

Breonna Taylor, the Book of Job and the Too-long Journey of Justice
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, March the 12th and the title of this morning's reflection is Breonna Taylor, the Book of Job and the Too-long Journey of Justice. I wonder if this title is, itself, too long. This is a reflection marking a spiritual journey that we have been on for the last three years. On March 13th of 2020, three years ago tomorrow, in the middle of the night, Breonna Taylor was killed by the police in her own home in Louisville, KY. As you may remember, there was a spate of police killings at that time (which, sadly, is not so different from today)—Breonna Taylor, Nina Pop, Tony McDade, George Floyd. A little more than three years ago, North Chapel gathered flowers in their names, in sorrowful celebration of their inherent worth and dignity. Four signs on the chancel were planted firmly in the earth of North Chapel's front lawn. Flowers and notes of blessing were offered ceremoniously. There is a picture of that event on the covers of your Orders of Service. Those four signs are here in the Sanctuary with us this morning. That was three years ago now.

This week, Attorney General Merrick Garland and his team from the Department of Justice found against the patterns and practices of the Louisville Metro Police Department (or LMPD). In a presentation that was both grace-filled and damning, Merrick Garland and his team were abundantly clear. Garland reported that [and this, I quote]

In April of 2021, [the Justice Department] opened a Pattern or Practice Investigation... Shortly after we opened the investigation, an LMPD leader told the Department, "Breonna Taylor was a symptom of problems that we have had for years."

Garland found that the police in Louisville regularly violated the First and Fourth Amendments of the Constitution of the United States. It give us a little room to breathe. It restores something in us. So now, we can finally begin to put the flowers we gathered to rest. But the journey has been so long...too long for so many of us.

So, how do we find peace in all of this? How does find the light of the sun looking beneath the thunder? As Bernice Johnson Reagan used to say,
And when there is promise of a storm and you want change in your life, walk on out into it. If you get to the other side, you will be different. And if you want change in your life and you are avoiding the trouble, you can forget it.

I want to tell you the story of a powerful storm...and through the telling, we might get one step closer to knowing the nature of clouds.

Do you remember when Joni Mitchell first tried to understand in 1969...when she first sang the different perspectives, the paradoxes?

I've looked at clouds from both sides now
From up and down and still somehow

It's cloud illusions I recall
I really don't know clouds at all

The meanings of the clouds were mysterious to her. Clouds were good and bad and both and neither...depending on one's perspective...upon one's openness of heart... It wasn't possible to know for sure...but like Bernice Johnson Reagon, she was sure of one thing: "When there is promise of a storm and you want change in your life, walk on out into it." Let me depart from that thought. I will come back to it but I want to change the subject for a moment.

Because three short months from now...and 600 long miles from here, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, thousands of Unitarian Universalists from all across the country will gather together in a yearly ritual known as General Assembly. We are going to carry on the affairs of the denomination. We are going to vote on things. We are going to talk about the Seven Principles and the Eighth one, too.

Last year, if you recall, we explored the Seven Principles as monthly themes. We spent the first eight months of the year—from January to August—exploring the Principles as adopted at the General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio in 1984. These are the Principles that appear in the hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*.

WE, THE MEMBER CONGREGATIONS OF THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION, COVENANT TO AFFIRM AND PROMOTE:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all,
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

In short,

1. Worth and dignity
2. Justice, equity, and compassion
3. Acceptance and growth
4. Truth and meaning
5. Conscience and democracy
6. Peace, liberty, and justice and
7. Kudos for the interdependent web

An Eighth Principle has been proposed. It reads,

"We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions."

Which is lovely and, for many Unitarian Universalists, redundant and the subject of some controversy. Some argue is that if you take the First of our principles seriously, then there is no need for the adoption of the Eighth. It's logical. It stands to reason. In fact, this used to be my argument but it isn't anymore. I gave it up because it assumes that there's a rational exchange about hot-button issues like race and gender in the United States. I don't know if we always have that in this country. Reasonable people can disagree.

You remember *The West Wing*, Aaron Sorkin's series on American government with Martin Sheen and Stockard Channing, right? There's a scene that springs to mind that grapples with the issue of civil disagreement. Sam Seaborn and Ainsley Hayes are having a casual conversation—Sam, the good-looking, left-leaning speechwriter for the American president and Ainsley, the good-looking, right-leaning White House lawyer who argues with Sam. Ainsley is taking a break. She's leaving Washington for a few days. Sam is curious and asks about her plans. He finds out that that Ainsley heading north to visit her alma mater, Smith College, and to participate on a panel for the Women's Studies Department. She's on a panel with Rebecca Walker, Gloria Steinem, Anne Coulter, Naomi Wolfe and the topic of conversation is the Equal Rights Amendment, the ERA.

