

**We Are the Keepers of the Dream**  
**Rev. Dr. Matt Tittle**  
**Bay Area UU Church**  
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Have you ever been to a historic site and tried to evoke some sense of the incredible events that took place there, or to imagine standing next to the people who made that history?

I have been to Jerusalem where Jesus walked, and have looked upon the hill where he was supposedly crucified, but he was not there....

I have traveled by sea around the Mediterranean, as the Apostle Paul did, but I never saw him....

I have stood many times on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial where Dr. King stood and spoke of his dream, but Dr. King was gone and his words were no longer audible....

I've been to the sacred ground of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but all was calm except for the tears that flowed without ceasing, mine included, from those who realized the inhumanity of what happened there only 60 years ago....

I have stood in the very spot where, and touched the desk at which, Pushkin composed his greatest poetry. I have drunk vodka in the same bars frequented by Fyodor Dostoevsky, but they and their many characters of existential despair were only spirits in our midst....

I've been to the train station in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa where Mahatma Gandhi was ejected from the train because of the color of his skin and thereby embarked on his path of nonviolence, but Gandhi was not being ejected that day. I went to the Parliament building a few blocks away where he later protested, but again he was absent....

I have been to so many of the historic sites in our own country where blood was shed, where freedom was won, where transformational assemblies occurred, where prophetic words were spoken, and where generations were inspired, but there was no one to ask about what had really happened there....

I received my seminary diploma from the writing desk of nineteenth-century Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker, and wondered whether it was the very same where his pistol once lay. The pistol he used to protect runaway slaves in the underground railroad. Neither Parker, the pistol, nor the prophetic words that he penned at that desk were there—only the diplomas of a new crop of preachers, and so I could not ask....

Every age has its watershed moments, its messengers, its prophets, its historic events, but they are all gone in this moment. We are now the keepers of their dreams.

This weekend we remember a modern day prophet who explained his dream time and again and paid the ultimate price for preaching the same message of love and compassion that the prophets before him had preached and which had cost them their lives.

As we honor Dr. King by keeping his timeless words alive because even his dreams have not yet been completely realized, we need to look beyond the man, to the message. Once we have done this, we need to look even beyond the message—beyond the very words he spoke—to the self-evident truth and meaning behind them.

Although I find Martin Luther King Jr's words to be prophetic and timeless, the fact that he was the one who said them is actually irrelevant. Blasphemous as it will sound to some, the fact that Jesus was the one who said what he did is also irrelevant. They were both great prophets and messengers of truth and meaning, but they wanted us to focus on the message, not the man, not even the specific words. I am not a Christian, or a Buddhist, or a Mohammedan, as Muslims were once called, or a Baha'i, or a Zoroastrian, or a Kingian, or a Gandhian, because these were all simply messengers, transient and unimportant lest we endeavor only to massage our collective human egos. What are permanent are their dreams, their self-evident truths that we enjoy certain inalienable rights, their messages of compassion and love for *all* people, their way of nonviolence. These messengers are gone, and their words are only audible if we repeat them. But their dreams remain strong, and are still being fulfilled. We are now the keepers of the dreams.

Dr. King also used the words and the dreams of those who preceded him. He was fond of at least one particular quote from Rev. Theodore Parker, whose pistol I mentioned a moment ago. That quote is, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."<sup>1</sup> As was often the case when Dr. King was quoting scripture or some other source, he never actually said, as far as I know, "That great Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker, who kept a pistol at his desk while he facilitated the liberation of slaves decades before abolition, once said 'the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.'" Neither did Dr. King ever claim these words as his own. He simply carried on the dream.

Dr King was very familiar with and studied the principles and doctrines of Unitarianism and Universalism. He addressed the Universalist Church of America in the 1950s and the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in the 1960s. His doctoral dissertation compared the theologies of liberal German theologian, Paul Tillich, and Unitarian minister, Henry Nelson Wieman. I'm confident that Dr. King knew Theodore Parker's work. By the way, Parker's actual words, from a sermon titled *Justice and the Conscience*, published in a book of sermons in 1853, were:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.<sup>2</sup>

This quote is critically important in understanding Parker's and King's dreams. But I also read in it the very essence of liberal religious thought, of which both men were masters, but which neither created nor squandered. The key here is not in the morality of the universe or in the justice toward which it supposedly bends, but in the arc itself.

