

The ultimate measure of a (person) is not where (one) stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where (one) stands at times of challenge and controversy. A true neighbor will risk (one's) position, prestige, and even life for the welfare of others.

—The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*

## **Family Planning: A Special and Urgent Concern**

### **Welcome**

Rev. Clare L. Petersberger

### **The Covenant**

(Read in unison)

*First Parish of Norwell Unitarian Universalists*

**WE PLEDGE TO WALK TOGETHER  
IN FELLOWSHIP AND LOVE,  
TO CULTIVATE REVERENCE,  
TO PROMOTE SPIRITUAL GROWTH  
AND ETHICAL COMMITMENT,  
TO MINISTER TO EACH OTHER'S NEEDS  
AND TO THOSE OF HUMANITY,  
TO CELEBRATE THE SACRED MOMENTS OF LIFE'S  
PASSAGE,  
AND TO HONOR THE HOLINESS AT THE HEART OF BEING.**

### **Opening Words**

From "Family Planning: A Special and Urgent Concern"

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Acceptance speech for the Margaret Sanger Award from Planned Parenthood, May 1966

In May of 1966, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was awarded the first Margaret Sanger Award from Planned Parenthood. The citation read in part: "For his courageous resistance to bigotry and his lifelong dedication to the advancement of social justice and human dignity . . . In the tradition of all great humanitarians who have seen that human life and progress are indeed indivisible, Dr. King has lent his eloquent voice to the cause of world-wide voluntary family planning."

Although he could not be present in person, to receive the award, his wife, Coretta Scott King, delivered his acceptance speech in which he wrote of how the civil rights movement was organized to bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice. The Rev. Dr. King wrote: "We had confidence that when we awakened the nation to the immorality and evil of inequality, there would be an upsurge of conscience followed by remedial action."

"We knew that there were solutions and that the majority of the nation were ready for them. Yet we also knew that the existence of solutions would not automatically operate to alter conditions. We had to organize, not only arguments, but people in the millions for action."

“This model of organizing continues to be how we bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice today.”

## **Chalice Lighting**

Rev. Rebekah Savage

(Read responsively)

We light our flaming chalice as a beloved people

**UNITED IN LOVE  
AND THIRSTING FOR JUSTICE.**

May it spark in us a spirit of humility.

**MAY IT IGNITE IN US RADICAL LOVE  
THAT TRANSFORMS OUR ENERGY INTO  
PURPOSEFUL ACTION.**

This a chalice of audacious hope.

**THIS CHALICE SHINES A LIGHT ON OUR SHARED PAST,  
SIGNALING OUR INTENTION TO LISTEN DEEPLY,  
REFLECT WISELY,  
AND MOVE (WITH INTEGRITY)  
TOWARD OUR HIGHEST IDEALS.**

## **Prelude**

“I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free”

Billy Taylor

Tracy Hall, piano; Casey O’Brien, drums

## **Story**

“We Are the Shepherds”

Rev. Erika Hewitt

We come this morning to remember the light shining from the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which inspires us to practice love. For his part, Dr. King remembered the light shining from another teacher of love—a man named Jesus.

Who was Jesus? Over two thousand years ago, Jesus was a Jewish teacher of love and compassion. When Jesus spoke to his followers, it was often about how to share more, love more, and forgive more. Jesus also talked a lot about the great, unfolding mystery named Love. He called it God. Sometimes, Jesus’ followers needed help to understand his teachings, so Jesus told stories to help them understand. We call those parables. This is one of the parables that Jesus told his followers adapted by the Reverend Erika Hewitt. It’s about a shepherd.

What is a shepherd? A shepherd is someone who cares for sheep: who makes sure their bellies are full, and

they're safe from predators—because a lot of critters would hurt sheep, if they could. In the days when Jesus told this story, a shepherd wouldn't have had a fancy farm for her sheep. There was no fence to create a big space for her flock. Instead, she would have had to take her sheep out into the hills to fill their bellies. In this parable, the shepherd didn't have just one or four or ten sheep. She had *one hundred* sheep! (Can you imagine how loud it would be if there were 100 sheep here in our meeting room?)

