



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

Pippin: The Search for Truth and Meaning (Annual Music Sunday)

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

frederickuu.org

Chalice Lighting

Before we fully move into Music Sunday, I would like to name that as we gather, we hold the city of Baltimore in our hearts. There is so much to say about all that has happened since we were together last Sunday, starting with the uprising on Monday in the wake of the funeral for Freddie Gray. But perhaps the most important point is to remind ourselves that the violent reactions to the cruel, inhumane behavior that seemingly led to the death of Freddie Gray emerges out of centuries of institutionalized racism in our county. And that all the complexities of racial injustice that we've considered in previous sermons and studies — and Michelle Alexander's book [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness](#) — are all part of the background for the recent riots.

So as we prepare to kindle our Chalice flame, I invite you to hear just a few paragraphs from a speech The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave on March 14, 1968 (less than a month before he would be assassinated). The speech is titled "[The Other America](#)," and that his words remain hauntingly relevant almost four decades later is a strong reminder that we must continue to recommit ourselves to the longterm struggle for racial justice in this country, particularly in changing discriminatory laws around mass incarceration, the drug war, voting rights, and other related areas such as the wage gap and wealth gap. As Dr. King said more than 47 years ago:

I use this title [“The Other America”] because there are literally two Americas.... One America is beautiful.... In this America, millions of people have the milk of prosperity and the honey of equality flowing before them.... But there is another America. This other America has a daily ugliness about it that transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair.... In this other America, millions of people are forced to live in vermin-filled, distressing housing conditions.... In this other America, thousands of young people are deprived of an opportunity to get an adequate education.... Probably the most critical problem in the other America is the economic problem. There are so many other people in the other America who can never make ends meet because their incomes are far too low if they have incomes, and their jobs are so devoid of quality.... All too often when there is mass unemployment in the black community, it's referred to as a social problem and when there is mass unemployment in the white community, it's referred to as a depression.

[But] I'm absolutely convinced that a riot merely intensifies the fears of the white community while relieving the guilt.... But it is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that without, at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society. These conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. And I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear the plight of the [African-American] poor... And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity....

The destinies of white and black America are tied together.... And somehow, we must all learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] in this country or we're all going to perish together as fools.... there can be no separate black path to power and fulfillment that does not intersect white routes and there

can ultimately be no separate white path to power and fulfillment short of social disaster without recognizing the necessity of sharing that power with black aspirations for freedom and human dignity..... in this pluralistic, interrelated society we are all tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.

Amen. I light our chalice this morning in the spirit of hope that we may we come ever more fully to live out of that sense of interconnectedness and interdependence that was Dr. King's dream of Beloved Community.

[Light Chalice]

If you are looking for next steps in responding to the uprisings in Baltimore, one central resource is Baltimore United for Change (a broad coalition including communities of faith, CASA de Maryland, and many others): **bmoredunited.org**.

Now, reflecting on the uprisings in Baltimore is a fairly heavy place to begin. But if we are to live up to the aspirations of our UU Principles, this sanctuary must be a place where we account for the world outside these walls. And as I often say each week in the benediction, we are different each week for having spent this time together in community. There is a kind of magic and transformation that happens each week as we come together in diverse community to support, encourage, and inspire one another to work for peace and justice both in our daily lives and in the world.

As part of that work, the musical *Pippin* that we are inviting you to hear excerpts of this morning for our annual Music Sunday is very much in line with our Fourth UU Principle, "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." And the opening number of the musical is all about bringing our full selves — all the parts of our life and the life of the world (the good and the bad) — with us to this place, It's about the magic and transformation that happens here each time with gather. I'm grateful for your presence here this morning, and as is true each time we gather in this place, we have "*Magic To Do.*"

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The Broadway musical *Pippin* was first performed in 1972, but has had a recent revival. And after the success of the Broadway film adaptation, *Into the Woods*, the same team is now working on a Hollywood film version of Pippin.

The musical tells the story of Pippin, the firstborn son of Charlemagne, who in 800 C.E. became “the first recognized Roman emperor in Western Europe since the collapse of the Western Roman Empire three centuries earlier.” But this play is not about historical accuracy. It’s about a person’s existential search for truth and meaning. And through the magic of the stage, a troupe of performers, led by a “Leading Player,” accompany Pippin on his journey.

