

**“A Single Garment of Destiny”**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
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**Readings**

from Isaiah 58

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?  
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear;

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,  
and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.

You will be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.

from the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.:

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted. Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that. We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. We shall hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.

## Sermon

We heard Dr. King's words: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

He did *not* say we are caught in several garments of destiny, each of us or each group with its own destiny.

Republican garment, Democratic garment.

American garment, Iranian, Chinese, Russian, European garments.

Christian garment... Jewish garment... Muslim garment...

Buddhist garment... Hindu garment...

Unitarian Universalist garment.

No, he said we are caught in a *single* garment of destiny. And I would add that though this is Dr. King's felicitous turn of phrase, it is an idea, and affirmation, a truth, that is hardly his alone, that is in fact universal:

Whether we call to mind Paul's affirmation that we are all part of one body of Christ... or the Buddhist metaphor of the single, all-encompassing Net of Indra... or the visual reminder of our unity when we see Muslim worshipers from all over the world, every nation, every ethnic background circling the holy Kaaba in Mecca. I could go on. It is clear, in short, that every wisdom and faith tradition affirms the oneness of humanity, the oneness of life. And for the secular spirit, science teaches the same... that we are part of one interdependent fabric of life, of existence, in one evolving cosmos.

But powerful and beautiful and evocative images aside, sometimes the fabric, the single garment sure looks and feels frayed, torn, ragged, or looks like many garments, not one.

What are we to do then? Do any of these beautiful ancient traditions and images or modern insights of science have any guidance for us?

For at this moment in our history it certainly it feels that the American portion of the garment of life is frayed and torn, perhaps we fear beyond repair: violence and death in the halls of the Capitol, members of Congress carrying weapons, shouting on cable news, worse in the dark corners of social media... and however much those of us of white and privileged skin might fear for the future, all the worse fear daily for those of black and brown skin, for the poor, for those whose access to the so-called American dream may seem to have evaporated.

What are we to do? How do we patch the garment... or sew it back together? Or can we?

Is there wisdom of a practical sort that can help us out here? Wisdom that can bring down to earth these other words from Dr. King that "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."

I suppose simply remembering that we *are* part of a single garment of destiny, one body, one interwoven net of life can help to begin with. It is a help for me.

But more practical than that?

Well, then I turn to one of Martin Luther King's inspirations, the life and work and example and method of Mahatma Gandhi – Gandhi of course from a very different culture and religions background (Jain and Hindu), but himself influenced by Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and by Thoreau's essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" (as was Dr. King) – Thoreau

himself influenced not only by the Christianity of his upbringing but also by Hindu and Buddhist scriptures. (Talk about one garment of interwoven traditions...!)

Gandhi.

His method of non-violence resistance he called “satyagraha”. He coined the term from two Sanskrit words: “sat” which means truth and “graha” which means force – so, “truth-force.”

His method assumed that in any conflict neither side had the whole of the truth, but that with non-violent confrontation a higher, fuller truth would emerge. Pie in the sky idealism?

Well, look – the British quit India in response to Gandhi’s movement of satyagraha.

And in our country during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s schools were integrated and voting rights were ensured (at least in law, since the struggle so clearly continues) – all of this and more largely through non-violent resistance and civil disobedience to unjust laws. The American version of satyagraha you might say.

Am I worried for the future of our nation, our democracy, not to mention for the future of life earth as the climate crisis accelerates? You bet. How could one not be worried, given the events of the last two weeks and months before? How could one not be worried, given the resurgence and renewed visibility of racism and systemic racial inequities in our nation? How could one not be worried, given yet another year of record heat on the planet as national environmental regulations have been rolled back?

But Dr. King said we should accept finite disappointment but never give up infinite hope. Poet Denise Levertov affirmed “so much is in bud” – true even in the depths of winter, though we can’t see it.

Well, we hardly need reminding that there has been plenty of “finite disappointment” during the past year and past weeks and days – this is to put it about as mildly as one could.

Yet at the same time, much that can give us hope has also been stirring in this year past – much, indeed, in bud – when it comes to non-violent movements and protests and lobbying for racial justice, for climate justice, to redress inequities of every sort. Perhaps all suggesting that more and more of us *are* remembering and experiencing that we are indeed caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, a single garment of destiny.

And may we remember this: That it is part of our work as people of faith to remind each other and to share with others, with the world, that this “single garment” *is* the reality, this *is* who we are as human beings, as living beings on this small planet circling the sun, circling the galaxy, sailing in cosmos.

All of which helps me to hear and find hope in the words of Pete Seeger’s “Quite Early Morning” to which I often return:

Don't you know it's darkest before the dawn?  
And it's this thought keeps me moving on.

Look, if those among us who are safe and privileged in many ways can’t keep on, then hope truly is lost. But we can, yes we can – often with the inspiring examples of those who have gone before:

I bring to mind Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, Rosa Parks, and all of that great generation of civil rights leaders who faced beatings and bombings... and kept on. If they could keep on, I can surely keep on in my small efforts toward King's "beloved community."

I bring to mind Gandhi and the generation of Indian leaders who faced the guns and jails of the British... and kept on. If they could keep on, I can surely keep on in my modest efforts for peace and equality.

I bring to mind Ruby Bridges, that brave six-year-old girl in 1960 walking through the midst of jeering, things being thrown at her... walking into school as the first Black student to be enrolled in an up until then all white school in New Orleans. She kept walking, never turning back. And now has written a children's book, inviting the next generation: *This is Your Time*.

Well, if six-year-old Ruby Bridges could keep walking, surely I can keep on, surely we can keep on, never turning back.

Because we are, after all, "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

So let's keep on as if we knew it in our bones.

With plenty of finite disappointments... but holding infinite hope. That, in the words of the great Unitarian abolitionist Rev. Theodore Parker, often quoted by Dr. King, the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice...

...when we, together, do the bending.

May it ever be so.

## **Benediction**

We must overcome... hate... greed... violence... racism...

And we will if we heed *these* words of Rev. Dr. King:

"We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead.

We cannot turn back."

So may it be. Amen.