

The Arc of the Moral Universe
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
January 15, 2017
the birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Readings

from the writing of the Persian Sufi poet Saadi (1213-1291)

To worship God is nothing other than to serve the people. It does not need rosaries, prayer carpets, or robes. All peoples are members of the same body, created from one essence. If fate brings suffering to one member the others cannot stay at rest.

from 1 Corinthians 12:

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves^[a] or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

from the writings of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

*

As I like to say to the people in Montgomery: “The tension in this city is not between white people and Negro people. The tension is, at bottom, between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness.”

*

Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.

*

Everybody wishes to love and to be loved. He who feels that he is not loved feels that he does not count. Much has happened in the modern world to make men feel that they do not belong.

*

“I” cannot reach fulfillment without “thou.” The self cannot be self without other selves. Self-concern without other-concern is like a tributary that has no outward flow to the ocean.

Sermon

In the early 1850s the Unitarian abolitionist Rev. Theodore Parker preached this:

Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my

eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.

Things refuse to be mismanaged long. Jefferson trembled when he thought of slavery and remembered that God is just. Ere long all America will tremble.

Well, as we know, Martin Luther King, Jr. drew on Parker's words and turned it into the memorable line we heard earlier, and have often heard:

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

Now, in a dark and difficult time – and many fear that we are indeed entering such a time right now – one can't be sure... at least I don't find myself sure. Sure of what? Not only whether the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice, but whether there even is such a thing as a moral universe.

But then I think of the time Theodore Parker was preaching and writing and working on behalf not only of abolition but of just about every reform movement of his era. The 1850s: Millions of fellow human beings still enslaved in our nation, as we became more deeply divided with each passing year, edging towards the cataclysm of the Civil War.

Even so... Parker saw the arc of the moral universe bending towards justice.

Then I think of Martin Luther King's time almost exactly a century later: "separate but equal" still the rule of the day in the south, discrimination and Jim Crow everywhere in our land, Vietnam...

Yet Dr. King too affirmed this arc of a moral universe bending towards justice.

Sometimes when I've preached this theme I make what seems to me to be the necessary point that this moral arc does not bend by itself, doesn't bend unless someone is doing the bending. And however one might understand their words, both Parker and King knew this and they lived and breathed this bending.

This said, one might well ask at this point: must we assume a "moral universe" in order to decide we are going to work to bend that arc of justice? Or could we just as well assume a morally neutral universe and choose to bend the neutral arc in the direction of justice? (Which I suppose would at the same time mean that we are part of creating a moral universe.)

But maybe all this is beside the point. Maybe what is more important has to do with discerning what might be necessary to bend that arc.

So, taking the metaphor another step I get simply this: To bend that arc, you need a place to stand on, firm ground if you will; and it couldn't hurt to have some help, some... many... hands to hold. Ground to stand on and helping hands to hold.

Think again of Dr. King.

His place to stand? His faith, his Bible, the prophets, Jesus.

As a Christian King of course drew much of his inspiration and spiritual sustenance for his work for justice and civil rights from his Christian faith. He often quoted the Hebrew prophets, words like these from the prophet Micah (6:8): "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

And so he lived.

And if “Lord” doesn’t work for *us*, we can understand the idea of the Lord requiring something, as a metaphor for this responding to the imperative of a moral universe (if we do believe we live in a moral universe), or at least responding to our conscience, the still small voice within that knows the difference between right and wrong, fair and unfair, just and unjust.

Then there’s that last line from Micah: “to walk humbly with your God.” For me this is suggestive in the same direction. “To walk humbly with your God”: Aligned with how things are, not trying to push your self-centered agenda, but working for the common good, for the health and well-being of all people, all life.

Here we get echoes from my comments last week about the teachings of the Muslim Sufi tradition. You may recall that I said one way of understanding Sufism is that the goal of the Sufi is to dissolve our self-centered ego into God; or to put it another way, to align ourselves with God and live accordingly; or to put it another way, to align ourselves with how things are and live accordingly; or to draw from another tradition, to align ourselves with the Tao, the Way of life... and live accordingly.

In other words, not to fight with “how things are” but to discover harmony with how things are, thereby bringing more justice and peace and well-being to everyone.

For, as I concluded last week, once you discover and experience this oneness with Reality (capital “R”) sometimes named God, you of course seek to be kind, of course work for justice and peace for all people, of course seek to live in harmony with nature.

But though you don’t need fancy words or theology or philosophy to live this way, to stand on such ground (or in such a field, to use last week’s metaphor from the Sufi poet Rumi)... you do need other people.

As I said a moment ago, though you need spiritual ground of some sort, by whatever name, ground to stand on from which to work at bending that arc, you also need other people. Of course.

Think of images from the Civil Rights movement:

Yes, Rosa Parks was one person, but she was part of a community of faith and non-violent resistance.

And in response to her refusal to give up her seat on the bus, it was not just one person who in turn refused to ride the buses of Montgomery... but a whole community.

Just as it was not just one person sitting in at Woolworths counters, but a community of people.

Not just one person marching in Selma or Memphis, but dozens, hundreds, thousands arm in arm.

Not just one person preaching at the National Mall, the Lincoln Monument at his back, but tens of thousands.

Not just one person singing in church or at a rally or on a march... maybe one taking the lead, but then dozens, hundreds and more taking up the song, often making up fresh lyrics as they stood together or walked together... music so deeply interwoven into the story of the Civil Rights movement and just about every movement for progressive social change.

(And it seems to me we do need singing more than ever as we also in our time walk the walk towards justice.)

So, whether through singing, marching, walking, talking, writing, civilly disobeying... we can be about the work of bending the arc of justice that does not bend by itself, no more in our time as in any time past, bending the arc of justice as Theodore Parker did in his, as Martin Luther King did in his... but neither of them alone, rather with uncounted numbers of women and men... all part of what Dr. King so frequently

reminded us was the *beloved community* that in the end must be the community of all of us together.

One further example to draw us towards a close:

You may recall that when incarcerated in the Birmingham Jail in April of 1963, Martin Luther King wrote a letter to some of his ministerial colleagues who had been counseling and recommending more patience in the struggle for civil rights and voting rights, as well as bringing King to task for being an “outside agitator”.

King’s response? He knew we were all in this together, and he knew that the moral arc did not bend by itself. He wrote (as we heard some of these words earlier in the responsive reading):

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

Then King went on to describe the injustices of that time and place and he named the need to “prod” (which was an understatement) elected leaders who had demonstrated no great hurry in changing things. 340 years of injustice, and African Americans should continue to be patient?

The arc was quite clearly not going to bend by itself.

Really then, my message this morning is quite simple. The universe in which we live may or not itself be “moral” – but maybe the word “moral” is just a metaphor for our intuition of who we truly are, part of one body of life (as both the Christian St. Paul and the Muslim Saadi affirmed), part of a network of mutuality woven into a single garment of destiny, as King put it.

However we name it, this is the ground on which we stand, the field in which we live.

Knowing this, the only thing we need next to do from this solid ground of who we are is to reach out for a hand to hold, so that together we can bend the arc of life towards justice and peace.

May it be so.

Extinguishing our flaming chalice

I’ll close with this brief thought from another distinguished veteran of the Civil Rights movement who died just a couple of years ago. In an interview not too long before he died (on Krista Tippett’s “On Being” radio program), Vincent Harding affirmed that here in the United States we are still a developing nation when it comes to learning to be a multicultural, multi-religious, multiracial democracy. This, since we’ve really only been working at this at all seriously for the last fifty or sixty years.

For me, this thought offers a note of hope... as well as a bridge to my sermon next week: “Keeping On.”

May we indeed keep on.