“I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience.”

You see, Theodore Parker was among the nineteenth-century transcendentalists along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, William Ellery Channing, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, to name a few. Transcendentalism could occupy an entire year of sermons, but in the simplest terms, it embodied the belief that there existed an ideal spiritual state that *transcends* the physical and empirical, and is realized through the intuition rather than the doctrines of established religions.

“I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience.”

Specifically, the transcendentalists rejected using scripture as an ultimate source of authority, which had become the dominant Unitarian method of the time. Of course, their religious ancestors had long since rejected the unquestionable authority of the priests in the Catholic Church, and their monopoly on interpreting scripture. In fact, we could argue that any number of historical figures espoused transcendentalism. When Martin Luther declared individual human conscience a source of truth, he literally and figuratively turned religion on its head. We can go even further to Jesus of Nazareth, which is what Parker did.

Parker’s most well known work on this subject was his 1841 sermon, *The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity*.<sup>3</sup> As a result of preaching this heretical sermon at a colleague’s ordination, he was banned from most other colleagues’ pulpits and was all but put on trial for heresy. I guess it beats being burned at the stake, which would have happened 300 years earlier.

What Parker said, and I use my own paraphrase here, “The scribes and sages of ages past have no authority. Their words are as elusive as a summer breeze. We are the keepers of the dream....”

What he actually said about what Jesus said, was this:

Christ says, His word shall never pass away. Yet at first sight nothing seems more fleeting than a word. It is an evanescent impulse of the most fickle element. It leaves no rack where it went through the air. Yet to this, and to this only, did Jesus entrust the truth wherewith he came laden, to the earth; truth for the salvation of the world. He took no pains to perpetuate his thoughts; they were poured forth where occasion found him an audience,—by the side of the lake, or a well; in a cottage, or the temple; in a fisher’s boat or the synagogue of the Jews. He founds no institution as a monument of his words. He appoints no order of men to preserve his bright and glad revelations. He only bids his friends give freely the truth they have freely received. He did not even write his words in a book. With a noble confidence, the result of his abiding faith, he scattered them broadcast on the world, leaving the seed to its own vitality.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus taught in parables and often used seeds as metaphor. He said his words shall never pass away, but that was not because they were the omniscient word of God. It was certainly not because he was painstakingly ensuring they were recorded. It was not even because he was a

messiah. His words remain with us today because they represent universal truths that many before him and many after him had preached and continue to preach. Theodore Parker said that these universal truths were the permanent in religion. Any expressed doctrine coming from a religious institution or particular messenger was transient. Parker might have gotten away with this much, but he went further, attacking directly the notion that scripture is infallible. Heresy indeed, even for the Unitarians of the time. He said:

...the current notions respecting the infallible inspiration of the Bible have no foundation in the Bible itself. Which Evangelist, which Apostle of the New Testament, what Prophet or Psalmist of the Old Testament, ever claims infallible authority for himself or others? Which of them does not in his own writings show that he was finite, and with all his zeal and piety, possessed but a limited inspiration, the bound whereof we can sometimes discover? Did Christ ever demand that men should assent to the doctrines of the Old Testament, credit its stories, and take its poems for histories, and believe equally two accounts that contradict one another? Has he ever told you that all the truths of his religion, all the beauty of a Christian life should be contained in the writings of those men, who, even after his resurrection, expected him to be a Jewish king; of men who were sometimes at variance with one another and misunderstood his divine teachings? Would not those modest writers themselves be confounded at the idolatry we pay them?<sup>5</sup>

By this time, not quite halfway through his ninety-minute sermon, Parker was in deep water. One person's heresy is truly another's orthodoxy. Parker's heresy so far was simple—the message and the messenger are nothing but means for conveying a “great universalism,” as King put it over a century later. But remember, Parker was a Unitarian, not a Universalist. Unitarians were anti-Trinitarians. Parker next took the opportunity to challenge Jesus' divinity, which is what Miguel Servetus had been burned at the stake for doing 300 years earlier.

