

“A Revolution of Values”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

September 18, 2016

Although today is “Homecoming Sunday,” and we’ve already talked a lot about *home*, my sermon today looks not the spaces of sanctuary, but to the values which anchor our lives. The sermon title, “A Revolution of Values,” is from a speech given by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King on April 4, 1967, exactly one year before he would die. In this controversial speech on the Vietnam War, King’s call to action moved beyond Vietnam to address a wider landscape of social concerns, saying,

“We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”¹

When I first heard the phrase, “a revolution of values,” I didn’t know this link to King. Rather, I heard it from the Rev. Dr. William Barber, another prophetic preacher from the African-American Christian tradition. Rev. Barber, president of the North Carolina NAACP, is the founder of the Moral Mondays movement. Over the summer I heard Rev. Barber speak twice.

In June, I sat among thousands at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Columbus, OH. Rev. Barber, dressed in a black vest and purple clerical shirt, thundered from the stage as he called for a moral response to political issues that went beyond left and right, liberal and conservative. Then, in late July, I joined a group of interfaith clergy and activists at the UU Urban Ministries. This time Rev. Barber arrived in a t-shirt and track pants. Yet, he still spoke with passionate conviction. He was funny and had a lively spark in his eyes. He taught and responded with gentleness. And... he insisted that the way forward as a nation is to build a moral movement that rises up from each state. He was there to be our teacher and to help us organize. But, what would or would not happen in *Massachusetts* was up to us.

I hear something important in the call made by Rev. Barber and other leaders in the “Moral Revival” movement. There is no doubt that we live in a politically fractious and ideologically divided world. So much of our life as a society has been rigidly divided into

¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, “Beyond Vietnam,” Speech at the Riverside Church, NYC, April 4, 1967.

polarized camps who do not talk, nor seek to understand one another. What will bridge this gap? Or, as Barber would say, what will repair this breach?

As Sam read for us from Rev. Barber's book, we work together by finding common ground. We seek common morals—shared values—that connect us to each other.

I suspect some of us scrunch up our noses a bit at the word *moral*. Yuck. Thanks to the conservative religious groups of the 1980's and 90's—groups such as the Moral Majority led by Jerry Falwell—the term *moral* can feel like a weapon wielded by politics of hate towards gay, lesbian, and transgender folks as well as towards women who have chosen abortions or even birth control, couples who have divorced, or any of us who have chosen to be sexually active outside of marriage.

You'll notice that most of those so-called moral issues have a *sexual* overtone as well as a disproportionate impact on the freedom of women. In this list, there is also a profound *absence* of other moral issues.

What about the morality of children going to bed hungry at night? Or, the morality of elderly folks having to choose between food and medicine? What about the morality of wars that protect the economic interests of some while devastating the lives and livelihoods of whole nations? What about the morality of mass incarceration and its impact on African Americans who are disproportionately affected? What about the morality of denigrating those of different races, ethnicities, or religions? What about the morality of rendering our planet uninhabitable for future generations of humans or countless other species?

Anyone thinking, "Geez, I thought she'd have a 'sunny' sermon for a celebratory day such as this?!"

To my mind, the 'sun' and the light, the hope and the way forward are already here in this room. That we are here, still here, still with pews full of people young and old, gay and straight, married and single, scientists and artists, bankers and teachers, Buddhists and pagans, atheists and lovers of God means that it is possible to build a community in which differences are recognized and respected.

Yet sometimes differences are not easily bridged or repaired. Sometimes conflicts and even war erupts. Some of you have served in wars or mourned the lives or those who did not return from war. And many of you have protested and voted against different wars, oppressions, or injustices throughout your life.

Existing as a community in the midst of conflict is nothing new for First Parish. Since the beginning, this congregation has stood through conflicts and controversies and war. . . from King Phillip's War and the American Revolution; to the Unitarian controversy and dividing into 2 congregations; to abolitionism and the Civil War; to Women's Suffrage in 1920 and a Great Depression in the 30's. First Parish stood through the 1950's Red Scare beside Anne Hale as well as through the fights for Civil Rights, Women's Rights, and Same-Sex Marriage.