Sam is delight to hear this and says, "You know, they say that something like 40% of all women oppose the ERA? In my entire lifetime, I've yet to meet one of them!" Sam is only casually shocked.

Ainsley laughs. She stands before him and extends her hand to Sam. She says, "[Hello. My name is] Ainsley Hayes, pleased to meet you."

Sam is now more formally surprised. Well, more than surprised. He is quite shocked and he says, "You're going back to Smith College, the cradle of feminism, to argue in opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment? [] They're gonna hate you."

Ainsley laughs again. She says, "I'm a straight Republican from North Carolina, and you don't think they hated me the first time around?" What can you say about commonly held attitudes in Western Massachusetts.

Anyway, Sam could not understand. How could a woman argue against the Equal Rights Amendment, especially with Gloria Steinem and Naomi Wolfe within striking distance! Sam asked Ainsley to explain herself. How could she argue against it and Ainsley said, "Because it's humiliating! A new amendment..." she cried out. Remember, the ERA was ratified in 1972. So, it is "new" compared to the First Amendment, which was ratified in 1791. For Ainsley, this was humiliating. "A new amendment," she continued,

...that we vote on, declaring that I am equal under the law to a man. I am mortified to discover there's reason to believe I wasn't before. I am a citizen of this country. I am not a special subset in need of your protection. I do not have to have to have my rights handed down to me... The same Article 14 that protects you, protects me. And I went to law school just to make sure.¹

Then, she grabbed a peach and left the room, declaring victory and departing the

¹ <http://www.westwingtranscripts.com/wwscripts/2-18.php>

field.

Some UUs feel this way about the Eighth Principle. As a life-long Unitarian Universalist, I felt strangely troubled by it. I felt troubled by a principle that we would vote on at General Assembly, newly declaring the value of Beloved Community. Like Miss Hayes, I was mortified to discover there was cause to question this. I, too, am a member of this denomination, not a subset in need of protection. I do not have to have my worth and dignity handed down to me... The same principles that protect others, also protect me. And I went to seminary just to make sure. [] Now, is the time when I wish I had a peach and an exit strategy.

But here is the thing: Had this principle that troubles my logical mind been adopted in 1984, many of our churches (including the one that I used to serve in Maryland) would have benefitted. Many of them would have been able to avoid the crises that they suffered without it. We can all philosophize. We can argue logic all day long but, sadly, racism does not respect logic and reasoning. It isn't rational. It isn't reasonable. It doesn't care if it makes any sense. Its goals are power and violence, pain and position. Its one law is advantage. Racism doesn't much care about anything else. It simply doesn't take the time. It's inconsiderate. It's too impatient. It does its violence in only seconds...both within us and in the world in which we live.

It's hard, really, to theorize against racism and its lightning. By the time we legislate against the flash, the damage is done. So, we make appeals to justice but justice takes so much time. Its journey-road is so long. How does one make sense of all of this? ^

Three years ago, tomorrow, on Friday, March 13th of 2020, lightning struck in Louisville, KY. A young woman, a 26-year-old nurse named Breonna Taylor, was killed by the police in her own home and while she slept. Just this week, three years after her passing, Breonna's mother finally heard the news what she knew all along. Tamika Palmer already knew her daughter. The legal system needed a bit more time to make her acquaintance.

It took three years for the Attorney General and the Justice Department to state the obvious—that the Louisville Metro Police Department has used excessive force, that it has used invalid search warrants, that it has used an array of unlawful practices and that it has violated the rights of those it has sworn to protect. Her mother... Tamika Palmer said,

It's heartbreaking to know that everything you've been saying from day one has to be said again through this manner. You know, that it took [my daughter's death] to even have somebody look into this department.

Palmer was relieved to hear the news. Something unnamable was restored to her—restored to us all, really—but it was...

Heartbreak all over again, [she said] because I knew that to begin with. I said that from the very beginning. We've asked that question a hundred times, over and over, [and] for no one to ever give you a direct answer...

It was maddening. It's too much, even for the most noble of hearts.

I think of Job. I think of the Book of Job and the stories of the great suffering he endured. Life is like that sometimes. Life is unbelievable sometimes. According to The Bible Project, the Book of Job is one of the three books in the Bible that are referred to as “the wisdom literature—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job.”

The first, Proverbs, showed us that God is wise and just. We learn that God has ordered the world so that it’s fair. The righteous are rewarded. The wicked are punished. In other words, the get what you deserve.

But the world is not that simple and in Ecclesiastes, we learn otherwise. People don’t always get what they deserve. Life is more complex than we wish that it was. In Ecclesiastes, we learn that, “The world isn’t always fair. Life is unpredictable and hard to comprehend...” which leads us to question the belief (or maybe, the preference) that God is fair and just. This is the central question of the Book of Job—Is God fair and just.

