

## **WE'LL WALK HAND IN HAND – HOW UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS RESPONDED TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

**A Sermon Preached**

**By Rev. Mary Moore**

Our topic for this morning came about when the staff of this congregation went off to the Akron Art Museum to see the Norman Rockwell exhibit. That was the suggestion of Rich Roberts -- that it might do us good after the holiday festivities to go and relax our souls with Norman Rockwell. It was a wonderful time for the staff and we learned things such as the fact that Len Benner, our sexton, was trained in graphic arts. One time when he was in the process of being so trained, he was commuting up to Cleveland, which is where his school was, and encountered Norman Rockwell himself in the bus station in Cleveland sketching, as was his want to do. Rockwell was very supportive of Len's progress.

On this day also, at the Akron Art Museum, Polly, our administrator, came over to me and pointed out how, on the wall for all to see – and that exhibit was very popular here in Akron – was a newspaper article near one of Rockwell's prints from the Civil Rights times. It pointed out and talked about the death of the Rev. James Reeb, Unitarian minister. Polly, as is her wonderful way of being in the world, said, "Mary, I wonder if everybody in the congregation knows about that." Lord knows it's out there for all of Akron and all of Summit and Stark and Medina counties to see. And so I am this morning making sure that all of you know about who the Rev. James Reeb was and actually what the role was of Unitarian Universalists during Civil Rights times.

People forget, white people in particular, that the first voter registration drive did not take place in 1962 in the South, but in 1952. It took place long before whites raised it above the radar. For in those times in the South, African American people had to jump through many hoops prohibiting them to vote. One hoop was answering questions like, "How many bubbles are there in a bar of soap?" And then one I like or rather dislike particularly: If you were a female, you had to, in some counties, bring your marriage license and the birth certificate of your oldest child. And if there were less than nine months between the dates, you were said to be an immoral person and prevented from being able to register to vote.

I fast-forward ahead from 1952 to Sunday, March 7 of 1965. On that day 600 Civil Rights marchers set out from Selma, Alabama trying to march to Montgomery, the capitol, for one reason, to commemorate the death the previous month of twenty-six year-old Jimmy Lee Jackson. Jimmy Lee Jackson, a name every bit as important as that of James Joseph Reeb. Jimmy Lee Jackson had been shot by Alabama state troopers over in Marion, Alabama during an effort to garner the right to vote. He was shot in front of his mother and his grandparent. He died several days later.

In addition to commemorating the life of Jimmy Lee Jackson on March 7, 1965, those who gathered in Selma to try to march to Montgomery, fifty miles away, were going to be petitioning Governor George Wallace for his support in helping to get people registered to vote. Most of you know that this effort by the 600 Civil Rights marchers was stopped at Pettus Bridge, not even out of town in Selma, by 60 Alabama troopers, four rows of fifteen each, of the Dallas County sheriff and also the Dallas County sheriff's "posse," as it was called – on horseback. The "posse" were volunteers. Basically, any man who owned a horse could be one in Dallas County. On that day, March 7<sup>th</sup> of 1965, the troopers beat people – young people, old people – and then the posse men on their horses with billy clubs moved in and the horses walked and stomped on the people creating great injury. The demonstrators, the marchers, the peacefully assembled people were turned around by clouds of tear gas, yellow clouds and white clouds.

But the television cameras were rolling, and that evening across this country and around the world people saw these images from Selma. And thus it was on Monday, March 8 of 1965, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. via telegram asked this nation's religious leaders to come to Selma. And there were Unitarian Universalist religious leaders who answered that call, about a hundred of them. One was the Rev. Dick Leonard who was the minister in charge of religious education at Community Church of New York City. And one was the Rev. James Reeb. James Reeb who had grown up in Casper, Wyoming, an only child, went off to St. Olaf College in Minnesota and then on to Princeton Theological School. He had worked as a chaplain at Philadelphia General Hospital and served four years as the Assistant Minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. On March 8 of 1965, the day he set forth for Selma by plane, he was serving in the Boston area, working for the American Friends Service Committee, the Quakers, as the Community Relations Director of the Boston Metropolitan Housing Program.

