What Would Henry Do?

May 26, 2013

Readings

I

“Law never made men a whit more just [and so it] is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.” Henry David Thoreau.

II

“There are times when you have to obey a call which is the highest of all—the voice of conscience—even though such obedience may cost many a bitter tear, and even more, all that you have held as dear as life itself. For this obedience is the law of our being.” Mohandas Gandhi.

III

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.

“Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.

“[But darkness] cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. [And so] I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.” Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sermon

Henry David Thoreau was born David Henry Thoreau (pronounced Thor-oh, not thor-OH) on July 12, 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts.

We claim Thoreau as a Unitarian “saint” (Saint Henry) because he attended the Unitarian Church in Concord as a child and, as an adult, hung out with Unitarian Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller. But like many Unitarians, then and now, Thoreau was not a “joiner” and rarely set foot in any church.

Thoreau was a philosopher, naturalist, abolitionist, poet, and author, best known for his book, Walden, which chronicled his two-year experiment in living simply in a cabin he built in the woods near Walden Pond.
It was while he was living at Walden that, on July 24th or 25th, 1846, Thoreau ran into Sam Staples, the local tax collector in Concord, who asked him to pay six years of delinquent poll taxes he owed. Thoreau refused because he believed that paying the taxes he owed implicated him in the government’s failure to abolish slavery and waging an unjust war against Mexico.

Thoreau was promptly arrested for failing to pay the taxes the law required him to pay and, like Henry David Bear, spent a night in jail. Legend has it that his friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson visited Thoreau in jail and asked, “Henry, what are you doing in there?” to which Thoreau replied: “Waldo, the question is what are you doing out there?”

Thoreau was released, against his will, from jail the following morning after his aunt paid his fine and the taxes he owed. He later recounted that as he walked from jail through the streets of Concord he realized that, in obeying the call of his conscience, he was more free in jail than the people outside. Thoreau’s night in jail had a strong impact on him and, the following winter, he gave a lecture on “the rights and duties of the individual in relation to government,” in which he asserted that the obligation to obey one’s conscience and to do what he or she believes is right and true and good is greater than one’s duty to obey unjust laws or provide even tacit support for government policies that deny the rights of others. It is, he said, the duty of people of conscience to resist injustice, no matter what the cost.

Thoreau’s lecture was revised and later retitled and published as “An Essay on Civil Disobedience,” which was read by both Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., and provided a touchstone for their development of the philosophy of nonviolent resistance to injustice and oppression.

To quote Dr. King: “In this courageous New Englander’s refusal to pay his taxes and his choice of jail rather than support a war that would spread slavery’s territory into Mexico, I made my first contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, … I became convinced that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. As a result of his writings and personal witness, we are the heirs of a legacy of creative protest [and his teachings] came alive in our civil rights movement—whether expressed through [sit-ins at lunch counters, the bus boycott in Montgomery, or the freedom rides into Alabama and Mississippi which are all] outgrowths of Thoreau’s insistence that evil must be resisted and that no moral [person] can patiently adjust to injustice.”

Now to be honest, there are some things in Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” that I find a bit hard to swallow.

I’m all for marching to the beat of a different drummer, but sometimes Thoreau, like Ralph Waldo Emerson and some modern-day Unitarian Universalists, comes across as an ultra-individualist who not only extols the virtues of individualism and self-reliance but seems to have much less regard for relationships and community.

And there are some passages in “Civil Disobedience” where Thoreau sounds very much like a Libertarian, Tea-Party Republican, or anarchist—which just goes to show you that Libertarians, Republicans, and anarchists as well as liberal Democrats can be “good” Unitarian Universalists.

But it won’t come as any surprise for you to know that I’ve been thinking a lot about civil disobedience, injustice, oppression, Henry David Thoreau, Gandhi, and King during the past three weeks as
I’ve joined hundreds of North Carolinians who have marched, singing and praying, into the Legislative Building on what has come to be known as “Moral Mondays” to protest the legislative agenda that is being pursued by the Republican majority in North Carolina’s General Assembly—an agenda that includes limiting health care for poor and disabled people, stigmatizing immigrants and the poor, reducing unemployment benefits for those who through no fault of their own are unable to find work because of the continuing effects of the economic recession, expanding the presence of concealed weapons in public places, and limiting voting rights.

And I thought about Thoreau, Gandhi, and King as I sat in the Wake County Jail two weeks ago, joining more than 150 others—professors, students, workers, grandmothers, veterans, clergy, people of all races, at least four Unitarian Universalist ministers and a dozen or so members of Unitarian Universalist congregations—who have been arrested because the only way we felt we could make our voices heard was to engage in civil disobedience and not only speak out, but stand up, against injustice.

I suppose it’s true that, like beauty, justice and injustice are “in the eye of the beholder.” And conscience can lead people in many different directions—all of which appear good, right, just, and true to the person whose conscience calls him or her.

It was conscience—that small but insistent voice deep inside every human being—that called Thoreau, Gandhi, and King to speak out, stand up, and fight against injustice. It was conscience that called Unitarian Universalists James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo to go to Selma, even though it cost them their lives. And it was conscience that called me to go to the General Assembly on May 13th—the call of justice that I’ve heard since my days growing up in Alabama during the Civil Rights Movement and as a student during the days of the Vietnam War and women’s liberation movement; a call that I’ve tried to answer with my voice, in my work, and now in my ministry; a call that I couldn’t ignore.

