

Haydenville Congregational Church

The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian

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Isaiah 62:1-5, Amos 5:14-15, 24

“People of the Dream”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

*[This sermon begins with a story about a large framed poster that was propped up
on the altar. The poster is sort of an antique! It shows two stylized hands, one
white and one Black, holding up a dove. The poster is from the 1960s.]*

I served as the Dean of Religious Life and Protestant Chaplain at Mount Holyoke College for ten years. Over the course of that decade I filled by spacious office with many colorful treasures—banners, photographs, candles, artwork—treasures that hung on the walls, filled the shelves and threatened to take over my office completely. One of those treasures was this poster which I had framed years ago. This poster hung on my office wall with pride.

This poster, when it was unframed, hung on the wall in my college dorm room in 1969. The Civil Rights Movement was fresh in our minds—its power, sacrifices and triumphs seared into our thinking and held with reverence in our hearts. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed the year before I started college. The Civil Rights Movement was current history when I was a first year college student and the Vietnam War was raging. This poster, which I bought in the Student Union at some poster and plant sale my first semester, hung in all my dorm rooms throughout my college career. After college I had it framed and I dragged it from job to job hanging it in every office where I worked.

When I arrived at the Haydenville Congregational Church in 2005 I brought my framed poster with me and thought to myself: maybe I won't hang it in my office, maybe I'll hang it in the Church Dining Room for everyone to see and admire. Our Church was very small then; there was a handful of members who served as Deacons, Trustees, Committee members and Chairs, congregation and choir!

One day, about a month into my ministry here, I was in the Dining Room wandering around looking for a place to hang my precious poster. As I moved from wall to wall wondering where to hang it, one of the original faithful servants who kept this Church alive when it was down to just a small core, someone who no longer worships with us, came into the Church. We chatted and this person noted the big framed poster in my hands.

“What are you doing with that?” the person asked.

“I am looking for a good place to hang it here in the Dining Room,” I said.

Then I noticed a disapproving look. We were both quiet.

So I said, “Would that be all right?”

I got a skeptical look. “Maybe I won’t hang it in the Dining Room,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll take it upstairs and hang it in my office.”

I took the poster upstairs and it has hung in my office ever since.

We’ll return to the fate of this poster later.

First let’s reflect on that stirring line Donique read from the Book of Amos.

“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream...”

Amos 5:24

Those words are chiseled into the base of the fountain that flows in front of the South Poverty Law Center Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. Those are the words every person stops and reads before entering the Museum. Our Church Mission Trip on route to New Orleans after Katrina stopped and read those words before visiting the Museum. Powerful words....words often spoken by Dr. King.

“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream...”

We are, as we know, God’s hands and feet in this beautiful but broken world.

We are Jesus’ contemporary disciples.

We are agents of change and we are called to help justice roll down like waters, called to make righteousness present in our lives like an everyflowing stream.

We are God’s nonviolent army of justice-seekers and peace-makers.

We are called...all of us in this little progressive Hilltown Church in Western Massachusetts....we are called, all of us called to be justice-seekers and peacemakers individually and in community here in our Church.

And that’s a tall order...

What can we individually and collectively do to promote justice, to combat racism and to manifest the dream that Dr. King lived for and died trying to create in a freedom movement that changed this country and the world?

What can we do individually and what can we do as a Church that will promote racial justice? We're a small Church, in a predominately white community, a predominately white church, in a small community. What can we possibly do to dismantle racism and promote racial justice? What can we do?

We can do a lot.

We can model ourselves after Jesus who was part of a movement that transformed the world. We can model ourselves after Jesus who was a bold and a brave ally. We can recognize that we are called to be the same.

Who and what are allies and how do we claim that identity?

Every movement agitating for social change whether it is the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, the Gay Rights Movement or the Disability Rights Movement...every movement for social change includes two groups of people...those targeted by the oppression that they are combating (targeted people would be African Americans, women, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered people, people with disabilities) and those who are dominant (white people, men, heterosexuals, able bodied people). Real strength in a movement for social change occurs when targeted people take hands and work for freedom from oppression with those who are dominant. Like African Americans working side up side with white people in the Civil Rights Movement, or women working side by side with men to stop violence against women. Those dominants who work side by side with those who are targeted are called ALLIES.

