

Church as Resistance

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April 7, 1943. A young minister is arrested and imprisoned in Berlin on suspicion of being connected to a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. He is an accomplished preacher and teacher, theologian and writer. Since the Nazi Party's rise to power ten years earlier, he has tirelessly sought to convince fellow Christians to actively resist Nazi persecution of the Jews. Unfortunately, his courageous words are, for the most part, unheeded, and he eventually joins the organized resistance movement. That decision leads to his arrest and imprisonment in April of 1943 and two years later he is executed at the young age of 39.

April 16, 1963, twenty years after the young minister is imprisoned in Berlin, another minister sits in a narrow jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama. Over the past eight years, he has led a nonviolent resistance movement seeking to end racial segregation across the American south. He is also an accomplished preacher and writer and a few months after his release jail he will deliver what is perhaps the greatest speech in the history of his nation. After being released from his jail cell and delivering that famous speech, the young minister will lead the civil rights movement for another five years until he is assassinated, also at the young age of 39.

Although coming from very different backgrounds and having very different life experiences, the journeys of the German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the African American civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr. share a great deal in common. They were both Christian ministers, scholars, and activists. They were both thrust into the leadership of movements that opposed powerful forces rooted in hatred, oppression, and violence. And they both articulated and courageously acted on a vision of religion and the church that demanded resistance to an unjust status quo rather than the passivity that so often characterizes religious communities who, as Dr. King said in our reading, prefer to "remain silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows."

"Resistance" is certainly a word one hears a great deal in Unitarian Universalism these days and there can be little doubt that the results of last November's election were a galvanizing moment for a many in our faith. But the question I want to ask this morning is this: Is a religious community's responsibility to resist simply a product of the results of the latest election or the party affiliation of the current leader or is there something deeper in the fabric in this religion we call Unitarian Universalism that calls us to resist and transform the status quo no matter who occupies the Oval Office or what political party has a majority in Congress?

And answering that question takes us back well before the last election or the latest headlines to the beginnings of Unitarian Universalism almost 500 years ago. Think for a moment about how both sides of our tradition – Unitarianism and Universalism – got started. Unitarianism emerged out of a theological dispute within Christianity about the nature of God – a dispute that led Unitarians to affirm the unity or oneness of both God and all people. That dispute soon turned violent and a number of Unitarians were branded heretics and killed or imprisoned for their beliefs. And it was that experience of religiously inspired oppression and violence that led the Unitarian side of our tradition to embrace freedom of conscience and choice as its core religious value and to resist all efforts to deny that freedom not only to Unitarians but to all people.

The Universalists began in somewhat similar fashion. Rejecting the theology of Calvinism which saw God as a harsh judge who divides human beings into the saved and the unsaved, the Universalists instead viewed God as a loving parent who welcomes and saves all people no matter who they are, where they come from, or what they believe. This led the Universalists to embrace unconditional love as their core religious value – a love that knows no bounds and that is the birthright of the whole human family.

While both the Unitarians and the Universalists could have chosen to remain inwardly focused, from the beginning Unitarian Universalism has never simply been about us. Not that we have sought to dismiss other religions or to insist that everyone should be Unitarian Universalist. In fact, just the opposite has been the case. With few exceptions, Unitarian Universalism has always celebrated religious pluralism and freedom of conscience, and has resisted all efforts to impose one religious vision or creed on society as a whole.

But our commitment to religious freedom and pluralism has never been a justification for remaining passive in the face of injustice or to remaining silent behind the safety of stained glass windows. Think for a moment about the Unitarians and Universalists who resisted slavery, who struggled for the rights of women, who stood courageously against war, who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, and who marched for civil rights and marriage equality. In one critical moment after another, Unitarian Universalists have answered the call to struggle for a more just and peaceful world.

There can be little doubt that resistance is indeed built into the very fabric of Unitarian Universalism and that we find ourselves living in one of those critical moments when we must resist. I can't remember a time when hate, fear, and exclusion have played such a prominent role in public life. And, as is so often the case, that hatred and exclusion are being directed at those who are most marginalized by society – people of color, immigrants, religious minorities, women, the LGBTQ community, and so many others.

But as Dr. King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and so many of our Unitarian Universalist forebears have made clear, in times like these people of faith have a moral responsibility to say “enough!” We have a responsibility to resist those voices calling us to hate our neighbor rather than loving and welcoming her. We have a responsibility to resist those voices calling us to care only about ourselves and our privilege while ignoring the oppression and suffering of others. And we have a responsibility to resist those voices calling us to let bitterness and resentment be our guides rather than love and compassion.

So what does resistance mean for a community like the Unitarian Universalist Church of Akron? First and foremost, it means that we must always be a community of love and welcome for all, a community in which people always know that whoever they are and wherever they have come from, they are welcome here. You don't have to be anyone or anything other than yourself to be cherished and valued in this community. That's the kind of love that is the doctrine of this church!