But on March 8<sup>th</sup> of 1965 he bade goodbye to his wife and four children and boarded a plane for Selma. Four hundred and fifty white clergy responded including a hundred Unitarian Universalist ministers. And on Tuesday, March 9<sup>th</sup> they made a march to the bridge but were turned around following a prayer service. After this people attended to their own needs after hearing briefly from Dr. King and were told to reassemble at Brown Chapel AME church at about 7 o'clock. So people went out to eat. James Reeb had not eaten since supper the night before, served by his wife Marie in their Dorchester, Massachusetts home. He and Rev. Clark Olsen and Rev. Orloff Miller, two other UU ministers, went off in search of food, and they went to Walker's Café, owned by an African American in Selma. Several of the other UU minister colleagues had decided not to go out to eat or to go to a place that was a little closer, because they wanted to be sure not to miss the 7 o'clock meeting.

Some of you, most of you, and I hope by the end of this morning all of you will know what happens next. They walked out of Walker's Cafe after dark. Clark Olsen was in the middle and Rev. Orloff Miller was on the inside and Rev. James Reeb was on the street side. And they walked down the street. They had looked to the left and looked to the right and decided that yes they'd come from the left, but it was a short cut back to the Brown AME Zion Chapel if they went to the right. And so they did. They sensed they were being followed by four white men who came out from across the street between two cars. James Reeb received a severe blow, just one blow, to his left temple. His two colleagues managed to sort of drag and struggle along with him to an insurance agency in the African American community from which they called the ambulance which was right next door at a funeral home. They realized with such a major head wound, he would need to be taken to Birmingham Hospital which was associated with a Medical School.

And so the decrepit, rundown ambulance took off toward Birmingham about 7 o'clock at night. A little bit out of town the tire went flat, and in those days you didn't dare stop -- if you were a mixed group of African Americans and Whites in Alabama -- you didn't dare stop to fix a flat tire at night. And so they ran back into Selma riding on the rim of that tire and tried to procure another ambulance. And James Reeb was transferred to another ambulance. And by the time they made the 90-minute ride to Birmingham Hospital, it was 11 o'clock at night. He was taken into surgery immediately, but there was a massive, massive blood clot on the left side of his head that had already done the damage. He was in a coma, never to emerge from such. Unlike in the case of Jimmy Lee Jackson, in the case of his death and of his lying in the hospital for several days before he died --- in the case of the Rev. James Reeb, President Lyndon Johnson sent yellow roses to his hospital room and called him a good man. Marie, his wife, flew down from Boston to Atlanta and transferred to make connections to go to Montgomery and on to Selma. And she, in the Atlanta airport, met up with Rev. Duncan Hollett, who was the minister

with whom James Reeb had worked at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D. C. On Thursday March 11<sup>th</sup>, two days after he had sustained his serious injury, after consulting with many doctors and neurosurgeons, Marie made the decision to discontinue life support, and James Reeb died.

Now meanwhile, back in Selma, on Wednesday March 10<sup>th</sup>, the day before, there had been attempts to go to the courthouse. People had gathered there in Selma and stayed through the first attempt to march to Montgomery, were kind of changing their vision and changing their destination and trying to get to the Dallas County courthouse. But during those days of March 10<sup>th</sup> and March 11<sup>th</sup> and March 12<sup>th</sup>, the Director of Public Safety in Selma, Alabama had a clothes line strung across Sylvan Street, which is the street that runs in front of Brown Chapel. Later on he had wooden barricades set up. And they came to call it the Selma Wall, somewhat like the Berlin Wall. And people staffed that wall night and day, singing freedom songs, and praying. And when one group got tired, another group went in. And so it was for a few weeks in Selma, Alabama.

News of James Reeb's death went across this nation and around the world. And ministers came to Selma for that Sunday, which by now is the 14<sup>th</sup> of March. On Sunday afternoon and going into the evening there was a church service held in Brown Chapel. The entire Unitarian Universalist Association Board of Trustees – thirty strong – (and also all the staff at the UUA headquarters) -- adjourned their meeting and went down to Selma to be there in the church on that evening. They had flown in to Birmingham, Alabama and it was the fairly small Birmingham UU church that arranged for rides for them to go to Selma. And there's an interesting story about that. The death of the Rev. James Reeb did what almost nothing else could have. On that Sunday, March 14<sup>th</sup> in Birmingham, Alabama there were 400 people that came together in an interfaith service in memory of the Rev. James Reeb – 200 Whites and 200 African-Americans. And people were very generous with helping the Unitarian Universalist Association trustees and staff to get from Birmingham to Selma, and so they offered their church buses to help with this endeavor. And so there was the unlikely sight of the UUA Board of Trustees members riding in the Morning Star Freewill Baptist Church bus. And that is how they arrived in Selma.

