

“Dreams That Bind Us Together”
Sermon, Sunday, January 17, 2010
Second Congregational Society UU, Concord, NH.
Rev. Olivia Holmes

Last week I spoke about how much it meant to each of who was able to do so to stand on the side of love with our children at Concord High School. I spoke about how we struggled with the question of whether witnessing the Topeka Protest at the school, standing in solidarity with our children, was the right thing to do or not. And I pointed to John Warner’s hard observation that had there been 20 Topeka protesters and 6 of us, the outcome could have been very different. Today I want to speak about someone who made the same decision we made, back in 1965, for whom the outcome was very different. We must know the risks of standing on the side of love and decide, over and over again, what is right for us.

His name is James Reeb. He was a devout Christian as a child; believing Christ had died for his sins, and that his work in the world would be to carry forth the good news of salvation. He spent the rest of his life working out what this commitment meant: what is salvation, and how am I to carry the news into the world. I think that in the end salvation meant to him:

- a. compassion
- b. honoring the inherent worth and dignity of every person
- c. striving for the integrity that resides in a correspondence between words, deeds, and faith.

In high school James Reeb defended the need of the poorest of the poor for help against the arguments of his teacher and most of his classmates that they just hadn’t tried hard enough.

Born profoundly cross-eyed, Jim was wearing glasses by the time he was 18 months old. He was repeatedly desperately ill for several years as a child. He knew well what it felt like to be excluded and ridiculed simply because you were different...funny looking, or not as strong as the rest.

In his late 20s, Jim became a chaplain at a Philadelphia hospital. There he encountered the wrath and moralizing vindictiveness of hospital staff at a 16-year-old girl, unmarried, giving birth to her 4th child. The girl believed she probably would get pregnant again. The staff deemed her irresponsible. Jim asked what kind of a society could create such a girl, with such an attitude toward her own life, and he preached for tolerance and acceptance.

As a director of youth programs at a Philadelphia YMCA, he defended a group of teenage black boys who had killed a Korean student at U Penn. Against a dominant social pressure to execute these teens, Jim argued that execution would “only encourage the community to ignore its share of responsibility.” Jim believed the execution was vindictive, when what was needed was “lifting the burden of tribulation and anguish.” So Jim set up a program to affirm and guide pre-teenage children headed for delinquency.

Ultimately, Jim became a Unitarian Universalist minister, because he found our faith compatible with his faith in our human dignity, our need for compassion, and our utter and complete interdependence. He served our church, well, our cathedral, if we have one, in Washington, DC., until his faith called him out of the church and into community.

In 1964 he began working for the American Friends Service Committee in Roxbury, MA. My own father grew up there. It's a tough place to grow up; impoverished, undereducated, underemployed folk live there with thugs and drug dealers. Jim's goal was building up a community of hope and trust that would honor the worth and dignity of every individual. Jim had taken a big pay cut to follow his faith from church to community...to follow the religion of his heart. So he and his wife, Marie, had agreed to cancel both his life and his health insurance when they moved.

Sunday the 7th of March, 1965, was Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama. It was the day Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to begin a peaceful march along Route 80 from Selma to Montgomery, 50 miles away, to bring national attention to the struggle of Alabama's black people to win the right to vote.

Dr. King, a few whites, and about 650 blacks began their march that Sunday at the Brown Chapel in Selma. They had only gotten to the far side of the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma when they were stopped by a solid line of State police, standing shoulder to shoulder across the highway, three deep, equipped with billy clubs, side arms, and gas masks. The police ordered the marchers to stop. They stopped. Then the police attacked. Seventeen people were in the hospital that night as Jim and Marie watched the brutality along with most of America on television newscasts. On Monday morning Dr. King put out a call to clergy all across the country...come to Selma. Stand with us. Walk with us as we try again, tomorrow, Tuesday, March 9th.

Jim called Virgil Wood of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, of which he was a member, before he made up his mind. Virgil told him he had to go. Virgil said, "You have to go to see what it's like to protest peacefully in the South. You have to go to stand with the Negro, to share the suffering the Negroes have to endure. You have to go because you and your principles are needed here."

Jim and Marie talked it over. They were well aware of the danger. Marie said, "You should go." He went. On Monday, March 8th, he got on a plane, headed for Selma.

Dr. King and the SCLC leaders spent most of Monday figuring out what to do. Judge Johnson had ruled that he would not give them an injunction against the police without a hearing, which he scheduled for Thursday. He advised King to call off the march. King struggled...he wanted no more bloodshed; but to call off the march would have been seen as a lack of leadership.

LeRoy Collins, representing President Lyndon Baines Johnson, proposed the plan that was followed in the end...they would march to the exact spot on the far side of the bridge where they had been brutalized two days before. They would stop, and then they would return to the chapel.

