

First Reading: *Abolitionist John Brown's Last Address, to a courtroom in in Charleston, WV.*

"I have, may it please the Court, a few words to say.

In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted, the design on my part to free the slaves. I intended certainly to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter, when I went into Missouri and there took slaves without the snapping of a gun on either side, moved them through the country, and finally left them in Canada. I designed to have done the same thing again, on a larger scale. That was all I intended...

I have another objection; and that is, it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered in the manner which I admit...had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends, either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class, and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.

This court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament.... It teaches me... to "remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them." I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say, I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done as I have always

freely admitted I have done in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I submit; so let it be done!"

Second Reading: From *Malcolm X*: "For one, when a white man comes to me and tells me how liberal he is, the first thing I want to know, is he a nonviolent liberal, or the other kind. I don't go for any nonviolent white liberals. If you are for me and my problems – when I say me, I mean *us*, our people – then you have to be willing to do as old John Brown did."

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

"I Shall Not Be Moved" by Mississippi John Hurt

Richard Porterfield

SERMON

Tomorrow is a day we set aside to honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In our best versions of the day, we remember his legacy of nonviolence, a methodology of resistance rooted in his faith. We Unitarian Universalists often use this day as a time to profess our own pacifism--to honor Dr. King by saying, Yes! Peace is the only way. As we sit this day with the cost of violence--the violence King faced, those the threads of

systemic violence that have woven their way through our history and into our todays--I'd like us to also consider the cost of peace.

I chose the readings we heard this morning because I'd like to claim the label of pacifist, but friends, I don't fully believe I can. I don't know if we can, as a movement.

We know John Brown was no pacifist. He rattled the sensibilities of many of our own abolitionist Unitarian and Universalist forbears for that very reason. His tactics of resistance were abhorrent to most of the liberal elite abolitionist UUs we now esteem. Brown was even more appalled at their stance of justice without much action toward delivering it.

He was born among those northern elites, though, after some bad investments, he and his family struggled financially. He was radicalized in a church pew. Brown joined the abolitionist movement in the Sanford Street Free Church, in Springfield, Massachusetts, crediting his views against slavery to his conversations there with Frederick Douglass. After a few years in the movement, he became convinced that with all the force of armed state-sanctioned violence backing the centuries-old sin of slavery, emancipation would not occur without some measure of violent response in return. (I might take a moment to remind us that, the Civil War being our deadliest as a nation, whether we decide he was a lunatic or a visionary, he was not incorrect on this count.)

Brown helped organize an armed underground militia in Massachusetts in response to the Fugitive Slave Act, which mandated the return of people who'd escaped slavery to those who claimed ownership of them. He went on to participate in the violent clashes between pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers in Kansas Territory, determined that Kansas should enter the union as a free state. Finally, with the help of Harriet Tubman, he staged an unsuccessful raid on Harper's Ferry, hoping to incite a rebellion of enslaved people that would lead to the total abolition of slavery in the United States with what he called "a minimum of bloodshed." It was for this act that he was hanged and about which he gave the statement we heard today.

I want to be very clear, I don't intend to stand here this morning to ask you to join in a violent insurrection. And I'm not even here to preach against nonviolence. I believe nonviolence, as a resistance tactic, is both morally and methodologically sound. It is right, *and* it can work. What I did come to discuss is whether it right or useful for us to take the stance of pacifism. Can we preach peace?

The authors of our readings today knew that peace is a slippery word. My life has the appearance of peace. For many of you, I think the same is likely true. The walls of my privilege create a space that seems to have the quality of peace. And of justice. Now, to be fair, not all of my intersecting identities are privileged. I'm a woman. I grew up, not in poverty, but right on poverty's doorstep. But mostly, I live in privilege. I'm white. I'm married. To a man. I'm educated. I'm middle class now. I'm able-bodied. I'm an

American citizen. These identities are served by the force of power. And that force--violent force, let's be clear about that--creates in my world, an illusion of peace.

I fear what we really mean by peace, most often, is security. And this sense of security comes at the expense of a desperate grasping for control by a massive apparatus of power. For those of us who inhabit it these spaces of privilege, our illusion of peace has required the implementation of ever-more militarized police *on our behalf*, the continued violence of a military force that covers the globe *on our behalf*, prisons overfilled with black and brown people *on our behalf*, and a system of capital that relies on exploited bodies of laborers *on our behalf*, a total ravaging of the earth and its creatures, *on our behalf*. All of this is to give us the *sense* of peacefulness, of security. And as long as that sense of peacefulness makes up our whole understanding of peace, the violence on our behalf expands and expands. The hand that grasps at security never stops grasping. This is a peace that cannot be held. My life looks peaceful, secure, fair, because power is on my side. The same was true for John Brown. So I have to ask myself, as he did, whose side am I on?

The side I lucked into is quite comfortable for me. Freedom will not be comfortable. True peace *by way of justice*, for me and for many of us here, will not be comfortable. On the other side of those walls of privilege lies a world that doesn't look very peaceful at all.

Twenty-six years ago, the police officers who brutalized Rodney King were acquitted by an all-white jury, and the people's response in South Central Los Angeles was not peaceful. Just two years ago, we saw a similar response in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray, again at the hands of police. Just earlier this year, we saw both peaceful and non-peaceful responses to Neo-Nazi demonstrations in Charlottesville. The pacifist in me wanted to condemn those violent reactions. But I ought to be oh so careful to remember, before I call for peace, that the lives of those reacting were not ordered by peace to begin with. I need to be viscerally aware, before I ever preach peace in the face of state violence, that I do not face state violence and never have. My child walks through the world with skin that shields him from harm.