At the beginning of each day, the shepherd took all one hundred sheep to the hills of green grass, and counted to make sure they were all there. At the end of the day she brought them home again, counting to make sure that all one hundred sheep had come home. The shepherd came home one night, counted her sheep . . . and saw only ninety-nine instead of one-hundred. She counted again to make sure, and then again. And even though it was cold and dark, and there were critters in the hills that might hurt a shepherd, too, she left the ninety-nine sheep who were safe at home and went out to find the lost sheep who was in danger.

Now Dr. King said that when Jesus told this parable to his followers, he was trying to tell them that the great unfolding mystery that we call Love, and that some call God, loves each of us so much that Love will always, always, go to those who are in danger. Dr. King also pointed out that the sheep didn't consciously seek to get lost. Getting lost wasn't a conscious choice on the part of the sheep. The sheep needed help.

Most Unitarian Universalists want to be Love's partner and its helper. That means we are the shepherd: when everyone else is safe, we're called to notice the few who are in danger, and to go out into the cold and dark to be with them. Love doesn't rest and wait; Love—in the form of the shepherd—leaves comfort behind in order to be a helper.

We are the helpers circling round, if necessary, for justice from generation to generation.

## **Hymn**

#155 "Circle 'Round for Freedom"

## **Stewardship Testimonial**

Angela Castillo Epps

"From Student to Teacher: YRE and the Teachings of Integrity"

(The text of Angela's talk is not available.)

## **Musical Interlude**

"Precious Lord, Take My Hand"

Thomas Dorsey

Tracy Hall, piano

## **Meditation**

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Let us continue in the spirit of prayer with words by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

O God, out of whose mind this great cosmic universe has been created, toward whom the weary and perplexed of all generations turn for consolation and direction, we come grateful for the many blessings of life.

We also come with an awareness that we have not always given our lives to that which is high and noble.

In these days of emotional tension, when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, give us penetrating vision, broad understanding, power of endurance and abiding faith, and save us from the paralysis of crippling fear.

Grant that we will love Thee with all of our hearts, souls, and minds, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves . . .

Be with us in our going out and our coming in, in our rising up and in our lying down, in our moments of joy and in our moments of sorrow, until the day when there shall be no sunset and no dawning.

Amen.

## **Musical Interlude**

“MLK”

U2

Tracy Hall, voice

## **Reading**

From “Family Planning: A Special And Urgent Concern”

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Acceptance speech for the Margaret Sanger Award from Planned Parenthood, May, 1966

In 1960, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. agreed to serve on a committee for a Planned Parenthood study on contraception. He explained in a letter, "I have always been deeply interested in and sympathetic with the total work of the Planned Parenthood Federation."

Six years later, in his speech accepting the Margaret Sanger Award, he compared the movement for civil rights to the movement for reproductive rights. He wrote: “There is a striking kinship between our movement and Margaret Sanger's early efforts. She, like we, saw the horrifying conditions of ghetto life. Like we, she knew that all of society is poisoned by cancerous slums. Like we, she was a direct actionist—a nonviolent resister. She was willing to accept scorn and abuse until the truth she saw was revealed to the millions.

At the turn of the century she went into the slums and set up a birth control clinic, and for this deed she went to jail because she was violating an unjust law. Yet the years have justified her actions. She launched a movement which is obeying a higher law to preserve human life under humane conditions. Margaret Sanger had to commit what was then called a crime in order to enrich humanity, and today we honor her courage and vision; for without them there would have been no beginning.

Our sure beginning in the struggle for equality by nonviolent direct action may not have been so resolute without the tradition established by Margaret Sanger and people like her. (We) have no mere academic nor ordinary interest in family planning. (We) have a special and urgent concern.”

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the parallels between the civil rights movement and Margaret Sanger’s work for family planning.

## Offertory

“We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder”

Traditional African-American/John Yankee, arr.