Job is a faithful man. He is noble, gentle and wise. God is proud of Job and holds him up as exemplary. And the sons of God assembled before him, conning at the knee of God (as the story goes), they all strongly agree...except the one who questions and opposes, except for the one who stands apart and challenges God, saying that Job is only good because he thinks he earned God’s favor, because of God’s reward...because of his blessing. Remove this favor, this reward, this sacred blessing and the true Job will quickly be revealed. This oppositional challenger believed that Job’s devotion was transactional and nothing more, like an equitable exchange—pray well and you get cool stuff from heaven. That belief was now in question and the challenger had no faith in Job’s integrity.

So, Job was tested. Job was made to suffer and made to grieve. Job loses everyone and everything that was important to him. Absolutely everyone and absolutely everything. And Job deserved none of this, remember, and he and God both knew this in their bones. So, in the middle of all of this suffering, Job did not sacrifice his faith. He was angry with God and bereft but he did not turn away, not at first, anyway. There was, alas, a breaking point...and Job cried out in pain, cursing the day that he was born.

His friends gather ‘round, ‘supportively’ but judging. Pathologizing. They failed to understand the nature of his suffering. They had wrapped their logical minds around his trials and tribulations but they had not wrapped as well their loving hearts. They tried to reason with Job but they were only blaming him. Surely, there was a reason for his suffering. Surely, Job had done something terrible to bring this anguish upon himself. Surely, he was somehow to blame for his own suffering.

Wouldn’t it be great if we all had this kind of control over the suffering in our lives? Wouldn’t it be great if we all had the ability to limit the depth sorrow with good behavior? Job’s friends stood over him in judgment—and, more fundamentally, in fear—and they dreamed up a world for him wherein he suffered at his own expense, a world in which he was responsible for his anguish...and world in which he was liable for the very lightning that struck him down. Job’s friends could not get beyond their prejudices and their preconceptions. They could only imagine a God was just and fair.

For 34 chapters, they speculated, postulated and theorized. For 34 chapters,

they mused and hypothesized...wondered, conjectured and surmised. And through all of that loss and in all of that pain, Job justly defended his innocence. Far beyond his friends and their banter, Job cried out directly to God...and God responded. God appeared to Job in the shape of a powerful storm. God, then, shows Job the spectacular universe of complexity over which he daily presides and in the most powerful and transformative of ways, God returns Job to the realm of humility. [] And then, leaves him.

Although Job never learns the reason for his suffering, he is still able to live in peace.

Then, God restores to Job everything that Job had lost. In fact, God doubles the gift. And yet, for this, as well, there's no explanation. Job's suffering was a path and not a punishment and his restoration was not a reward. These are just the long roads that are possible in life. These are just options for the journey. No story, no rhyme, no reason. No crime, no fowl. No prize, no praise. Job's restoration is purely a gift and not the dividend of prayer. Even Job does not understand what he receives but he accepts it. And his acceptance reads as wisdom to the people who surround him. We, who are able to accept life's gifts with grace and with gratitude, are able to use them to bless the world in the spirit of love. No matter what comes—good or bad—Job is able to trust God's wisdom. Job does not master the rules of a system that he can control judiciously. He simply trusts in God—come what may.

Oh, the grace of this... The grace of this story in its fullness, in its completeness. Because we can get stuck in its parts—in the fear of losing things unfairly, in fears of loneliness and pain, in the fear of being misunderstood. This is where so many of us get stuck...for reasons that are both trivial and deep.

Tamika Palmer lost her daughter, Breonna. Like Job, she was broken before the holy...and burdened by the too-long road of justice. For three, long years and 34 chapters times racism in America, we speculated and we theorized and for three, long years and 34 chapters times violence, we mused and we hypothesized as the storm clouds gathered in the sky. And the rains that broke us free came not from Merrick Garland and the Justice Department. The great storm that sets us free is the reign of our own inner light, our Job-like wisdom that waits for and recognizes justice soul-level deep...not as the reward of heaven for sufficiently impressive prayer but as the will, the inner perseverance to hold on to what is true and not surrender. So, when the powerful storm comes along, we will see ourselves within it.

For these are the clouds of Michelangelo
Muscular with God and songold
Shine on your witness...

Joni Mitchell said...and Bernice Johnson Reagan would agree that,
When there is promise of a storm and you want change in your life, walk on
out into it. If you get to the other side, you will be different. And if you want
change in your life and you are avoiding the trouble, you can forget it.

Be wise and brave, Breonna. May it be so. Blessed be and amen.