Many well-meaning folks who would like to be allies with the cause of antiracism reacted like the white liberals Malcolm X cautions against trusting. We, as a liberal but comfortable culture, loudly denounced the violence of riots. Our national conversations characterized--and continue to characterize--these times of upheaval as "senseless" violence. When we're honest with ourselves, though, these and other collective reactions to systematic oppression are anything but senseless. They make perfectly fine sense. What's senseless is the expectation of passivity in response to generations of brutal violence from the systems that empire wields. What's senseless is calling that passivity *peace*.

What we are really saying when we call this kind of resistance “senseless” is that it unravels the imagined order of our lives. It makes us uncomfortable. Somehow, remarkably, more uncomfortable than the generational systemic injustice it is a reaction to. It forces *some of us*, those of us who look from the vantage point of privilege, to confess we may not be the peacenik heroes we imagine ourselves to be. We may be accountable for more than the veneer of peacefulness in our own little lives. We call it senseless because it disrupts our sense of who we are. We want it to make no sense, because when it does, it re-orientes our gaze toward the injustice perpetrated on our behalf.

Here is what Dr. King said of meeting oppression with violence, only shortly before he died, “There can be no justice without peace and there can be no peace without justice.” A true peace is only ever built on a foundation of justice. His words are echoed in the cries of today’s Black Lives Matter activists who proclaim in the streets, “No Justice, No Peace.”

Neither they, nor I, nor King are calling for violence to right the wrongs at hand. What the chant does is expose the illusion that security equals peace. That calm and quiet equal peace. In reality, there is no true peace that is not built on a foundation of justice. Children without fair access to a decent education, people who are hungry in a society with more than enough food, quiet and methodical community segregation, a fear to walk the streets in one’s own skin, this is violence. Those lives it affects are not peaceful

lives to begin with. There is a violence in the inequality and white supremacy that underlies our society. If we would like to be pacifists, if we would like to say tomorrow, that we would follow in King's footsteps by choosing peace, building a culture of justice is the first step.

Calling for pacifism is a dangerous stance for those of us inside the walls of privilege to take, because the call rarely stops at physical reactive violence. We see this reaction to even slightly provocative techniques of protest, kneeling during the National Anthem, for example. It is telling that our country's common respect for dissent against injustice extends only as far as the boundaries of control that the system of injustice itself sets out. Preaching pacifism turns into this: It's fine to protest if you have a permit. If you stay on the sidewalk. If you're quiet. If you don't actually disrupt any of the mechanisms of the very system you're protesting. If you have the kind of face we think looks safe. Passivity, again, passes for peace.

And that's nothing like the intentionally disruptive nonviolent resistance that Dr. King practiced and taught. For him, nonviolence *necessarily* included conflict with oppressive systems. It *necessarily* included provocation of bystanders, to expose our interconnectedness. It included the confrontational practices that serve to dismantle those invisible walls of privilege, creating an exposure to the violence that many of us never have to look at. Because the truth, he taught, was this: "We are caught in an

inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

I have to admit, I struggled in writing this sermon. Can I really caution against pacifism on Martin Luther King Day? How can I hope to convey the nuance of the differences between peace and passivity, a justice-rooted work for peace and an ego-rooted stance of pacifism? Do I even have this right? And from behind these walls of privilege, could I even see if I didn't? Who am I to say?

My dear friend Gwen, lucky for me, happens to work in peace and conflict transformation. “What do you think about pacifism?” I asked her out of the blue. She laughed at the enormity of the question and said, “It's easy to talk about, but hard to do.”

“Yes!” I said, “That's what I'm trying to say. It's too easy to claim pacifism without really building peace and justice.”

“True,” she answered, “But it's even easier to do neither. To oppose pacifism and still not build peace and justice.”

You can see why I was struggling.

Then she said this: “Marginalized people are going to work for their own freedom and justice in all kinds of ways. Ways that are nonviolent and ways that include violence. I'm choosing nonviolence, but we're still on the same side. Nonviolence means I have to

accept that there are other ways of understanding. To force my understanding of pacifism on someone who's struggling for justice? That's just another form of violence. The challenge of peace that I see is that it's so natural, when we're looking at an unjust world, to respond with criticism. We criticize the injustice and the unrest it results in; we criticize violence as wrong *and* pacifism as ineffective. What's really difficult, but necessary for true peace, is a creative nonviolence. We have to be able to imagine new ways of living together, and we have to be willing to actually live differently."

This was the missing piece, for me. It's so easy for us as a culture to say, peace doesn't work and a pacifist ideology is naive, and then to do nothing about the culture of violence that's been built on our behalf. It's also easy for us as a movement to call for peace, to take a stance of empty pacifism, preaching peace without building justice. I think Gwen's call for *creative* nonviolence is exactly on point. True peace, peace *with justice*, requires something of us. It requires our imagination, our willingness to conceive of a different ways of living together and then our sacrifice of in living them.

I think this understanding requires us white would-be allies to set aside the illusion of security in our current world to imagine a new one. It requires the sacrifice of our comfort in the familiar to be part of creating something new.

My ambivalence to the claim of pacifism is not a denunciation of peace. It's really not that I'm calling us into violence in my lifting up of John Brown and Malcolm X. What I

mean when I challenge our claims to pacifism, friends, is that true peace, true justice, requires us to invite the violence of discomfort and disruption upon ourselves. We need not inflict violence on one another, but we DO need to admit the violence already done on our behalf. We DO need to be willing to dismantle the walls of privilege which protect us from it.

I am NOT calling myself or my fellow white people to take up arms for justice like John Brown, but I AM calling us--and this will not be any easier--to give over our own lives over to that cause like he did. Like Malcolm X did. Like Dr. King did. That's the only path to redemption, to reconciliation, to peace, as far as I can see. A peace created on the ground of justice. A creative nonviolence which, like all creation, will be an ever-flowing stream.

May we have the courage, the will, and the love.