



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

"I Dream a World: Stewardship, Economic Justice, and Beloved Community"

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I dream a world where man
No other man will scorn,
Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn
I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom's way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day.
A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free,
Where wretchedness will hang its head
And joy, like a pearl,
Attends the needs of all mankind-
Of such I dream, my world!

I Dream a World by Langston Hughes

20th c. African-American poet and a leader of the Harlem Renaissance

There is a joke, where a Unitarian Universalist is worried, and confides in another UU, "I want to invite a friend to the Sunday service, but our minister uses that J-word so much I'm afraid it will make my friend feel uncomfortable."

"When has our minister ever mentioned Jesus?" asked the other.

"Not Jesus, I meant 'Justice'."

Well I am going to talk to you about Justice today, so if you brought a friend, I hope I don't make them too uncomfortable.

First of all, I want to thank all of you for the honor of being able to speak from this pulpit, particularly at a time when you are considering the financial commitment you will make to this congregation in the coming year. This is a moment for aligning our resources with our values, beliefs, and loves. A time to consider how we are living out

our 7 UU principles with our finances, to create a beloved community and support the spread of justice in the world.

I believe that a meaningful transformation is occurring in UU congregations like this one. A transformation that can potentially change all of our lives, certainly change the congregation, helps fuel a change in the larger community, our nation, and even the world. Particularly in this time when racism and money are tearing apart the social fabric of America. This change has to do with how we are together with each other, how we welcome and embrace differences of all types, building what Martin Luther King called *The Beloved Community*, and how we share our resources toward the common good.

Let me start by telling you about Amy-Lee, an Asian-American young adult. Amy-Lee was born in mainland China of parents who were political dissidents. In fact they marched as a family in Tiananmen Square during the famous 1989 protests, her parents marched with the tiny baby Amy-Lee being in their arms, despite the enormous danger.

Amy-Lee is not her real name; she was very frank and revealing in our interviews, so I am respecting her privacy by disguising her identity. There is more about her in my book, *The Generosity Path*, so if you want to know more of her story, you can find it there. As you can already tell, Amy-Lee's parents were extremely oriented toward social justice and she sees that as her primary orientation as well. Her family was atheist; they never belonged or contributed to a church, even after they immigrated to the United States. I know Amy-Lee because she is now a Unitarian Universalist.

She found her congregation through volunteering for a social justice program in the congregation building and only after a time discovered the sanctuary and Sunday services. Now she is a full member of the community. Here is what she says about social justice work and belonging to a UU Congregation:

“I feel more sustained in that justice work. I make that connection between what I am doing and why I am doing it, because there is that underlying spiritual basis at my congregation.” Amy-Lee now says that her religion is a source of great spiritual sustenance for her and other people doing things that are politically necessary and brave. She also talked to me about how her understanding of money had changed through her spiritual development in the congregation. I will come back to talk more about Amy-Lee and money in a few minutes.

This intersection of justice, Unitarian Universalist community, and money is where I believe this congregation can really make a difference - especially since our systems in America are not working now to recognize the “inherent worth and dignity in every person.” National political systems are not building a beloved community and the current presidential campaign is not helping. But you are here at UU Frederick.

Justice and money are intimately tied together. I am sure I do not need to educate you about economic disparity in the United States, about how social mobility in the USA ranks below many other developed countries and is getting worse, or about how people of color as a demographic group are more strongly affected with these financial challenges than people who look like me. We can change that, starting here, and serving as a model to influence the wider community.

Let us turn our thoughts to Martin Luther King, Jr. We think of MLK as having been concerned chiefly with civil rights, with having led people of color and white allies in peaceful protests to demand the rights that were denied blacks at the time. Yet MLK had two main concerns: civil rights and poverty. During the whole last period of his life he was involved with an effort to gain economic justice for disadvantaged communities in the United States, it was called *the Poor People's Campaign*. King was assassinated in April of 1968, just a month before his *Poor People's March on Washington* that resulted in two weeks of protests led by Coretta Scott King and the erection of a shantytown on the National Mall known as "Resurrection City," which housed thousands of poor people for six weeks.