Trio: Judie Clague, Patty Barry, Ellie Hughes

## Sermon

*Family Planning: A Special and Urgent Concern*

Rev. Clare L. Petersberger

Thank you, Judi, Patty, and Ellie, for your gift of “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.” It originated as an African American spiritual sometime before 1825. In the mid 1960’s, Pete Seeger changed the lyrics to “We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle” to lift up a less hierarchical, more feminist meaning.

This was around the same time that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was accepting the Margaret Sanger award from Planned Parenthood. He began his speech in these words: “Recently, the press has been filled with reports of sightings of flying saucers. While we need not give credence to these stories, they allow our imagination to speculate on how visitors from outer space would judge us.” He went on to talk about the billions of dollars our government spends on the military, and the paltry sums our government spends for family and population planning. He concluded, “I am afraid they would be stupefied at our conduct . . . and could be forgiven if they reported home that our planet is inhabited by a race of insane men whose future is bleak and uncertain.”

It is striking to me that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was publicly advocating for contraception in the late 1950’s. Our own Unitarian Universalist Association became the first religious tradition to officially endorse a woman’s right to reproductive choice in 1963. But Dr. King was advocating for this as a Baptist, in the South, in 1957.

He wrote an advice column—“Advice For Living,”—for *Ebony Magazine*. In December of 1957, a woman wrote to him that she and her husband had seven children and another on the way. They lived in a four-room apartment in Harlem. This mother had suggested to her husband that they practice birth control. Her husband responded that birth control was sinful and had said, “When God thinks we have enough children, He will put a stop to it.” The woman was asking Dr. King if her husband was right.

King responded, in his advice column, “It is a serious mistake to suppose that it is a religious act to allow nature to have its way in the sex life.” He continued, “The truth is that the natural order is given us, not as an absolute finality, but as something to be guided and controlled. In the case of birth control the real question at issue is that between rational control and resort to chance.”

Dr. King addressed the woman’s concern for economic stability, given that her family of 10 was living in a four-room apartment. He wrote, “Another thing that must be said is that changes in social and economic conditions make smaller families desirable, if not necessary . . .” Then he addressed the need for women’s rights and reproductive justice: He wrote, “A final consideration is that women must be considered as more than ‘breeding machines . . .’ It is true that the primary obligation of the woman is that of motherhood, but an intelligent mother wants it to be a responsible motherhood—a motherhood to which she has given her consent, not a motherhood due to impulse and to chance. And this means birth control in some form. All of these factors seem to me, to make birth control rationally and morally justifiable.”

[\[Column from Ebony magazine, from the papers of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.\]](#)

In 2020 we may disagree that the primary obligation of a woman is motherhood. But Dr. King was way ahead of his time in speaking out about the right of a woman to give her consent to motherhood. In 1960, Walter Chivers, a professor of sociology at Morehouse College, who had served with Planned Parenthood for 16 years, reached out to Dr. King to ask him to be on a committee for a Planned Parenthood study on contraception. Dr. Chivers vouched for the honesty, integrity, and complete lack of racial prejudice of Planned Parenthood. Dr. King accepted the appointment.

1960 was the year oral contraception was introduced to the United States. The study was to examine the effect of the pill on family size. To be clear, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was talking about birth control methods excluding abortion. No one was publicly speaking of abortion 60 years ago. It was not legal. But Dr. King viewed family planning as a special and urgent concern. He saw it as a particularly urgent concern for African Americans in the United States in the early 1960's. He pointed to the history of slavery in this country—how African Americans were “once bred by slave owners to be sold as merchandise.” He continued, “They do not welcome any solution which involves population breeding as a weapon.”

He argued for knowledge of, and access, to birth control as a means to economic freedom for people of all races. He wrote, “Like all poor, Negro and white, they have many unwanted children. This is a cruel evil they urgently need to control. There is scarcely anything more tragic in human life than a child who is not wanted. That which should be a blessing becomes a curse for parent and child.” He concluded, “In the need for family planning, Negro and white have a common bond; and together we can and should unite our strength for the wise preservation, not of races in general, but of the one race we all constitute—the human race.”

