

Giving Life the Shape of Justice

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First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
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Story *The Bell of Justice*

Reading from *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James H. Cone¹

Sermon

James Cone was a Christian theologian. He was talking here about late 19th century liberal white Christians. Especially for those of us who are not Christian, it may be tempting to think this has nothing to do with us. But the Unitarians and Universalists of Ida B. Wells' time were liberal Christians, and predominantly white. Cone (and Wells, as conveyed by Cone) are talking about our religious ancestors, the people who shaped the theology - and the commitment to justice - that was passed to us.

Those early Unitarians and Universalists cared about justice. So do modern Unitarian Universalists. We are known as people who show up – and at the workshop two weeks ago, we heard stories of how folks here – you! – have showed up in powerful ways. We sing of “giving life the shape of justice” – and it touches us because we mean it. And. There's context.

Back in the 17th century, Puritan Calvinists arrived in what would become New England, and they built religious communities where they could practice their “true faith,” free of the misguided oversight of the Anglican Church.² (Our dislike of authority goes way back.) Strict Calvinism was assumed, but was never expressed as a creed;³ instead they used covenants to guide how they would be with each other.”⁴

Over the next few generations, the liberal Enlightenment values of reason, tolerance, the individual, and freedom⁵ found their way into these communities.⁶ Liberal religion – interpreting Christianity from an Enlightenment-informed perspective - emerged. Liberal clergy preached - in many of these churches - what would become Unitarian theology. The freedom to hold these values and use them in religion mattered to these liberal Christians – enough to split churches, with messy arguments about who got to keep the silver, not to mention the income from local taxes, which was a thing back then.

And this freedom that was so important was intellectual. In the words of historian and minister Mark Morrison-Reed, “The freedom that is foremost in the heart of the Unitarian is the freedom of the mind, not of the body, for the enslavement they struggled against was intellectual and psychological, not physical.”⁷

¹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Orbis Books, 2017, 131-2.

² David E. Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History* (Chicago: Meadville Lombard Theological Press, 2000), 96.

³ “The Salem Covenant and the Enlarged Covenant” (1629, 1636), in Dan McKanan, *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism, Volume 1* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2017), 36.

⁴ Bumbaugh 97; also e.g., *The Salem Covenant*, 36-38.

⁵ Bumbaugh, 100.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁷ Mark Morrison-Reed, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, 18.

William Ellery Channing, who first articulated the Unitarian faith (and who has a room named after him down the hall), spoke to this in his 1830 sermon entitled “Spiritual Freedom.” His language about the free mind is a reading in our hymnal:

I call that mind free which recognizes its own reality and greatness;

I call that mind free, which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers.⁸

These early Unitarians who brought this faith into existence and gave it this new understanding of freedom were financially secure white men. They had a status in society that allowed them to focus on the “freedom of the mind,” even as they took for granted physical freedoms, like the freedom not to be lynched.⁹

“Faith of the free,” we sang in our opening hymn. That hymn – with language about defying creeds and escaping old church bondage – is about this kind of freedom. Morrison-Reed points out that it’s also ambiguous. Is this faith of the free, he asks, “the church that celebrates the free mind?” Or is it “the faith of those who are free – that is, those who are [already] both politically free and free from economic oppression?”

We inherited this history, and this theology, and this question. We cherish the individual freedom of the mind - we “jealously guard” it (as Channing put it). Individuals among us have always found their way, within that freedom, to a commitment to physical freedom as well, but jealously guarding our individual intellectual freedom can make it hard for us to work for physical freedom collectively – as a faith community. When freedom of the mind is our reason for being, just about any denominational or congregational stance can start to look like an unacceptable impingement on that freedom.

There’s a true story we often tell about the First Unitarian Church of Chicago, back in 1948 – when only white people were allowed to join. Many of its members came to believe that living their values required them to desegregate, but not all. And when the Board met to discuss that proposal, there were objections, that this would make desegregation into a creed, forcing everyone to support this particular approach to combating racism. There it was - that fierce commitment to freedom of the mind.

As Jessica York tells the story, the Board debated long into the night. Finally, James Luther Adams - the famous liberal theologian and social ethicist – who was on that Board - asked a question. To the person who was making the strongest objection, he said: "What do you say is the purpose of this church?"

After a long pause, the Board member replied. "Okay, Jim. The purpose of this church is to get hold of people like me and change them."¹⁰

Segregation was clearly unjust and inconsistent with Unitarian values. But that commitment to intellectual freedom was so central that it almost derailed desegregation. It’s a cherished piece of who we are, but sometimes it will, if we let it, get in our way. Especially when the justice work is not out there ... it’s in here. When the change that justice asks of us is in the congregation. And in us.

⁸ STLT 592.

⁹ Morrison-Reed, 24.

¹⁰ Adapted from Jessica York, <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/toolbox/session11/109792.shtml>

It takes a sense of larger purpose that we allow, sometimes, to override the “jealous guarding” of our intellectual freedom. What is that larger purpose?

For some inspiration, we might turn to another Christian theology. Liberation theology.

