

Chalice Lighting

“The greatness of non-violent resistance is that even as [people are] faced with tyranny, and the resulting suffering, [we] respond to hate with love, to prejudice with tolerance, to arrogance with humility, to humiliation with dignity, and to violence with reason.”

—Liu Xia

Liu Xia is a Chinese painter, poet, and photographer who resides in Beijing, China. She is the widow of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo. Biography[edit]. Liu was formerly a civil servant in the Beijing tax bureau, and met her husband Liu Xiaobo while part of the Beijing literary scene in the 1980s.

The Reverend Martin Luther King

In April of 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. participated in a non-violent rally in Birmingham, Alabama. He was jailed for that participation. While in jail, on April 12, 1963, eight Alabama clergy men sent a letter to the Reverend Dr. King. In the letter they requested Rev. King to "support calm negotiations".

They wrote:

We, the undersigned clergymen, are among those who issued "An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense," in dealing with racial problems in Alabama. We expressed understanding that honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts, but urged that decisions of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed. However, we are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders. We are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.

- the letter concludes with the following...

We further strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.

Signed by eight bishops and clergy of the Birmingham area.

Rev. King responded with a nine page letter, I'm sure you all know it as the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail". This letter clearly documented his position on demonstrations and civil disobedience; and further defined how Rev. King felt this was part of his religious calling to fight for civil rights. He wrote:

“More basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eight century B.C. left their villages and carried their "this sayeth the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsys and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must

constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.”

Reverend King felt called, as a person of faith, to fight against injustice. And not only in his own community, but also in other U.S. cities. He was aware of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. It was impossible for him to sit by idly in Atlanta, not being concerned about what was going on in Birmingham.

His probably most famous quote also comes from this letter: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an in-escapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

For Reverend King, it was hard to understand that any people of faith could sit by while others suffered. He traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi, and all the other Southern states. He looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. Over and over he found himself asking:

“What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call of defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?”

In deep disappointment Rev King complained over the laxity of the church. He was hurt and disappointed that more churches didn't join in the struggle. He saw many of the contemporary churches as *“weak, ineffectual voices with an uncertain sound, as “arch-defenders” of the status quo.”* He was deeply unhappy that the churches' sanction of things as they are consoled the leadership of the average community.

Obviously, Reverend King could have been one of those members of the clergy who silently tolerated what was going on. He had already been through the struggle for his own better and freer life – he was educated, was ordained clergy, a recognized and beloved leader. He could have stayed in his church in Atlanta, supporting the struggle for racial justice with monetary donations and with prayer. Instead, he went into the thick of it, eventually gave his life for this struggle.

And – of course - he is not the only one! Not the only one to march, and not the only one to die: When Rev. King prepared for the march from Selma to Birmingham, in 1965, he once again appealed to clergy to march with him. The Unitarian Universalist denomination (only 2 years old) received King's urgent telegram in which he asked religious leaders and concerned citizens to join him in Selma, Alabama. Here, African Americans, marching for their right to vote had been brutally attacked by police.

About 500 Unitarian Universalists, including nearly one-fifth of all Unitarian Universalist ministers, heeded the call. One of the ministers who responded to King's appeal paid with his life. He was the Rev. James Reeb, a 38 year old white father of four, who served a church in Boston. He had been active in the civil rights movement from its beginning, and he continuously encouraged his parishioners to do the same.

A member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), James Reeb went to Selma to add his voice to the voice of Rev King, and to fight for the voting rights of black Americans. On his first night in Selma, on March 9, the Reverend James Reeb was attacked and beaten by a white mob armed with clubs. They inflicted massive head

injuries. Reeb died in a Birmingham hospital two days later. In a way that few deaths do, the murder of the Rev. James J. Reeb helped change the course of history!! It inspired a wave of nationwide protests, memorial services, and calls for federal action. It created the political groundswell that President Lyndon Johnson needed to introduce new voting rights legislation.

