James Reeb, March 15, 1965] *UU World*, May/June 2002.

<http://www.uuworld.org/pdfs/reebeulogymayjune01.pdf>

⁴ Scott Helman, “Letter from Selma,” *Boston Globe*, June 25, 2013.

http://www.bostonglobe.com/2013/06/25/greeb/q99BkAPIK9fKtrkA1vYorM/story.html?comments=all&sort=OLDEST_CREATE_DT

⁵ King, Jr., “A Witness to the Truth.”

Rev. Reeb was not always an activist. As a child he was sickly and cross-eyed, developing in him a sense of what it feels like to be marginalized. When he moved as a teenager to Casper, Wyoming, he fell in love with the wide-open prairies. After serving in World War II, he attended college on the GI bill and then decided to enter Princeton Theological Seminary to become a Presbyterian minister.

Here is where Reeb and I share a bit of biographical detail as Princeton is also where I attended seminary. Until researching for this sermon, I had forgotten Rev. Reeb had attended Princeton—and that a plaque honoring him hangs beside the entrance to the student center, which I walked by hundreds of times during my time in seminary.⁶ After seminary, Rev. Reeb was ordained a Presbyterian minister. However, he was dogged by theological questions that led him to seek fellowship as a Unitarian minister—a tradition with theological freedom and a strong tradition of social justice.

Rev. Reeb’s story of becoming a Unitarian is one that I recognize and to which I can relate. Stymied by theological questions, there is great relief in discovering the Unitarian Universalist tradition of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Unitarian Universalism does not insist on adherence to a creed, or a statement of shared belief. Rather, as our own congregational covenant affirms, we are to “search for truth in freedom.”

For many religious congregations and organizations, shared belief is the cornerstone that unites people into a shared identity and sense of purpose. Yet, religious groups treat the idea of “truth” in a variety of ways. Within more conservative religious groups, there is usually a sense that there is a (capital T) Truth that is eternal and must be preserved and upheld against any changing tides or circumstances within the world. More moderately, some may believe that while (capital T) Truth exists, how that Truth is understood and applied shifts within different historical eras and cultural contexts.

Within the liberal religious tradition—of which Unitarian Universalism is a part—the very idea of an eternal, unchanging Truth becomes questioned. The liberal religious tradition does not hold tightly to the idea of singular, eternal, (capital T) Truth to which all must subscribe or be *wrong*. Rather than claim that we definitively *know* the Truth, we are called to an ongoing *search* for truth within our time and place.

Notably, this search for truth most certainly is not a total *abandonment* of the idea of truth. Rather, as I understand it, the search for truth is the humble recognition that it is not

⁶ William Harris, “Given in Love”, *Inspire*, vol 6.2 (Winter 2002): 29.
<https://www.ptsem.edu/Publications/inspire2/6.2/pdf/feature4.pdf>

always easy or simple to know the truth. Sometimes we need to work at learning what is true by reaching beyond what we know, beyond our own experiences, and beyond what we thought *was* true. Sometimes we need to ask ourselves, *what do I not know?* What do I not understand? What have I not experienced or felt or seen that has shaped another person's experience and knowledge so differently than my own? What do I not know?

For Dr. King and Rev. Reeb, the truth was "that [people] of different races and classes might live, eat, and work together as brothers [and sisters]." Rev. Reeb had chosen to live this truth by residing in Dorchester, by sending his children to neighborhood schools, and by flying to Selma to march for the voting rights of African Americans. Rev. Reeb lived and he died for what he believed to be true.

Of course so many people in Selma and across the nation did not agree with Dr. King or Rev. Reeb. For too many, the "truth" was that the races and the classes should *not* mix. The sit-ins, the bus boycotts, the marches, the speeches, and all the ways people protested during the Civil Right Era was a way of speaking out on behalf of a truth of equality and dignity. For too long, this truth of the full humanity of African Americans had been denied in the laws and the racist systems of our nation. For too long, an alternative "truth" of racial *inequality* had been propagated by the white men and women who held the power of making the laws, policing the streets, and owning the wealth.