Through all the ways that society has changed and struggled and even warred, First Parish in Wayland has served as a place for people to gather, to seek truth, and to support one another as person after person, family after family, generation after generation sought to live and love with integrity and by convictions of what is right and good.

And here we are today in this moment. A group of people who are both familiar and new to one another. A group of people who arrive here with all kinds of concerns and questions on their hearts. Some of you may bring with you the weight of a personal grief, or a struggle with work or family. Others may bring a celebratory heart after a summer of joy or in anticipation of something new. Many of us bring both. In some aspects of our lives, we feel joy—even if it's just a small pleasure of petting a cat or the first sip of coffee in the morning. Yet, in other aspects, we struggle—the same argument reappears or the uncertainty about tomorrow frightens us.

In other words, we arrive here as humans in all of our capacities for love and connection, loss and fear. We come together as a group of people not with all the answers, but with a longing to make some sense out of life. We come here not as perfect people, but as scarred and broken people who have known what it is to suffer and to fall and what it is to heal and to move on. We come here to be reminded that life with all of its struggle and its beauty, its loss and its love . . . is worth living.

It matters that we are here. There are so many news articles and surveys out there that remind us of the declining numbers of folks who attend religious services. It could be easy to become fearful that we too might decline. Indeed, the years of ministerial transition did see loss as well as struggle. But, I believe that the only decline to fear is a diminishment of our sense that we do here is important and that it makes a difference in our lives and in the lives of our community.

We are living in a moment of significant social conflict. Debates about Black Lives Matter, immigration, economic inequality, affordable health care, women's health choices, and more daily dominate news headlines. While often framed in terms of political parties or personalities, each of these issues can also be viewed through a lens of moral and ethical

commitments. What does a moral commitment to equality—to the inherent worth and dignity of every person—demand of us as we consider such issues? How does an ethical framework that understands humanity as interconnected with one another determine our responses to those who are different?

Throughout our lives, we are faced with choices about what we value, about what we think is good, and about what we believe is the right thing to do. We face such choices in our public lives and in the voting booth, but also we also face these choices everyday in our interactions with friends, families, strangers, and even ourselves. Where do we turn for help in making these choices?

In calling for a moral revival and a revolution of values, Rev. Barber directs people to draw upon their religious traditions for moral insights. In planning meetings and public gatherings for the Moral Movement, I witness Jews, Christians, and Muslims turning to their sacred texts of the Torah, Bible, and Qu’ran. To what should Unitarian Universalists turn? Where do we go to search for moral insight or ethical guidance? When faced with choices about what we value, how do we decide?

As Unitarian Universalists, we have neither a single creed defining our shared beliefs, nor do we have a single sacred text to which we turn. Rather, we are a living tradition shaped by conversations with each other from which shared agreements emerge. So, what we do have are 7 principles that we promote and affirm and 6 sources from which our living tradition emerges. Both the principles and the sources were agreed upon by a multi-year process of congregational discussion and representation to the General Assembly of congregations that meets each year. In this way, the principles and the sources are more like an expression of shared understanding of what shapes our tradition than they are intellectual ‘rules’ that we must enforce.

Over the course of this year, I want us to explore the six sources of our living tradition. Consider where you turn for insight as I briefly list these sources: Do you lean upon direct experience of transcending mystery? Or, do you learn from the words and deeds of prophetic men and women? Perhaps you turn to wisdom from the world’s religions or from Jewish and Christian teachings? Do you look to Humanist teachings and science? Or, finally, do you explore the spirituality of Earth-centered traditions? As we explore these different sources, my hope is that each of us will reflect more deeply on where we turn for insight when faced with an ethical decision. My hope is that we will become more conversant with both the sources of our own values as well as aware of what shapes the values of the people around us.

We are living in a moment of conflict that demands of us to know where we stand, what we value, and what we consider to be right and good. Every day, in ways small and large, we face ethical choices. And yet, none of us are alone as we wrestle with such choices. This community, the living tradition of which we are a part, surrounds us as we seek to live and love with integrity.

I end with words that Martin Luther King used to conclude his 1967 speech.

And if we will only make the right choice, we will be able to transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of peace. If we will make the right choice, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our worlds into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to speed up the day, all over America and all over the world, when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.