I want to share with you good people in this church one of the incidents that happened during that service in Selma on Sunday, March 14<sup>th</sup>. They took up a collection. And that church was packed. People were sitting in the window sills, and people were at every crevice and every entry way; every doorway, every vestibule were just packed solid with people. And the balcony was packed solid, almost as if it were going to collapse. But during that passing of the basket, something amazing happened and the Unitarian Universalist Association Trustees who were sitting in a place of honor down in the front row to a person had shock and surprise written on their faces. For it was impossible to get baskets up to that balcony. And all of a sudden raining down from that balcony was money: bills and coins streamed down from that balcony, bills floating down and the coins bouncing on the floor. And people collected it and brought it forward in their way of showing support at this time. (I kind of wonder if Joe File and his ushers here might find a new way of doing the offertory. An Interim Period is the time you know to try new things.)

So those were some of the events from Sunday, March 14<sup>th</sup>. On Monday, March 15<sup>th</sup>, three events took place. In the morning, a group set out about 9 o'clock to try to go once again to the Dallas Courthouse and was once again stopped by the Director of Safety who said, no, this could not take place. In the afternoon at Brown Chapel the Memorial Service took place. It was supposed to start at two; it didn't start until three. And Dr. Martin Luther King so eloquently delivered the eulogy that we heard portions of spoken by Bob earlier this morning. Immediately

following this Memorial Service, there was the wondrous announcement made that a federal court had upheld the right for the marchers to go to the Courthouse, and so they set off. The compromise was, instead of marching ten across in the street, they were supposed to march three across on the sidewalk; and they could put up with that. But it was back and forth. But that had been a FEDERAL court saying it. They tried again the next day and the next, and the Director of Safety sometimes would toy with their minds and play with them. Yes, you can go to the courthouse. No, you can't. Get all lined up. No, you can't go. Get all lined up and we'll open the pathway, we'll take down the rope, we'll take down the wooden barricades. But no, you still can't go. Back and forth. They did get in one more march to the courthouse that week immediately following James Reeb's memorial service.

On Thursday, March 18<sup>th</sup>, finally the word came from a federal judge again that there would be National Guard troops to guard the people as they walked the fifty miles from Selma to Montgomery. This was greeted with tremendous joy. They were going to be marching along Route 80 for the fifty miles. Route 80 was a 4-lane highway at that time. But a portion of it, as it went through one very poor county, went down to a 2-lane highway. And they realized with concern that 3,000 people marching on a 2-lane highway probably wouldn't work. And so 300 people were chosen, mostly people from the three counties where the voting drives had taken place, but twenty-two others from out-of-state were chosen. One of them was Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Dick Leonard. They also had some marshals for the march to help people keep orderly. One of those marshals who went the whole fifty miles was a Unitarian Universalist from the Germantown, Pennsylvania church.

And so on Sunday, March 21<sup>st</sup>, people set off 3,000 strong to march from Selma to Montgomery. They stayed on three different farms owned by African Americans and slept in the mud, and there was a cold spell at that time: the weather went down to freezing. And they slept in the mud. On Thursday, March 25<sup>th</sup>, it was the end of the march at the state capitol building in Montgomery. Somehow George Wallace declared that the state capitol building was closed that day to the 25,000 people who had gathered. Many, many Unitarian Universalists came for the end of the march from Selma to Montgomery. Dr. King addressed them from the front of the capitol.

One of the Unitarian Universalists who had come that week of the Selma to Montgomery march was Viola Liuzzo. In the early sixties she left her Roman Catholic Church in Detroit and began attending the First Unitarian Church of Detroit. This was a woman who wanted to study to be a doctor. She answered the call to go to Alabama, and, like so many, she left family members behind: her husband and her five children. She drove through the night down from Detroit and then continued to use her car. She was a volunteer during that week driving countless trips from Montgomery to Selma and back, ferrying people from the Montgomery airport on to Selma. Also, because people had donated supplies from all over the country, getting those supplies to Selma. Just after the end of the march, on Thursday the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, 1965, Viola Liuzzo was shot and killed. Three members of the Ku Klux Klan were indicted. (It is thought that four people were around, firing the shots on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March.) But there was insufficient evidence to convict them. Another UU martyr.