It was this march that Jim Reeb shared, down Sylvan Street to Water St., past City Hall and across the bridge, where the same wall of police waited. The march started at 3pm and was over by 4. Having prayed on the spot where they were stopped, the marchers...including UU ministers from all over the country...turned around and walked peaceably back to Brown Chapel. At 5:30 they broke up for dinner, planning to convene for another meeting later in the evening.

Jim joined 2 UU clergy colleagues for supper: Rev. Clark Olsen who had flown in from Berkeley, CA., and Rev. Orloff Miller, who had flown in from Boston. Clark and I worked together on long range planning for the UUA Board of Trustees. Orloff and I led worship services together in St. Petersburg and Moscow back in 1995. These men are my friends.

Jim, Clark, and Orloff waited a long time to get a table at Walker's Café...the only café in the neighborhood where blacks could eat and where the whites who had come to Selma in support of them were welcome. It was about 7:30 when the 3 UU colleagues finished their chicken and mashed potatoes and gravy and headed back to the chapel.

Jim was walking on the outside, Orloff in the middle, and Clark on the inside. They had only taken a few steps when they saw 3 white men coming toward them from across the street and from behind them. One of the men yelled, "Hey Niggers," and yelled again. The three UU ministers quickened their pace, and Clark turned to look over his shoulder. Clark saw the leader of the group take a huge swing with a heavy stick. The stick connected full force with Jim Reeb's left temple, and Jim went down. Orloff dropped to the ground where one of the men began kicking him while another attacked Clark with his fists. After a final kick to Jim, the 3 attackers left. Clark estimates it was all over in 30 seconds. What happened next was a 4 ½ hour ordeal struggling to get the severely injured Jim Reeb to a hospital.

Clark and Orloff lifted and supported him as they struggled to the SCLC office. An ambulance was called from a Negro Funeral Home. No white ambulance would come for whites supporting the Negro cause. The Negro infirmary in Selma didn't have the equipment Jim needed...he'd have to be taken to Birmingham. That meant that both an escort and a hospital deposit were needed.

The police came. They would only escort the ambulance to the edge of town. So the local doctor and Orloff headed off to get the doctor's car and the deposit slip. The clock was ticking. Once on the road the ambulance had a flat tire. It wasn't safe to change it on the road. So they turned back, looking for a telephone where it would be safe to call for and to wait for help. They finally found one. Several cars full of white men stopped and stared while the ambulance was waiting for help, but the 3 whites and 3 blacks inside were not harmed.

Finally a second Negro ambulance arrived...along with the Selma Police. Clark and Orloff were grilled by the police, who again refused to escort them. Finally they were on their way...with 90 miles to go. Clark and Orloff had to hold the stretcher with Jim on it on their knees for the entire trip...the ambulance brackets were broken.

Jim was rushed into surgery as soon as they got to the hospital. His skull was crushed and he had a massive blood clot. He never made it out of the recovery room. Though he was still alive when Marie and his father got there later that day, Wednesday, he was already clinically dead, kept alive only by machines.

While Marie and Jim's dad struggled with the decision they knew they would have to make, Dr. King was struggling with what to do back in Selma. By now the whole nation and indeed the whole world had heard that Jim Reeb was in critical condition. There was escalating agitation among the protesters to meet violence and brutality with violence; to which King responded "You can't push the philosophy of Jesus with the methods of Caesar."

Ultimately they decided to march to the Selma Courthouse...symbol of oppression that it was...and to hold vigil wherever they were when the police stopped them, which the police did. Throughout Wednesday night and all day Thursday, in the drizzle and in the rain they knelt or sat or stood all along the street from the Chapel to the Courthouse, waiting for news of Jim.

Jim Reeb died at 7pm on Thursday night. President Johnson sent a private jet to take Jim's ashes and his family home to Roxbury. He also sent Lee White to represent him at Jim's memorial service, held at All Souls Church in Washington. The President declared the events in Selma "an American tragedy," which, he said, should strengthen people's determination "to bring full and equal and exact justice to all of our people." White made it clear that Jim's death had influenced the President to "lay the voting rights bill before a special session of Congress the following Monday evening."

That bill prohibited states from imposing any "voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice, or procedure ... to deny or abridge the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color. The bill passed the Senate in May, 1965, by a vote of seventy-seven to nineteen. After five weeks of debate, it was finally passed in the House of Representatives on July 9. On August 6th President Johnson signed the Act into law. Both Dr. King and Rosa Parks witnessed the signing. In 2006, President George W. Bush signed a 25-year extension to the bill.

Should we witness for our principles, for right, justice, equality the inherent dignity of every person? Yes, of course we should. And as Wayne Frey said, so often last Sunday, "Ahh, that's just it, why don't we? Why don't we?" We don't because it's scary; we could be hurt, we could be killed for standing up for what we believe. Yet each one of us, in our own way and in our own time, can bend for justice.

In the words of Dr. King, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny...hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that." In this sacred moment, when we remember these two men, let us pray, ever and always, to stand on the side of love.