Another instance of the transitoriness of doctrines, taught as Christian, is found in those which relate to the nature and the authority of Christ. One ancient party has told us that he is the infinite God; another that he is both God and man; a third, that he was a man, the son of Joseph and Mary,--born as we are, tempted like ourselves; inspired, as we may be, if we will pay the price. Each of the former parties believed that its doctrine on this head was infallibly true...<sup>6</sup>

That might have been ok with the Unitarians of his day had he left it at that, but remember, they were still devout and unwavering Christians. Parker, like so many before him, including Jesus of Nazareth, and like so many after him, including Dr. King, relied on his conscience and intuition to divine the arc of the moral universe, the universal truths that he felt called to pass on. I imagine that those who took action against him gained their resolve with these words:

...it seems difficult to conceive any reason, why moral and religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer, any more than the truths of science on that of him who makes them known first or most clearly. It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus...<sup>7</sup>

And later:

...we have made him an idol, have bowed the knees before him, saying "Hail, King of the Jews," called him "Lord, Lord!" but done not the things he said.<sup>8</sup>

if as some early Christians began to do, you take a heathen view, and make him a God, the son of God in a peculiar and exclusive sense—much of the significance of his character are gone.<sup>9</sup>

Parker goes on to say that anything unique about Jesus comes from his humanity. If he had been a God, nothing he did or said or suffered would have been particularly remarkable.

Moses had a dream that all Gods people would be prophets, and so he led the oppressed Hebrews through the wilderness in search of a promised land....

Siddhartha, having been exposed to age and sickness and death, dreamed of attaining a higher consciousness, overcoming the suffering inherent in the world....

Jesus had a dream that the kingdom of heaven was available here and now through deeds of love and compassion—that the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the unjustly persecuted were the blessed ones....

Theodore Parker and the transcendentalists had a dream that the arc of the moral universe was long, but that it bent toward justice. They could not divine it by sight or words, but by the universal truths found only in the conscience....

Martin Luther King Jr. had the same dreams as these great prophets before him. Neither he nor his message were novel or unique. If anything made him great, it was that he had the courage to be the keeper of the dream when it was his turn. Like Jesus before him, the most remarkable aspect of his mortal life was that he risked it, without turning to violence, for a dream of a better life—a life of liberty and happiness; a life with peace, liberty and justice for all people.

Sometimes our dreams are shattered, sometimes they go unfulfilled, sometimes we leave this mortal life before we can see the fruits of our labor, but the dream exists because of our mortality and continues despite that mortality—for now we are the keepers of the dream. The time is ours to carry on a dream of worth and dignity for every person, of justice equity and compassion in human relations, of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, of the goal of world community with peace liberty and justice for all.

If we dream of a world without war, the task is ours. If we want to curb global warming, the task is ours. If we want to end racism, eradicate aids, poverty, and homelessness, the task is ours. If we want equal rights for all loving couples, the task is ours. If we truly want equal rights for women, the task is ours and the time is now.

When you find yourself in a historic place looking for the specters of those who came before you, or listening for some whisper of words spoken in times past, take what courage and inspiration you need from them, but move on. They are not there. You are now making history. It

is our turn and our task. It is our time. “But the hour is late. And the clock of destiny is ticking out. We must act now before it is too late.” We are the keepers of the dream!

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Our God is Marching On,” in Clayborne Carson, ed., *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: IPM/Warner Books, 2001). [Speech given in Montgomery, AL, 25 March 1965. Text also available online at: [http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/Our\\_God\\_is\\_marching\\_on.html](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/Our_God_is_marching_on.html)]

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Parker, “Of Justice and Conscience,” in *Ten Sermons of Religion*, (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, & Company, 1853).

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Parker, “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity,” in Conrad Wright, ed., *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing-Emerson-Parker*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1986). [Sermon delivered May 19, 1841 in Hawes Place Church, Boston, MA]

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 137.