

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

Session Plan

The Legacy of Martin Luther King

Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, ME, Ellis McKeen Small Group,
written by Doug Rooks, Jan. 11, 2021, via Zoom

Chalice Lighting and Opening Words

In the spirit of fellowship and friendship, may the warmth of this flame give us comfort as we take new roads and tread new paths.

Check-in

Introduction:

Living through extraordinary events, it is difficult – probably impossible – to know where things are headed, let alone what they might mean. Yet, somehow, we understand that the onset of the pandemic and, less than three months later, the eruption of protests following the death of George Floyd, are closely connected. They made it unmistakably clear that a culture and society that lacks racial equality also lacks social and economic equality, and that the gaps between our national ideals and our national reality has grown perceptibly over our lifetimes. At this moment, the legacy of Martin Luther King – protester, leader, preacher and martyr – is worth reconsidering.

1903

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”

-- W.E.B. DuBois

1963

“My Dear Fellow Clergyman,

While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas . . . But since I feel that you are men of genuine goodwill and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

“I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth century prophets left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular home town.

“I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. 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 . . . Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country.

-- Martin Luther King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail

2021

“Whoever would have thought that in the state of Georgia we would see the people of Georgia rise up and send an African American man who grew up in public housing, the pastor of this

Ebenezer Baptist Church where Dr. King preached, and a Jewish young man, the son of an immigrant, to the US Senate?”

“You must know that this is a glimpse of God's vision of a more inclusive humanity that embraces all of God's children. I'm just grateful to be a part of this. I'm just grateful because I just want to serve, I just want to be a vessel, I just want to be an instrument, I just want to be a prism of God's glory so that God's glory can shine through me.

“Donald Trump created a lot of trouble for himself. Telling the truth will get you in trouble, yet there can be no transformation without truth. We cannot and we will not change until we confront or are confronted by the sickness of our own situation. That applies to individuals, that applies to institutions, that applies to nations.

“The violence in this world is real, don't be dishonest about that, yet violence does not have the last word. God is still up to something in this world. So don't give in to cynicism, don't give in to fear. Don't give in to hatred, don't give in to bigotry, don't give in to see the xenophobia because violence will never have the last word.”

-- Raphael Warnock, U.S. Senator-elect, Sermon, Sunday, January 10.

Questions for Discussion:

- To what degree is our crisis of democracy a matter of faith, and do “people of faith” have a role in confronting it?
- Martin Luther King was often encouraged to run for public office, but never saw a path for doing so in the segregated South. One of his successors at the Ebenezer Baptist Church has now been elected as the first black Democrat to serve from a state in the former Confederacy. How much has changed, and how much has not?
- When Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, many saw it a victory over racial discrimination in the same way John Kennedy's election in 1960 was a milestone against religious bigotry (Joe Biden will soon become our second Catholic president.) Why did Obama's election not mean what many thought it did?
- Can the Black Lives Matter movement, as a contemporary counterpart of Martin Luther King's preaching, change the way we live in Maine?
- What is our own responsibility, personal and collective, in bringing about positive change?

Closing Words

“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves – and then we will save our country.”

-- Abraham Lincoln, Message to Congress Dec. 1, 1862