Liberation and liberal are similar words with a common root, but the two theologies are quite different. Liberation theology emerged much later, in the 1960’s - initially in Latin America by Catholic priests – most prominently Gustavo Gutierrez. The freedom at issue here was the massive wealth inequality between the indigenous poor and the colonial powers who oppressed them. Gutierrez spoke of the “preferential option for the poor” - the idea that God is on the side of the poor, and the rights of the poor must be at the center of religion.¹¹

In liberation theology, religion starts with, and is inseparable from, the liberation of a particular oppressed people. First we choose whose side we’re on – then we do our theology. For Gutierrez, a process of noticing this particular oppression, and then committing and acting¹² revealed a theology that reframed “salvation” in real life terms – as, in his words, “passing from less human conditions to more human conditions.”¹³ In his view, we must address this oppression – not because our free thinking tells us we should – but because if we don’t there is no religion. And we judge our religion based on how it calls us to bring about more human conditions.

Liberation theology explicitly acknowledges something that most religions don’t. All theology is political. There is no neutral theology. What looks like a neutral theology is really just aligning with the status quo. Cone and Wells and the liberationists would tell us that when the status quo is oppressive and unequal, a religion that does not expressly align itself with the oppressed is itself oppressive.

A bell of justice that does not ring for a starving horse would be no bell of justice at all.

After Gutierrez, other liberation theologies soon followed. In the United States, there was James Cone - the founding theologian for Black liberation theology. There is also queer, indigenous, and womanist liberation theology, and more. But they all work the same way. You start with an oppression, you interpret your texts and traditions in ways that call you to do something about it, you commit, you act, you reflect, you act some more, and your religion is the framework that holds it all.

Unitarian Universalist minister and justice advocate (among other things) Marjorie Bowens Wheatley described the liberationist approach to religion as “inherently humanist, in that it draws its program from the concrete experience of the people rather than from abstract universalized principles or values.”¹⁴ I’m not sure Gutierrez would have appreciated being called humanist, but Wheatley has a point.

The liberal Christians did the same thing – responding to a limitation on their freedom by changing how they did religion - but they ended up in a different place.

¹¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Toward a Theology of Liberation,” in Alfred Hennessey, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary Reader* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 73.

¹² *Ibid.*, 63.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, “Toward Wholeness and Liberation,” In *Essex Conversations* (p. 30). Boston: Skinner House Books.

Our ancestors centered an individual right - each person's intellectual and religious freedom – the liberationists centered a collective responsibility for the physical well-being of the most marginalized among us.

Of course it's not either/or. But our core affects how we see the world, what we cling most tightly to, and what fears are most likely to drive us.

Religions change over time. And our liberal faith is becoming more liberationist. We're increasingly trying to center those who have been in the margins, with all of the particular context, and all of the visions of freedom.

We see this in the increased visible denominational support for people marginalized by gender identity, sexuality, race and disability, and in the attempts to increase inclusivity within our congregations. We are, more than we used to, “validating our faith” (to use Cone's language) by our collective response to “less human conditions.”

And we see the liberationist influence in the newly revised Article II of our denominational bylaws – including in the definition of the value of Justice, which is in your order of service (because it's our theme this month), and that reads:

“We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregations, our Association, and society at large.”

The language about the democratic process has been around for a while - that piece is rooted solidly in our liberal heritage. But the rest ... sounds liberationist. It asks us to do something about systemic oppression and to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities – to change ourselves in the direction of a commonly held vision of more human conditions. To really be One.

Like any institutional change that touches our identity, this expansion can be unsettling and (as we saw with desegregation in Chicago) not everyone is on board.

But I've come to trust that our evolving theology is big enough to hold both the individual freedom of the mind and a collective centering of the physical freedom of all. Even when those two are in tension.

So what does justice mean for us today? I trust it will continue to mean supporting individual and small group action. And I trust it will continue to mean showing up to protest or protect, or witness in solidarity. This congregation has a proud tradition of being home to people who show up through advocacy and civil disobedience – there are and will be more opportunities for that. And I trust justice will also mean transforming ourselves, and our communities, and paying attention to our participation in the systems that create injustice.

And ... continuing to learn to prioritize both the freedom of the mind and a collective responsibility for all of us passing from less human to more human conditions.

On this day, two weeks before an election that has most of us kind of stressed, I just spent 16 minutes preaching a somewhat academic sermon that pokes at our identity in perhaps uncomfortable ways. Why would I do that?

The first reason is because whatever happens with this election, there is a lot of physical unfreedom. And when we find ways to center those concerns we have much to offer. Especially a congregation like this one with a history of embracing legislative advocacy. We talked about

this at the start-up workshop two weeks ago. You've done good work in the past; you're needed now.

The second reason is because I'm a transitional minister. Poking at things is kind of my job.

But the main reason is that one of the most powerful things this congregation has to offer you in this challenging time (that won't end on November 5) is the solace of collective action for physical freedom. Action that connects us to one another and what matters, and that creates and sustains hope. This is how we endure. Some of that action might involve taking a position together that maybe we don't all agree with. And some of that action is the really hard stuff that's not out there – it's in here. It's the work of ever more becoming the kind of welcoming, inclusive, multicultural community that the world – and we - desperately need. Jealously guarding our individual intellectual freedom is not (by itself) going to help us endure or keep us relevant or comfort you in the days to come.

Intellectual freedom will always matter to Unitarian Universalists. But there may be a larger purpose, in the ways this faith calls us to act together in response to less human conditions.

My invitation is to notice when that commitment to our personal intellectual freedom arises. And then, perhaps ask ... Is it getting in the way of our banding together in support of someone's physical freedom? Is it getting in the way of our becoming ever more a multicultural Beloved Community? If so, what (if anything) do we want to do about that?

Justice can be big enough to hold it all.

And we – today's keepers of a faith that can change people, and the world – can keep working to serve that bigger justice. Together. We can be one.

May it be so.

Amen.