



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

The Network of Mutuality

The Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

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“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.” Martin Luther King, Jr.

As Louis Baldwin said “(King) detected that there were many forces reshaping the world, such as politics and religion, but he wanted to live in a world in which spiritual values were held in higher esteem than the military-industrial complex. King argued that war, like racism and the neglect of the poor and marginalized, constituted “a spiritual problem” that required spiritual leadership and a conscious and persistent movement toward “spiritual ends,” especially if humans were to live in what he termed “a war-less world.” Thus, he urged humans to stop paying “lip service to the spiritual life,” and he turned to “the weapons of the spirit” in an effort to achieve global justice and peace.” (In an “Inescapable Network of Mutuality:” Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Globalization of an Ethical Ideal”)

Dr. King spoke those words near the very end of his life. It was at a time when we were at war in Vietnam and he saw how the war took money away from poor people who needed it most. Dr. King saw the world as inter-connected. When we were at war with the Vietnamese people we were tearing at our goodness. The single garment of destiny, that he spoke of meant that we are supposed to treat one another, even our enemies with the same love as anyone else. This is the truth: we all deserve to be cared for and valued. And what affects one, affects all.

Dr. King liked to tell the story of the Good Samaritan in the bible. Who remembers the story of the Good Samaritan? A young lawyer, a Hebrew Scholar concerned with Torah asks Jesus “Who is my neighbor?” to which Jesus replies: A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and left him half dead by the side of the road. Now by chance a priest was going down that road and when he saw the beaten man passed by him on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed him by on the other side of the road. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed came to where he was and when he saw him, he had compassion and went to him, bound up his wounds,

pouring on oil and wine, then set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn and took care of him...And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper saying "Take care of this man and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I return". Which of these three, Jesus asked, the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan, proved neighbor to the man who fell among robbers? And the lawyer replied "The Samaritan, the one who showed mercy upon him"

To get the full impact of this story we need to understand what this story meant. Jesus' choice of characters in this parable was intentional and courageous to his first century audience. The priest, the very image of purity for Jews, was charged with upholding the law. And part of that law included mercy and compassion. It was the height of hypocrisy to suggest that a priest would not help the fallen. But perhaps, said the Jews of his time, the priest was late for the temple. Well what about the Levite? Well, the Levites were one the 12 tribes of Israel who traditionally acted as subordinate priests and functionaries in the temple. They cleaned up after the slaughter. So they were a little less holy than the priest but still pretty pious and bound by law, a common man with divine intentions. But the Levite passes by the fallen man as well. So along comes the Samaritan.

Now what made this story so very outrageous is that the Jews were the enemies of the Samaritans. Samara was a little country between the northern and southern halves of Israel not too unlike Palestine today. Samara retained the "mixed blood" of Jews and Babylonians who had intermarried. It was, in Jewish eyes, a pigsty of half breeds. This would be the equivalent to any of us, helping out a fighter for ISIS. So for a Samaritan, a stranger, to help a fallen Jew, while his fellow Jews passed him by was outrageous. Not only was it unclean, it was an insult to Judaism. But then again Jesus wasn't known for being subtle.

This story illustrates what Dr. King was trying to say. Whenever we look at someone other than us, from another part of the world, someone who is a different color, someone who doesn't speak our language, someone who is poor and homeless, someone who doesn't vote like we do as our enemy, as someone who doesn't deserve our love, than we are tearing at our garment of destiny, we are not being faithful Unitarian Universalists.

All of us have crossed the street to avoid the panhandler. I would hope that we are mature enough to have a conscience that moves us towards pity. The meaning I am looking for here is actually a deeper one. Why was it that Jesus picked an alien, a real stranger in his midst, to help the fallen? What was he trying to say? I believe the deeper point is this: helping those we know may not be enough, the true calling

to our humanity is to help those who are not like us, the Samaritan helping the Jew, the American helping the African, the Democrat helping the Republican, the Unitarian Universalist helping the Christian. Not agreeing with, but helping. I believe the deeper point to this parable is that we are all wrapped up in mutuality, invited to the feast of life but it's up to the rest of us to be sure there is room at the table, better yet that there is a warm garment to put over the shoulders of those who are cold and bring them to the table.