The last public speech that MLK ever gave was in Memphis, the evening before he was shot and killed. It is called "I've Been to the Mountaintop." You can find a recording of the speech on the web because I cannot imitate the beautiful speaking style of Martin Luther King. In the speech he calls upon people to stay together in solidarity, saying, "when the Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves got together, something happened in Pharaoh's court, and he could not hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity."

MLK calls upon people to join together with their economic power as well. He said, "Individually we are poor, collectively we are rich." He talked about boycotting certain businesses that did not compensate black people fairly, or treated black people badly. And he also talked about using economic power to favor and support businesses that were just in their treatment of black people. In this way he understood that money itself can be used as a tool of social justice.

This speech has dark undertones because of the physical danger and violence that the peaceful protesters were encountering. Like our own Unitarian Universalist Minister James Reeb who was killed in Selma -- and the death threats that MLK himself had been getting right before this speech. Reflecting on this, King talks about the Good Samaritan and how dangerous it was to stop and help a stranger on that particular route between Jerusalem and Jericho in that historical time. Yet he calls on the audience to be brave. He said, "The question is not, 'If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?' The question is, 'If I do not stop and help, what will happen to them?'" He said, "Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness."

Right now, let me bring us back to the present time and to Amy-Lee, who just as I was interviewing her, was trying to figure out the intersection of her justice orientation, her Unitarian Universalist beliefs, and her money. How do those pieces fit together and support each other? She and her partner were also doing some real budgeting and financial planning. She wanted to move away from willy-nilly donations and make a plan, she was trying to determine what amount of charitable giving felt right to her. She said, “What kind of daily life do I want, what are the priorities? I could always live in a smaller home, or in a less expensive neighborhood. What is reasonable for me to have for a lifestyle versus what I am giving? I find those questions really, really hard to answer. It is not only a money equation, it is figuring out what is just. I can always live on less and spend less, but what is the right point?”

Her Unitarian Universalist congregation helps her with that. She said, “It is a place to check in to make sure that my priorities are in order. It is a central place for me to think about how I give my time and money and how others spend their time and money.” She added “Giving is not just like other spending, out of my pocket and off somewhere else. Money becomes an active thing that you are using to make a difference.” She has also realized that money is a tool of social justice.

She gives generously to her congregation for three reasons: 1) because of what she personally gains, 2) because she wants to fuel the organization, its great worship and programs, including social justice work and 3) because her Unitarian Universalist congregation teaches about how to use our financial resources to make a real difference in the world.

Imagine a place where a person of color and a white person can each feel this is their spiritual home. That is not so hard to imagine, since you have made that possible here.

Now imagine a place where a rich person and a poor person can each show up as themselves, be celebrated, and belong. Where they can sit side by side in the pew and each feel that they are doing their part, by making contributions that are ambitious, but fit their own resources. Where generosity is celebrated -- not just deep pockets. You are already on your way. Your congregational pledging system is built beautifully for an economically diverse community - people contribute at different levels, and collectively we make it work. And no one gets better religious education, worship, or pastoral care - or has greater power here - because they have more money. In this way money is not only a tool of social justice, it also brings us together as a community. This is a community of beloveds. This what you are creating here at the UU Congregation of Frederick.

Much has changed since the era of Langston Hughes and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet our times look similar to MLKs time in many ways:

There is political unrest, crushing economic disparity, and systemic racism.

The needs are great and we cannot work alone to make change, we must follow his advice to maintain solidarity and unity across economic and racial lines. We can use money itself to do that.

We must develop a “dangerous unselfishness” like the civil rights activists of the 60’s, and Amy-Lee’s parents -- risking our own comforts and security to support our neighbors.

We must individually challenge ourselves to use our money according to our values, as a tool of social justice, like Amy-Lee was doing.

We must follow MLKs advice to use our collective economic power, withholding it from organizations that are violating people’s rights and health, and keeping them in poverty.

And we must use our collective economic power to support organizations that fight racism and grow the beloved community to embrace people from all races and across the economic spectrum - like this one. If you want to support black lives, you can do that, starting right here.

I hope you will remember this when you are considering how generously to pledge to this congregation. Collectively, we are rich. And here your personal contributions build an economic power to further justice, starting with this community and creating a transformation at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, then growing it outward - joining with others, and changing the world.

So May it Be Amen