But it was also conscience that led Paul Hill, an ordained Presbyterian minister, to murder Dr. John Britton and his Unitarian Universalist bodyguard, Jim Barrett, in 1994 in Pensacola, Florida because Hill believed that abortion was wrong and that it was both right and necessary to kill doctors who performed abortions.

Although the value of justice is, I believe, rooted deep in the heart of every human being, people will never agree unanimously on what is just or unjust—what is right or wrong, good or evil—in any particular situation. Thoreau was right: Ultimately, each of us has to judge for ourselves what is right and wrong and what justice requires of ourselves, of others, and of our government.

And, yet, justice is not, I believe, simply a matter of individual choice or personal taste, like music or art. Justice is not just about what is good for me or you or “people like us.” As Dr. King said: “An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.”

Justice is about the “common good” and the welfare of society as a whole, not protecting the power or privilege of the few at the expense of the many. It’s about equal opportunity for all. It’s about inclusion, not exclusion. It’s about valuing all people. It’s about allowing every person’s voice to be heard. It’s about making sure that everyone has enough. It’s about protecting the earth that is our home and respecting the billions of plants and animals who share this world with us.
Justice, in the words of the Jewish prophets from Amos and Isaiah to Micah, calls on those who govern—the powerful and the privileged to enact just laws and govern with mercy, to protect the most vulnerable members of society, the poor, the disabled, the marginalized and oppressed, the strangers and immigrants within our midst. Justice, in the words of the rabbi Jesus, is about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting prisoners, and caring for the “least of these” who, in fact, are all our brothers and sisters and children of God, Life, and the Cosmos.

The call of justice is a call to recognize that, in Dr. King’s words, “we are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied together in a single garment of destiny” so that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

It’s a call to recognize that one “who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as one who helps to perpetrate it and that one who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.”

It’s a call to speak out against injustice and let the voice of justice, freedom, equality, and peace be heard. It is a call to speak truth to power.

It’s a call that, to quote my colleague, Rev. Robin Tanner, is not so much a call to civil disobedience as it is a call to “moral obedience.” It’s the call of conscience that can’t be ignored.

It’s a call to stand on the side of love, remembering that justice is what love looks like in public. It’s a call to join together as not only an Army of Justice but as one Army of Love.

It’s a call to recognize that words are not always enough and that, when our words fall on deaf ears, we must stand up and put our bodies where our mouths are. It is a call to make justice real through our actions and deeds as well as our words and creeds. It is a call to do the right thing even if we’re not sure that our words or actions will make a difference.

It’s a call to respond to injustice not with violence, but through nonviolent resistance in the spirit of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King. It is a call to fight for justice, but to always fight with love in our hearts—love for those we oppose as well as those for whom we are fighting, because, in Dr. King’s words, only love can drive out hate, fear, injustice, and war.

It’s a call to act with hope and faith: a faith and hope that, in the words of Theodore Parker and Martin Luther King, the arc of the universe bends toward justice; faith that, in the words of Margaret Meade, a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; the faith and belief of Dr. King that “unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word and that right, even when temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.”

“There are times when we have to obey a call which is the highest of all—the voice of conscience—even though such obedience may cost many a bitter tear, and even more, all that we have held as dear as life itself. For this obedience is the law of our being.”

It was the call of conscience—the call to moral obedience and justice—that led me to go with Tom, Mary, and hundreds of other people to the Legislative Building on May 13th.
I went there in the “third wave” of the Moral Monday protests because I grew up in Alabama in the 1950s and 1960s and saw with my own eyes how injustice and oppression masqueraded as law and order, how the powers that be denied people their human and civil rights—the right to vote and the right to an education, and how when people are knocked to the ground they have no choice but to stand up.

I went because I believe that the legislative agenda that is being pushed by the Republican majority is, in a very real sense, immoral and unjust. I went because I was frustrated and angry and outraged, but I also went with love in my heart.

I went to the General Assembly because I could not be silent or stand on the sidelines. I went because my conscience required me to speak out and stand up. I went because my liberal religious faith required me to stand on the side of love and justice.

I went because my words were not enough. I went because, for me, it was the right thing to do. I went because my conscience would not allow me not to go, even if going meant going to jail like Saint Henry.

It is not for me to tell you what you should believe or think or say or do.

It is not for me to tell you that you should oppose or support cutting health care, expanding gun rights, limiting abortion, requiring voters to obtain identification cards, cutting unemployment benefits, allowing fracking, or lowering tax rates for corporations and the wealthy.

It isn’t for me to tell you to follow my example or do what Saint Henry would do. It’s not my place to tell you that you participate in the continuing Moral Monday protests at the Legislative Building, though I’ll be very happy to see you there if you do. It isn’t for me to tell you that you should engage in civil disobedience, though I’ll support you if you choose to do so.

The only thing I can do is to tell you to listen to the voice of your conscience; to heed the call of justice; and to follow that call not only with passion and courage, but, most importantly, with faith, hope, and, above all, love in your heart.