Would any of us be willing to take the homeless to the nearest hotel and put them up with breakfast in the morning and put it on your Visa? I sometimes do this for people in need. Some of you have gone to extraordinary lengths to help those you don't even know. It feels right. You get double green stamps on the Karma scoreboard for helping. Who feels good about that? Give me an 'Amen!' Praise be.

"Bridging "the social and economic gulf between the haves and the have nots of the world" was central to King's vision of a global beloved community or "a worldwide fellowship." But the real challenge involved educating the white world and bringing it to a true understanding of its role in compensating for the evils of its history, past and present." (Ibid Baldwin et al)

Dr. King said "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. We shall hew out of a mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

What did he mean by that? What he meant by that is that as long as someone is suffering somewhere, we are not complete. That we must work for justice always, even in some small way. Think about that. We don't see very much suffering here in Connecticut, do we? But it is there. Go down to the Social Security Office in Bridgeport and you will see what I am talking about; poor people trying to find a way to keep food on the table and pay the rent.

That is why our congregation here and all of us in it are so important to becoming better people. We start by learning here two great truths:

1. The first is that we all have inherent worth and dignity. This is our first principle. All people are worthy. They may do bad things but all are worthy. This is what makes us part of the network, the web of being a person means.

And the second truth is this:

2. We are all connected to one another because we are all people. Mutuality is the care for someone not like you. Like the Youth Group discovered last week when they went out to serve the homeless under the bridge in Bridgeport. Am I right teens? Didn't you feel the connection. The irony that the homeless are under a bridge in Bridgeport, just underscores the point.

These two truths that all people have worth and that all of us are connected simply by being alive (Sing The Circle of Life) is what a Network of Mutuality really means.

Our job this year, all of us, kids, youth and adults, young and old, is to reach out to somebody other than yourself. I am challenging you before the 2020 is done to take on some service project and then send me an email or a text or post it on Instagram and tell us about what you did to strengthen our Network of Mutuality. Who will do that this year? Raise your hand. Listen the Teens are already one up on you all. We will be making those opportunities available. Just stay tuned. Beardsley School, Mercy Learning Center, Helping Hands with Homeless in Bridgeport, helping refugees.

This is where we are going to start to take back our country in 2020. Not just stay at home and wring our hands and tune in to MSNBC for all the latest on the apocalypse, but to start to do something. Later there will opportunities to help with voter turnout.

In Newnan, GA southwest of Atlanta, a growing town of 40,00 with an increasingly diverse population, a Neo Nazi group held a rally last year expecting hundreds to show up in what they thought was a mostly white town. Only two people from the town showed up and hundreds more came to protest their hatred. Then civic leaders commissioned Mary Beth Mehaan, a photographer to create 17 poster size portraits of the diverse population of the town: 17 large-scale banner portraits, images of the ordinary people who make up Newnan:

“They hang from the perches of brick buildings around downtown. There's Helen Berry, an African-American woman who for years worked at a sewing factory. Wiley Driver, a white worker who folded and packed blankets at a local mill before his death in 2017. Jineet Blanco, a waitress who arrived in Newnan carrying her Mexican traditions and dreams. And then there were the Shah sisters. A portrait of Aatika and Zahraw Shah wearing hijabs was displayed on the side of an empty building in downtown Newnan. The sisters were born in Georgia and had lived in

Newnan since 2012, after they moved from Athens, Ga. They attended a local high school in the county. Their father, an engineer, moved to the United States from Pakistan, as did their mother.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/19/us/newnan-art-georgia-race.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>

There were posts about how Muslims weren't welcome and dozens of comments. And then? Then something amazing happened, thousands and thousands of posts supporting the Shahs as part of the new America. Rev. Jimmy Paterson, the white Baptist minister in town, who had a portrait alongside his African American colleague at the AME church, held a rally in support of the portraits and the Muslims. As he put it: My family owned enslaved Africans, for which I am ashamed, we need to all be part of God's family.

So friends, even if it hard to find the rock of hope in the mountain of despair, take heart, it is there and we are the people called to hold it up. Amen.