

A People So Bold

February 26, 2017

UU Church of Greensboro

Rev. John L. Saxon

I

On the afternoon of Monday, May 13th, 2013, I crossed Jones Street in downtown Raleigh wearing my clerical collar, my ministerial stole, and a green arm band into the state Legislative Building along with hundreds of other North Carolinians, young and old, black and white and Hispanic, gay and straight, union members, doctors, teachers, veterans, and unemployed workers, middle class and poor to sing and pray in the rotunda outside the doors of the North Carolina Senate answering the call of Rev. William Barber, president of the North Carolina NAACP and leader of the Moral Monday movement to stand up and speak out the actions of the North Carolina General Assembly to limit health care for poor and disabled people, stigmatize immigrants and the poor, reduce unemployment benefits for those who through no fault of their own are unable to find work, expand the presence of concealed weapons in public places, and drastically limit voting rights.

I was arrested that afternoon along with more than fifty other protesters as hundreds more in the gallery above us chanted, sang, and offered their moral encouragement and support.

I was handcuffed, put on a bus, taken to jail, fingerprinted, searched, photographed, and booked on second-degree trespass and persisting in protesting after having been ordered to disperse.

As an (up to that point) upstanding, law-abiding, white, educated, middle-class citizen and minister, I was released without bail around 3:00 am and the charges against me were eventually dismissed as a violation of the constitutional rights to due process, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly.

I knew, when I crossed Jones Street, that afternoon that I'd be arrested just like the forty-seven protesters who had been arrested during the first two Moral Monday protests.

I also knew that, unlike John Lewis and those who crossed the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma on Bloody Sunday fifty-two years ago, I wouldn't be beaten to the ground by police before being thrown in jail, bloody and bruised.

I knew that I was following in the footsteps of Rosa Parks, John Lewis, Martin Luther King, Mickey Schwerner, Jonathan Daniels, Viola Liuzzo, James Reeb, and so many others who have fought for justice, equality, civil rights, and peace but that the minor inconvenience of my being arrested paled beside their sacrifices of blood, sweat, and tears—the sacrifice of their hearts, their breath, and their very lives.

I knew that singing, chanting, praying, and protesting wasn't going to stop the legislature from doing what they were going to do.

But I also knew that I couldn't remain silent, that I couldn't remain on the sidelines, that I couldn't not speak out, not stand up, not show up, not reach out, and not put myself—my whole self, heart and soul, mind and body—on the line.

I walked across Jones Street because my conscience, my beliefs, my values, and my Unitarian Universalist faith compelled me to speak truth to power and stand with “the least of these” who are my sisters and brothers.

II

Justice is part of my personal DNA—an integral part of who I am and who I have been as a person at least since the time when, going to Sunday school and church in the 1960s in a small town in Alabama, I began to question whether there would be white and colored water fountains and segregated schools in heaven.

Justice is part of my DNA and a part of the religious DNA of Unitarian Universalists—an integral part of who we are, who we have been, and who we are called to be.

Unitarian Universalism is a faith in which freedom, equality, brotherhood and sisterhood, democracy, justice, and peace are *religious*, as well as personal and political, values.

That's why I wore my clerical collar and stole when I crossed Jones Street that Monday afternoon.

That's why, when, as Unitarian Universalists, we put on our yellow Standing on the Side of Love t-shirts to march and protest against injustice we are not doing so only as Democrats, as

liberals, as union members, as teachers, as environmentalists, as veterans, as women, as LGBTQ, as people of color, as North Carolinians, or as Americans but as *people of faith*.

That's why our work for justice, as individuals, as congregations, and as a denomination, has to be firmly grounded in, *and expressly articulate*, our Unitarian Universalist faith, principles, values, and beliefs.

That's why, to quote Unitarian Universalist theologian Paul Rasor, we need to "intentionally reclaim our identity as religious liberals, ... to know why, and be able to say why, our work for social justice is *religious work*."

III

So, what, exactly, are the religious principles, values, and belief on which our social justice work as Unitarian Universalists is, and should be, grounded?

First, Unitarian Universalism affirms the fundamental unity and interdependence of all existence. As so, as Unitarian Universalists, we reject the artificial barriers that separate "us" from "them." We are all us. Y'all means all. We are all brothers and sisters. We are all neighbors. And we all need each other.

Second, ours is a faith in the transforming power of love. Love is our religion. Love calls us

- to create relationships of compassion, respect, mutuality, and forgiveness;
- to love our neighbors as ourselves;
- to recognize everyone as our neighbor;
- to stand on the side of love; and
- to remember that "justice is what love looks like in public."

Third, as Unitarian Universalists we covenant to affirm *and promote* the inherent worth and dignity of every person. All human beings have the right to a meaningful and fulfilling life, including physical safety and economic and social well-being. And so, we are called, as people of faith, to help create the conditions within which this well-being can be most fully realized by all.

Fourth, we believe in human freedom—that human beings are free moral agents who make choices and are morally accountable for their choices, understanding that human

freedom can be used creatively or destructively and that we express our freedom not only in our own personal choices but also in the institutions and social structures we create.

Fifth, our Unitarian Universalist faith rejects moral dualism—the false separation of good and evil that assigns individuals and nations into one category or the other and blinds us to our own capacity for evil and to the inherent worth and dignity of those whom we are tempted to see as other.

Sixth, we believe that justice is about the fair ordering of human relationships, including social, political, and ecological relationships; that just communities reflect equal concern for all, respect for basic human rights and liberties, non-coercive institutions, consensual relationships, shared power, and inclusiveness; and that all human beings have an obligation to create institutions, social structures, and environmental conditions that reflect these values and enable all people to live with dignity and respect.

And seventh, knowing that power can be used to create or destroy, to liberate or oppress, we believe that social justice and human fulfillment require the use of cooperative power—power with, not power over—grounded in a commitment of mutual persuasion over coercion.

These are the seven principles—the seven core theological principles of Unitarian Universalism—on which our work for social justice must be based, that must motivate and guide our work for social justice, that fuel our passion for social justice, that give meaning to the work that we do, that can sustain and give us hope in the face of disappointment and despair.

IV

Unitarian Universalism is a *prophetic* faith—a faith that calls each and every one of us, both individually and as congregations, to speak truth to power; to witness against injustice; to stand with and care for those who are marginalized, powerless, and oppressed; to bind up the broken and set the captives free; to bring good tidings to all the afflicted and all those who mourn; to build a land where justice rolls down like waters and peace like an ever-flowing stream; to be the bold and loving prophets of the times in which we live.

Living out that faith—that prophetic faith—requires courage. It requires passion and commitment. It requires persistence and hope.

Living out that faith—that prophetic faith—requires us to speak fearlessly and act boldly.

But living out that faith—that prophetic faith—also requires a healthy dose of humility, remembering that “no virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own.”

It requires us to temper our passion, our righteousness, and our anger with compassion, understanding, and forgiveness.

It requires us to build bridges and seek common ground when we can.

It requires us to hold those who we oppose accountable for what they do rather than simply condemning them for who they are or what political party they belong to.

And above all, living out our Unitarian Universalist faith—our prophetic faith—requires us to fight the never-ending fight for justice with love in our hearts.

May we be a gentle, angry people.

May we be a people so bold.

May we be the bold and loving prophets of the times in which we live.

May it be so.