Why do I mention all of this to you? Why do I mention all of this to you today? Well, one of the things I'm supposed to be doing during the interim period, one of the things you're supposed to be doing during the interim period, is to think about anti-racist endeavors and multiculturalism. Maybe I mention it to you because I hope this congregation would take up the challenge and make contact with the predominantly African American congregation here in Akron which has had trouble with building permits and zoning. I think we know a little bit about that subject, and I think we might be able to offer some assistance and join in common cause

with them. Maybe it's because I'm so proud of this congregation; for upon very short notice, having twelve or fifteen of you come together to support those who wish to build the Hindu temple in one of our suburban, outlying Summit county areas. Do I mention this today because I am so proud that last night at the Gospel concert which combined about 150 singers along with the Akron Symphony our own Lois Davis was one of those singers? Perhaps next year there will be more than Lois joining together in that endeavor. Perhaps it's because I'm so proud of the UU Women's group here who have recently said that, yes, indeed, we need to have a very visible symbol in this church of Sojourner Truth: we need to have her picture. And again, Lois Davis again was the one who spearheaded this effort – an effort to remind people, anybody who comes – visitor, newcomer, or long-timer alike - that it was from the steps of an earlier building of this congregation, downtown, that Sojourner Truth spoke her “Ain't I a Woman” speech. Perhaps I mention it this day because the times in Selma and Montgomery were times when people came together across interfaith lines, across ecumenical lines, and worked together, just as our Green Sanctuary people are seeking to work together with some people from St. Hilary's. Maybe it's because tonight is the Akron Interfaith Alliance dinner. I will be attending, and I hope that some of you will be also.

What does your church demand of you? What difficult thing does it ask of you? We as UU's don't talk about, “Well, it's a way to earn your way into heaven.” The Universalists have made that a moot point: everybody's going to be going there. But what does our church demand of us? We are called to carry out our UU faith. We're not called perhaps to do what James Reeb was called to do when lost his life. But we still are called to do things that are difficult at times, things that are troubling to us, things that we're not comfortable doing, that we're out of our comfort zone doing. For instance, having a conversation with a fellow congregation member about what this church means to them and how they are choosing to support it. And you will not be without support as you take up such conversations; for none other than our district executive, Rev. Joan VanBecelaere, has agreed to come in to help you all get to know the comfort level of having such conversations. I was thinking about it today and in some ways this is an altar call, the ‘altar’ is spelled slightly differently. It's altering the culture in this congregation, helping to create a change, so it's an alter call rather than an altar call.

Many UU churches ask that people make an identifiable contribution in order to be a member. How many in this room have bought a cup of coffee or tea this week? My, not very many! It's not a caffeine police up here. Raise them high. All right. Hot cocoa counts, too. Thank you. I'm not going to become a member of the Mormon faith and ask that you give up caffeine, not even for lent! But I am going to talk to you about a coffee fund for the deficit with which, not only our board but this entire congregation is struggling. The deficit in our pledge drive could be totally taken care of -- and then some -- if each of us were to take two bright shiny silver quarters a day, four on Sunday, and put them into a coffee mug, not your coffee fund! And every so often bring them in to church so the poor collectors don't have to count a whole bunch of quarters at the end of the year. And our deficit would be gone!!

I think that there does need to be a culture change here. I think about what happened in Birmingham, Alabama on that Sunday, March 21<sup>st</sup>, when people set off from Selma to Montgomery. There were not too many people from the Birmingham UU congregation who went on that particular trip on that Sunday. For the people in the Birmingham congregation, it was New Member Sunday. And what happened that day on New Member Sunday was that some police officers came to the church after it had recognized the new members, and they told the church that three bombs had been found across the city of Birmingham in various locations that Sunday morning. There was no specific threat but they wanted to search the building. The minister stood on a chair at the back of the sanctuary, so that he could be seen and heard, and

explained the situation. People were to gather their children and leave as soon as possible. There would be no coffee hour, no tea. The minister said to the assembled group of the Birmingham UUs, "For all you new members, this is what it's like to be a Unitarian in Birmingham. So welcome to the Unitarian Church. And see you tonight at the canvass dinner." Of a hundred and seventy-eight people who had signed up for that canvass dinner, a hundred and sixty-six came, despite grave concern about a potential bomb. And the thirty-five children, they came too, and the teenagers of that church provided child care and meals. That's what that church had chosen to do on that important day, Sunday, March 21<sup>st</sup>. They had chosen to help to strengthen their infrastructure. Their new minister was very new at that time, less than six months there. They had chosen to help support him.

Over thirty years ago a book was written by the author, Jim Kelly, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*. And what Kelly said was that they are churches that make demands on their members. I do not believe that the people of this church are any less committed than the people of the Birmingham congregation or than conservative church people. The Rev. Gordon McKeeman was one of those people who went to Selma at that time. Some of you may remember his leaving. I'd love to hear those stories. We need to get them in oral history and out there. I hope that this morning and through the next weeks you will show that you can do some difficult things, some new things. And so I make to you an "alter" call this morning.