And every movement needs allies to stand side by side with those who are targeted.

As people of faith we are called to be allies.

Being an ally is in the air we breathe as Christians, it is part of our legacy, part of our calling, part of our job description as Christians...because Jesus was an ally. Jesus was an ally to poor people, he traveled with them, preached to them, assured them that they were particularly blessed and promised them that they would inherit the earth.

Jesus was an ally to women, he saw them, recognized them, traveled and ate with them and honored their gifts and leadership.

Jesus was an ally to children, he talked to them, made them visible, referred to them in his teaching and held them in his arms.

Jesus was an ally to sick people, he ministered to them, touched them with his hands, prayed over them and healed them.

Jesus was an ally and we can do no less.

As Christians, we need to understand and continue to claim our identity as allies. Today as we lift up the life, work and witness of our Christian brother The Rev. Dr. Martin King, we need to understand our role as people of the dream...people who continue to carry and manifest Rev. King's dream that all people of color would live without fear, with pride, safe, confident and empowered, and all white people would embrace the identity of ally and claim the role of anti-racist. As people of the dream we celebrate, encourage, honor and fund programs for people of color that focus on empowerment, self-discovery, and pride. We know that our brothers and sisters of color long to gather in safe settings without white people present to think and talk and work and build confidence and a sense of connection, safety and pride. We understand that some time apart leads to greater connection later and we bless our sisters and brothers of color on their journey, we bless and support them.

And those of us who are white know that as allies we continually educate ourselves about communities of color; we look for opportunities to be useful to targeted people by raising money for multi-ethnic groups and serving on boards; we talk about our commitment to racial justice even when it is awkward and we think that is not part of polite discourse; we ask our local libraries to make sure the children's department has multicultural offerings and displays that reflect our multi-ethnic society; we seek out opportunities to experience life as a minority by placing ourselves in settings where we are one of few white people; we leave the upper Valley and attend events in Springfield and Holyoke; we give money to groups promoting racial justice; we support projects and programs that promote the empowerment of people of color. We remain aware, sensitive and committed.

“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream...”
Amos 5:24

Jesus was a good Jew, he grew up hearing those words....those powerful words in the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus grew up hearing those words.

And he had an agenda.

He had a plan, he had a vision, he had a mandate from God.

He wanted to transform the world.

And part of the way he did that was by modeling a different way of being in the world, a different way of relating to people, a different way of recognizing the inherent worth of each individual.

Jesus was an ally. He saw, honored and befriended those who were marginalized and oppressed. When we embrace the role of ally, we are doing what Jesus did, we are continuing his work.

Our reading today from the Book of Isaiah includes these words...

“I will not keep silent...I will not rest...” As empowered people of color and white allies, we recognize the importance of those words.

This nation has come a long way in the struggle for racial justice, AND we have a long way yet to go. Both are true. Both are true.

And so we will not keep silent, we will not rest...

But the work does not rest on each one of us individually. As a community of faith, we are called to be united in our work for racial justice.

We are called to be an anti-racist church.

Our Church must reflect our dedication to racial justice...

The posters in our Dining Room from the vigil last year declaring our commitment to equity, nondiscrimination and love are important for us to see again and again week after week. Our ongoing promise to make our Children’s Church curriculum multi-cultural and inclusive helps to make us an anti-racist Church.

Our many anti-racism and cross-class workshops over the years have fostered dialogue, deepened our commitment to these issues, and helped us move forward united and strong. Our work in local prisons when we minister to people across lines of class and color helps us to live our commitment to social change.

“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream...”

The prophet Amos had a dream.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King had a dream.

And we are the people of the dream.

We are heirs to the ancient prophecy from the Hebrew Scriptures, we hear those powerful words that echo down through the ages.

We are the people of the dream.

We have inherited King’s vision, we strive to live out his legacy, and we move forward with hope.

We are the people of the dream

We are called to be empowered people of color and strong white allies.

And called as a community to be an anti-racist Church that makes our commitment to racial justice clear, felt, lived and visible.

Our commitment to racial justice needs to be clear, felt, lived and visible.

I think it is time this poster goes up in the Church Dining Room.

What do you say we hang in there today after our service is over?

Amen.