Four days after Reeb's death, Johnson invoked his memory – calling him “that good man” - as he introduced the *Voting Rights Act* to a joint session of Congress. Johnson had invited King to attend the historic speech, but King turned him down in order to deliver James Reeb's eulogy in Selma the same day.

In his eulogy, Reverend King exhorted his listeners to “leave the ivory towers of learning and storm the bastions of segregation” He told them to see to it that the work Rev. Reeb had started be continued - so that the white South might come to terms with its conscience. He then posed the rhetorical question, “Who killed Jim Reeb?” and answered: “A few ignorant men.”

He then asked, “What killed Jim Reeb?” and answered: “An ir-relevant church, an indifferent clergy, an irresponsible political system, a corrupt law enforcement hierarchy, a timid federal government, and an uncommitted Negro population.”

An ir-relevant church, an indifferent clergy . . .

How much has changed in the last 45 years? What do you think? Are we indifferent or ir-relevant?

The good news is, that today, too, there are members of the clergy who are not indifferent: For example, there are Nancy and Alan Bean. You have probably never heard their name! Alan and Nancy are both Baptist ministers – white Baptist ministers – who founded an organization called *Friends of Justice* in 1999. In their small hometown of Tulia, TX, 39 African Americans had been indicted on the uncorroborated testimony of a single narcotics agent. The local paper reported the bust as if it were a major victory over a powerful underworld gang, but something about the story didn't ring true to the Beans. They decided to investigate and found proof of bribery, prejudice, ignorance, and atrocious police work.

The Beans felt bound by their faith to find out the truth. They tried to enlist the aid of the NAACP, the ACLU, and the Justice Department, but got little response. Nor was the media interested in the story. They were told: 'So what: poor black people are being mistreated by the criminal justice system. That's not news!'

Finally, the Beans and the other Friends of Justice attracted the notice of a big town journalist who eventually convinced key officials in the NAACP that a travesty of justice had been committed. Soon the Tulia case began to attract the attention of civil rights organizations and high-powered lawyers from up north. As a result, the irregularities of the Tulia case were exposed, and the governor of Texas pardoned the defendants.

About 11 years ago it was thanks to the Reverends Bean that the *Jena Six* received some publicity. The Jena Six were six black teenagers in Jena, Louisiana convicted in the 2006 beating of Justin Barker, a white student at the local Jena High School, which they also attended.

Originally, there was no one interested in the case of the black teenagers. Despite obvious racially charged incidents, the investigating U.S. Attorney found no indication of

racially-motivated prosecutions. Until Alan Bean and his *Friends of Justice* got involved, there was no hope for the six teenagers to receive a fair trial.

As the result of their involvement, the Beans were shunned by family members and by most of the community, and are still afraid for their lives. And they may have good reason to be afraid. After all, Rev. King was assassinated for his efforts to end racial segregation. Rev. James Reeb was beaten to death. Countless other individuals were jailed, beaten, shunned for their involvement. They all were aware of the danger they put themselves in. But it didn't stop them! They were motivated by their religious beliefs – they walked the walk, they lived their faith. In the words of Reverend Martin Luther King: *“Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment.”*

We are all called to fight for what we believe in, whether it's Social Justice or the survival of our environment. Let us not be - to quote Rev. King - “an ir-relevant church” with congregants who “fear being nonconformists.”

We are here today for the same reason, one community together in one sanctuary, across denominations: as we honor the work of the Reverend Martin Luther King, we feel called to DO SOMETHING; to work for social justice; to speak out against racial injustice.

We are called to recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church. After all, we are all ministers. And it is our ministry to break loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and join together as active partners in the struggle against prejudice and discrimination.

Closing Words: *Blessed is the Path*

By the Rev. Eric Williams

Blessed is the path on which you travel.

Blessed is the body that carries you upon it.

Blessed is your heart that has heard the call.

Blessed is your mind that discerns the way.

Blessed is the gift that you will receive by going.

Truly blessed is the gift that you will become on the journey.

May you go forth in peace.