Over a half century later, contraception is under attack. In October 2017, the Trump administration made it much easier for an employer to exclude contraceptive coverage from any health plan it offers to its employees and their dependents. One regulation allows any employer to exclude some or all contraceptive methods and services because of religious objections. Another regulation allows employers with moral objections to do the same. So far, enforcement of these regulations has been blocked by the courts.

But family planning, in general, is also under attack. Eleven states prohibit state family planning funds from going to any entity that provides abortions. Seven states prohibit state family planning funds from going to any entity that contracts with or is affiliated with an abortion provider. Four states prohibit state family planning funds from going to any entity that counsels on or refers for abortion. Three states have priority systems for distributing state family planning funds that disadvantage or effectively exclude reproductive-health-focused providers. One state prohibits Medicaid from reimbursing Planned Parenthood for services.

Forty seven years ago this month, the Supreme Court made abortions legal and safe. Women still need and seek abortions. According to a 2016 Guttmacher Institute report, no single racial ethnic group made up the majority of women who receive abortions. Nearly 30 percent were black, nearly 40 percent were white and 25 percent were Hispanic. Religious belief and practice were not a determining factor. More than 60 percent of women who received abortions identified with a religion, including 24 percent who were Catholic, 17 who were mainline Protestant, and 13 percent who were evangelical Protestants.

I thought of Dr. King's support for family planning and of Planned Parenthood while listening to Karen Nelson in December. As CEO of Planned Parenthood of Maryland, she addressed the question of what we

are going to do if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned this year by the Supreme Court.

Why is this an urgent concern? A rash of new state laws was passed last spring to ban abortions. Alabama sought to make it a felony for Alabama doctors to perform an abortion, with no exceptions for rape or incest. Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, and Ohio tried to ban abortions once a fetal heartbeat is detected—at about six weeks. Few women even know, for certain, they are pregnant at that point, much less have the ability to schedule an abortion. Utah and Arkansas voted to limit the procedure to the middle of the second trimester. What these laws all have in common is seeking to bring a “test case” to the Supreme Court to have *Roe v. Wade* overturned, and to make abortion illegal in many states.

Access to abortion had already been severely curtailed in many states. Now the goal is to make it illegal. Of course, this will not stop abortion. It will only stop safe abortions. Maryland has passed legislation to seek to make abortion safe and legal come what may. This means we need to plan, now, for what we will do if and when we are contacted by women from surrounding states seeking a remedy if they are unable to access a safe and legal abortion.

I thought of colleagues who participated in the underground networks to help women get safe abortions before *Roe v. Wade*, including being a friend of Jane and the Jane Collective. If we want to be Love’s partner and its helper, we will once again be called to notice those who are in danger, and reach out to be with them. Increased fundraising will be needed, along with those willing to provide transportation and hospitality. Our TUUC Social Action Committee plans to participate in activities which support and promote Planned Parenthood. Marilyn Anikis will serve as our main contact. Thank you, Marilyn. We will all need to get involved, speak out, participate in marches, give money, and vote.

Sixty years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed the special and urgent concern of family planning. He wrote that being the recipient of the Margaret Sanger Award would “cause (him) to work even harder for a reign of justice and a rule of love all over our nation.” Today, family planning continues to be a special and urgent concern. Like Dr. King we will work together for a reign of justice and a rule of love all over our nation. We will work together with faith that we shall overcome unjust laws that do not respect the moral agency of women. We will work together for reproductive justice: the right to have a child; the right to not have a child, and the right to parent a child or children in safe and healthy environments.

## **Hymn**

#169 “We Shall Overcome”

## **Closing Words**

Rev. Kathleen McTigue

“In our slow walk [on this earth], we will be wounded,  
and we will be showered with grace,  
amazing, unending.

Even in our sorrows, we [will] feel our lives  
cradled in a holiness we cannot comprehend  
and though we each walk within a vast loneliness,  
the promise . . . is that we do not walk alone . . .”

and that we do believe that we shall overcome injustices . . . someday.

GO NOW IN PEACE.