

“The True Genius of Justice”

Isaiah 62:1-5, John 2:1-11

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From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Second Sunday After Epiphany, January 16, 2022, Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday, dedicated to Thomas Marshall Emery on his baptismal day, to Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker and the three hostages who were freed late on Saturday night and to their families and to all the members of Congregation Beth Israel and always to the glory of God!

“The True Genius of Justice”

Isaiah 62:1-5, John 2:1-11

For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. Isaiah 62:1

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Late yesterday afternoon, during his day of Sabbath prayer and rest, a day when he and Deb and daughters Shira and Zoe should have been soaking in the peace and the joy of the Sabbath, a Sabbath which celebrated the music of Jewish faith and during which Rick and his synagogue and synagogues all over the world were celebrating

the memory of a Christian pastor named Martin Luther King, Jr., I received a call from my friend and colleague Rabbi Rick Kellner. I was sitting with Susan at the kitchen table. I said to her, “something is wrong. Rick never calls me on the Sabbath.”

I answered the phone. I knew something was wrong right away. Rick’s voice was clearly shaken. He asked if I had heard the news that another synagogue was attacked? This time a terrorist had taken four hostages at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas. This time, one of his good friends – Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker – was a hostage. As he described Rabbi Charlie, Rick said, *“he is the nicest man in the world. When we were in seminary together, Charlie would go out and sleep with homeless men and women to bring them comfort and food. He is so calm and so peaceful. If there is any hope, Charlie will be at the heart of bringing this to a peaceful end.”* (Note – As the day went on, it became clear to the whole world that Rabbi Charlie is an amazing and caring soul for his congregation, an interfaith witness in Texas, and an incredible child of God who lives peacefully with others).

Rick went on to say that this terrorist attack and the murder of 11 at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on October 25, 2018, and the murder of one and injuring of three others on April 27, 2019 at Chabad Synagogue in Poway, California, had deeply affected both his daughters – making them anxious about worshipping in their own synagogue and worried about their father’s own safety as a rabbi. Now they were watching their dad react to the news of one of his friends being held hostage on the other side of the country simply because he was a Jew.

As the sun set and the afternoon turned to evening, I reached out to every rabbi I know and offered prayers. I reached out to imams

and Muslim friends and leaders. I reached out to my network of pastors and priests in Protestant, Pentecostal, Evangelical and Catholic communities in Columbus, across Ohio and throughout the nation asking for them to kneel down and pray. Prayers were lifted everywhere. Every Rabbi was deeply grateful for the contact and the news that hundreds of churches and mosques and thousands of Christians and Muslims were praying for Charlie and the three hostages, and for the terrorist/hostage-taker, their families, their synagogue, all Jews everywhere and everyone involved in law enforcement at the scene. Several religious leaders of Christian and Muslim background put out a press release with the mayor and Shannon Hardin last night to emphasize our prayerful unity throughout our region and our city.

Last night, through a news feed and via a tweet from Texas Governor Greg Abbott, we all heard that the hostages were safe and free, and that the hostage taker was dead. I believe our prayers were answered. I believe that Rabbi Charlie was central to saving himself and the three members of his congregation who were taken hostage. I believe he is heartbroken that the terrorist is dead. I believe that will become clear in the coming hours and days.

Our prayers have been answered – all except one. The terrorist who committed this terrorist act is dead. In the words of the prophet Ezekiel in 33:11: *“As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live.”* The God of Abraham is weeping. We are Abraham’s descendants as he was the father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Abraham has no joy today at the death of the wicked, only sadness that yet another one of God’s beloved children did not turn from wickedness to live.

Once again, children and their parents in communities of Jewish, Muslim and Christian faiths are deeply affected having watched yet another hate-filled, rage-filled terrorist act on our soil, in our nation, in real time played out in a house of prayer and community of faith during worship. This is jarring and scarring.

What I wanted to preach about today was friendship between two great prophets – Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel and Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. – two true geniuses of justice. I wanted to talk about the call to prophetic justice that has power and influence for each one of our lives. Let me speak briefly on this to honor the legacy of justice in two magnificent men.