This moment of deep tension between very different understandings of what was "true" is but one of many such moments of debate in history. In the 19th century, abolitionists argued for the freedom of slaves. Feminists have argued—and continue to argue—for the equal and just treatment of women in the voting booth, the workplace, and in the household. From the 1969 Stonewall Uprising to the ongoing fight for marriage equality to calls for the protection and rights of transgender persons, there are ongoing fights for a plurality of gender and sexual expressions.

I believe that as Unitarian Universalists we are called to engage in the questions of our time about what is in fact true. Rather than be wedded to one, unchanging way of understanding the world, we are called to be engaged in an ongoing search for truth—even when it leads us to places where we may feel uncertain and unclear. Even when it may lead us into conflict with others—including those we love and those with whom we share these pews.

Conflict is hard to avoid when faced with changing beliefs and shifting senses of what is true. While Unitarian Universalists *have* been very active in major social movements for change, there have also been moments of great discord. William Ellery Channing, often cited as the "Father" of Unitarianism, long resisted speaking out against slavery because it would fracture his congregation. Theodore Parker was isolated and snubbed by other 19th

century Unitarian ministers for suggesting that religions other than Christianity might contain religious truth. And, Olympia Browne had to repeatedly petition for the right to enter seminary before finally becoming the first woman ordained as a Universalist minister. Change can be hard. Change takes effort. Change can involve conflict and confusion; heartache and bitterness; violent confrontation and even death.

Sometimes I fear that the Unitarian Universalist promotion of the free and responsible search for truth and meaning is misunderstood as a lax and lazy religion. It's seen as that "fluff" religion where "you can *just* believe whatever you want." While it is true that there is no creed or test of belief to belong to First Parish or to the larger Unitarian Universalist movement, to me there is a much harder challenge. We are challenged to take responsibility for what it is that we believe. We are challenged to engage in the search for truth in freedom—even when it leads us to places of confusion or conflict, confrontation or sacrifice.

There is plenty in our world today to lead us into places of confusion and conflict. The Charlie Hebdo killings have once again ignited a debate about the tension between civil freedoms and safety; national identity and immigration. The shut-down of Boston freeways on Friday have stirred fierce discussion about public safety and activist tactics to get out their message. These are but a few of the issues on the current public stage.

So many of us are also struggling with issues of confusion and uncertainty closer to our hearts—from questions about how to navigate a new stage of life or how to help a child or teen grow into their fullness of life. We face health challenges or questions about money. We consider a job change or returning to school.

There are so many questions large and small facing each of us every day. When we walk through the doors into this Meeting House, you need not leave any of these questions behind. Rather, you are invited—even implored—to bring them with you as we engage together in a search for truth in freedom.

In a life that led James Reeb from the Wyoming prairie, to the halls of Princeton Theological Seminary, to a Unitarian parish, and then to the cities of Dorchester and Selma, Rev. Reeb came to his truth that all races and classes can live, eat, and work together as brothers and sisters. This is the truth he lived and this is the truth for which he died.

At the close of his eulogy for Rev. Reeb, Dr. King said, "the greatest tribute that we can pay to James Reeb this afternoon is to continue the work he so nobly started but could not finish because his life—like the Schubert "Unfinished Symphony"—was cut off at an early

age.”⁷ Dr. King had suggested who and *what* had killed Rev. Reeb. Now, he was calling for a response. Indeed, searching for answers, seeking to understand the truth, often leads us to live differently.

On this Martin Luther King weekend, I encourage you to ask yourself what do you *not* know about King, about Selma, about what it is to live as an African American in this country. Then, I encourage you to seek answers. Go see the movie *Selma*. Spend some time on the internet searching James Reeb, Selma, or King. Or, investigate the hashtag #blacklivesmatter to learn more about the desires of the protestors who stopped the traffic on the highway. Maybe your heart is asking a totally different question—about a different social issue or about a very personal challenge. Whatever it is that you *don't know*, I encourage you to “live the questions” as you search for truth in freedom.

And when you've found your truth, may you have the courage to act, to answer the call to live your truth.

So may it be. Amen.

⁷ King, Jr., “A Witness to the Truth.”