A community of resistance is also a place where people can find healing and comfort amid the voices of anger and cynicism, a community where the spirit and the heart can find peace, rest, and renewal. In the struggle for justice we can easily lose sight of just how important it is to attend to our own wellbeing and to create spaces for peace and silence in our lives. If people of faith are to resist what's going on out there, we must give ourselves permission to find peace in here (community) and in here (the heart).

And, finally, we must follow Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr's example by having the courage to resist an unjust status quo. This congregation must expand our existing social action programs and build partnerships for justice in our local community and beyond. We must launch a new stewardship for the earth ministry so that we can do our part both as individuals and as a congregation to prevent an impending climate catastrophe. And we must be willing to show up and to speak out with boldness and courage whenever and wherever freedom and justice are threatened by the forces of hate and intolerance.

And resistance most certainly requires that we take risks, as both Bonhoeffer and King did. As many of you know, last April the UU Church of Akron declared itself to be a sanctuary and for the last month, we have had a wonderful family living here at the church. Of course, being a sanctuary means we are defying the law and taking a risk. But as Dr. King said so powerfully in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” there are times when communities of faith and conscience must resist and, yes, even break unjust laws, which he defined as laws that degrade and damage human personality and human dignity. In similar fashion, Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued that there are times when the church is required not simply to offer comfort to the victims of injustice but also, in his words, “to jam a spoke in the wheel” of injustice by actively defying those forces perpetuating it.

I simply want to say that although we have so much more to do here at the UU Church of Akron, I have never been more proud to be a Unitarian Universalist and a Unitarian Universalist minister. By offering sanctuary we are indeed resisting an unjust system and we are truly jamming a spoke in the wheel of a broken immigration system. And I am pleased to report that our example is inspiring other congregations in Ohio and across the country to become sanctuaries and just two days ago I spoke to a leader from a UU church in the western part of the state that is considering offering sanctuary to a family later this month.

And that is truly the power of resistance. One congregation in Fairlawn, Ohio offering sanctuary is not enough to transform a broken system. But what if one congregation becomes 10, and then 100, and then 1,000, and then 10,000 congregations offering sanctuary? What a powerful force for change that would be – a force that I believe would transform a broken system and move our country in the direction of love and justice for all, not simply for those who are white, privileged, and native born.

There is so much work to be done and so much more good

that this congregation can do. After the service I hope all of you will join us in Hannah Hall for the Ministries Fair and for the kick-off of our annual stewardship campaign. At the Ministries Fair you will find leaders representing many of our programs and ministries who will be available to tell you about how you can get involved and help this congregation to live its core values of freedom, justice, and dignity for all people and for this planet.

We also need your financial support so I hope you will

stop by the Stewardship tables and make a generous financial commitment to the church. The theme of this year's stewardship campaign is "Now is the Time" and with the exciting and life-changing ministry the church is doing, now is most certainly the time for all of us to make a generous pledge to the UU Church of Akron. The simple truth is resistance takes money and we need each and every one of you to make the most generous pledge you possibly can. If you made a pledge last year, we need you to increase it substantially. Carol and I are increasing our pledge by 15% and I hope many of you will increase your pledges by an even higher percentage. And if you have never made a pledge to this congregation or to any congregation, now is most assuredly the time to make that commitment. If you give generously today, just imagine the families we can help, the spirits we can nourish, the lives we can touch, the meals we can serve, the gardens we can grow, and the souls we can welcome into this community of unconditional love and freedom for all. Now is truly the time!

On the night before he was assassinated, Dr. King delivered his famous "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech. While most remember that speech for what seemed to be Dr. King's premonition of his impending death, earlier in the speech Dr. King offers a powerful interpretation of one of Jesus' most famous parables. I'm sure many of you remember the Parable of the Good Samaritan in which Jesus tells the story of a man who is robbed and left to die along the side of a road. Two religious officials come along but they don't stop to help the injured man. Then, a Samaritan, a man who himself lives on the margins of society, comes down the road and stops to help the injured man.

In his retelling of the story, Dr. King speculates as to why the first two men didn't stop. Perhaps they were worried about violating a religious law or maybe they were in a hurry to get to an important meeting. Dr. King eventually rejects these explanations and concludes instead that the two men didn't stop because they were afraid. Perhaps they were afraid that the injured man was faking and that he intended to harm them. Or perhaps they thought the robbers might still be around. In any case, when the two religious officials saw the injured man, the only question they asked themselves was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?"

But then along came the Good Samaritan and he reversed the question. Rather than focusing only on himself, the Good Samaritan simply asked, "If I do not stop to help this man in need, what will happen him?"

And that's the question before all of us today and the question I hope you will consider as you make your pledge and volunteer your time and talents in Hannah Hall. If we as a community of faith do not do all that we can to resist the forces of hatred and injustice and do not do all that we

can to help the marginalized, the oppressed, and all who are being made to feel that their lives don't matter, what will happen to them? That's the question. That's the challenge before all of us. How will I, how will you, how will we respond?