As a prince born into royalty and incredible privilege, Pippin at first thinks quite a lot of himself. Indeed, as he is crowned king in the wake of his father’s death, he anticipates that ruling will be easy. As Mel Brooks says, “It’s good to be the king!” — especially when you are **“Extraordinary”!**

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As you can perhaps guess, ruling a kingdom — not unlike being a parent or going to school or having a job — is often much more complicated in reality than one might anticipate in theory. And it turns out that changing the world is hard, even when you are supposed to be the most powerful person in the land. Accordingly, in the play, *Pippin* confesses at one point that, “I have an overwhelming need to be completely fulfilled. And it's never ever happened to me so I am in abject despair.” Today, we have some words for his condition: entitlement and narcissism.

In response, this next song is all about finding your place in this world — because Pippin shows us that even if you’re the king, there are still money limitations, power struggles, and institutions that resist change. And for the rest of us, who aren’t kings or queens, a similar question is raised of how we can leave this world changed for the better as a result of us having lived. And at various seasons of our lives, different ways of approaching vocational discernment resonate with us. So as we prepare to listen to the next song, I invite you to consider in this current season of your life, which of the following three definitions of “calling” resonates with you most:

(1) Frederich Buechner: “Neither the *hair shirt* nor the *soft berth* will do. The place [you are called] to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

(2) Robert Frost, “Two Tramps in Mudtime”: “My object in living is to unite / My avocation and my vocation / As my two eyes make one in sight. / Only where love and need are one, / And work is play for mortal stakes....”

(3) Howard Thurman: “Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then do that. What the world needs is people that have come alive.”

Where are you uniquely able to make a difference in this world? In this season of your life, what is your “*Corner of the Sky*”?

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As Pippin continues on his journey to find his “Corner of the Sky,” the next three songs are about the advice he is given along the way. First, the leading player challenges Pippin that rather than being extraordinary all the time, it may instead be in the simple, ordinary parts of life (those parts he thought he was too good for) where he can find his greatest happiness — those parts of life that the Leading Player calls “*Simple Joys*.”

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For anyone curious (I had to look this one up), “pelf” in that last song means “money, especially when gained in a dishonest or dishonorable way.” And studies have show that the relationship between increased income and increased happiness decreases precipitously once you make \$75,000 per year. But finding what makes you feel content, grateful, connected, and alive — those simple joys” — is vitally important for everyone because, as Pippin’s grandmother reminds him in this next song, when you look back it can often seem as if an entire lifetime has passed in “*No Time At All*”:

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The third and final piece of wisdom offered to Pippin on his journey is also from the Leading Player, who assures Pippin that he is “On the Right Track.” That advice can seem controversial, paradoxical, simply wrong advice, depending on where you find yourself in life. But I’m reminded of hearing the singer-songwriter David Wilcox introduce his song, “Hold It Up to the Light,” with an example taken from Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” about feeling anxiety and indecision regarding all the choices we make in life:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Wilcox said that he used to feel like he couldn't make any choices because he was afraid of choosing wrongly, through failing to take the "road less traveled." But over time, he noticed that in the middle of the poem Frost admits that the "passing there" "Had worn them really about the same." Wilcox said that he has come to think that Frost was speaking ironically in the poem and that the final line can throw you off if you fail to read it in context.

This insight doesn't apply in the same way, however, if one path is clearly a dangerous path. But Wilcox has come to think that Frost is saying is that at many points in our lives there are *many equally good choices* that can be made. And this idea that the choice you made "has made all the difference" is in many cases a "trick of retrospect." Our invitation then perhaps is to take our past, our path, and our possibilities and "hold them up to the light." And if we're doing that, we honor the journey this far, and trust that we are "***On the Right Track.***"

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The next-to-last number is the love song from *Pippin*, and it will serve as our offertory. With only a few adjustments we can hear this song as about not only the promises of romantic love, but also the support we find from friendship and community. (And in the play, Pippin soon discovers, as do we all, that romantic love is not enough to sustain a relationship for a lifetime. It takes regularly recommitting to kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, practices that are required for Building the Beloved Community.

Again, we are grateful to you all for your presence this morning, as well as the commitment and support of so many people to our music ministry at UUCF. Being able to plan and hold this annual music service — as well as all the programs, opportunities, and ministries here at UUCF— is 100% made possible by your generosity. I encourage you to give generously as you feel led to support the ongoing work of this community. ***The offering will be gratefully received.***

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Chalice Extinguishing

Even as we prepare to extinguish the flame we kindled for this hour, we are different for having spent this hour together. May your experience this morning enliven and inspire your ongoing

search for truth and meaning as we each individually and collectively continue to seek our
“Corner of the Sky.”