On this Sunday, when the legacy and love of our nation's greatest nonviolent activist and the greatest preacher and leader in American Christianity has ever known, we find ourselves – 54 years after his death – still focused on raging violence and hate in our land in our lives in racial discrimination and separateness in caste and class in our own community as well as across the land. And it most definitely is right here in this community and in our state of Ohio.

The Columbus Dispatch reported yesterday that Ohio lags on almost every major measure of racial progress. Only eight states in our nation have made less racial progress in the last 50 years than Ohio. We are 37th for racially integrated education. We are 39th for the Infant mortality rate. We are 40th for the most integrated state (in other words we made the top ten for segregation!). We are the 45th state for biracial social and civic engagement. We are 45th for wealth and unemployment disparities (according to WalletHub, owned by Evolution Finance).

These are horrible statistics. These statistics are shameful. We should all be angered by these injustices and inequalities. These numbers should cause us to feel and respond like the maladjusted people that we are called to be.

What do I mean by maladjusted people we are called to be?

A true prophet – a true genius of justice seeks maladjustment as a prophetic goal. We should all feel maladjusted this morning – to use the words of Dr. Heschel and Dr. King.

In an interview in 1972, Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke of his maladjustment. He said that all of us should always be surprised by statistics like these and news like yesterday's news. He said, *"I don't accommodate myself to the violence that goes on everywhere. I'm still surprised. That is why I am against it. That is why I can hope against it and work against it. We must learn how to be surprised. Not to adjust ourselves. I am the most maladjusted person in society."*

In a 1957 speech, King spoke to his maladjustment:

*"I never intend to adjust myself to an economic system that will take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. And my friends, I call you to be maladjusted to all of these things for you see, it may be that the salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted. The challenge of this hour is to be maladjusted. Yes, as the prophet Amos, who in the midst of tragic injustices of his day, could cry out in words that echo across the generations. **'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream'**... The world is in desperate need of such maladjustment. And through such courageous maladjustment, we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering*

daybreak of freedom and justice” (Martin Luther King, Jr. “The Christian Way of Life in Human Relations,” address delivered at the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches, December 4, 1957, in Carson, et al, *The Papers* 6:327-328).

As maladjusted people, we should also reflect on what true friendship means. We need maladjusted friends in our work for justice. When I spoke with Dr. Susannah Heschel this summer about her father, Abraham Joshua Heschel she spoke glowingly of the deep friendship he held with Dr. King. In the Spring of 2018, in Telos, Susannah Heschel on her father and Dr. King in an essay entitled, “*A Friendship in the Prophetic Tradition: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.*” she wrote: “*The friendship between Heschel and King was unusual in its day, and was surprising to many, but also inspiring because the two came from such different backgrounds and yet found intimacy that grew out of their religious commitments and transcended the growing public rifts between their two communities. Heschel brought King and his message to a wide Jewish audience and King made Heschel a central figure in the struggle for civil rights.*”

Heschel and King were both prophets in their own rights. King was the prophetic preacher and pastor. Heschel was the prophetic preacher and scholar. Both blended their prophetic gifts in powerful ways to address injustice. Together, they formed a dynamic duo of prophecy and truth telling. In June 1963, when called to the White House to meet with President Kennedy and Dr. King, Heschel sent a telegram the day before the meeting calling the president to declare a “State of Moral Emergency.” Continuing on he said, “*the hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.*” A few months later on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial Dr. King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech and Heschel was on his shoulder.

When I asked Dr. Susannah Heschel about her father and Dr. King, she spoke with great love and affection for both men. She spoke of their deep relationship. She said, *“Dr. King was always sincere and gracious in our home. He was genuinely interested in what I was studying, reading and writing. He was friendly and kind and was always welcomed as a family member in my home.”*

This morning my maladjusted heart and mind are with my friend Rabbi Rick Kellner and his family. I am struggling to imagine the world without him – just as he struggled yesterday and will continue to struggle to imagine the world without his friend – Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker.

I pray that you find a place in heart to reach out to someone today who is not in this community of faith – especially a friend or relative who is Jewish and have meaningful conversation with them about how together we will build a better world. Reach out and touch someone with your heart wide open and know that it makes a difference. Amen.