

About That Arc

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

January 13, 2019

READING **Of Justice and the Conscience**

from a sermon by the Rev. Theodore Parker, 1852: *Of Justice and the Conscience*

<http://www.fusw.org/uploads/1/3/0/4/13041662/of-justice-and-the-conscience.pdf>

Please note: when Parker references "the right," he means as opposed to "the wrong," not "the left." His is a statement of conscience, not politics.

God has made man with the instinctive love of justice in him, which gradually gets developed in the world. But in Himself [God] justice is infinite. This justice of God must appear in the world, and in the history of men; and, after "the wrongs that patient merit of the unworthy takes," still you see that the ploughshare of justice is drawn through and through the field of the world, uprooting the savage plants. . . .

Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice. Things refuse to be mismanaged long.

A THOUGHTFUL PAUSE

Often our pause is a prayer . . . this is sort of like one.

When we welcome new members among us as we did this morning, we share an invitation at the end of our recognition . . . we encourage our new members in earnest to: Come, sing a song with me . . . come, and among other things, be a part of the music that is our community life . . . because here at Theodore Parker Church we know how important, how essential, music is to our being, to the beating of our hearts, to the fullness of our spirits.

One of our members was encouraged to visit here when church shopping years ago: "Oh, you'll want to go to Theodore Parker – that's the musician's church. Music is sort of their theology."

Our thoughtful pause this morning is one of gratitude for those who contribute to that theology. So, before we consider Rev. Parker and his amazing moral arc thoughts, let us pause for gratitude.

• • •

For more than 27 years, this congregation has been blessed with the gift of music that **Yukiko Takagi** brings to us each week. Her spirit of adventure with the piano and the composers she brings to life for us is nothing short of spectacular. Our hearts are nourished, opened, surprised, sometimes even shocked, by what she chooses to help us understand. We can never adequately express what this gift has been and continues to be. We can only rise in body or spirit and offer our heartfelt thanks.

• • •

And for nearly 20 years, and perhaps I am underestimating, our singers have been gifted a partner – a volunteer partner – to help them learn the music that they sing to and for us several times a month. Many of us are unaware of the time that **Laura Dowd** has committed to this congregation and to this choir, showing up every week for rehearsal to accompany their voices, to help lift their joyful noise to new heights. Please let us remember how blessed we are to have her offering of time and love week after week. Please let us show our thanks.

• • •

Choir, dear friends, you are the heart of our voices every time you come forward to put one note with many with energy and harmony. We hope you feel our gratitude every time your willingness is on display; but, seriously, how would it come together, how would you practice and learn and offer your gifts, without our beloved Director of Music, **Michael Johnson**? This year marks his 10th with Theodore Parker Church – a decade of gathering, teaching, cajoling, encouraging, composing, arranging, and singing with us; bringing hymns, liturgical form, and his very own beloved jazz to our spiritual lives in ways that many of us would never have imagined. Feel the love, Brother Michael. Feel the love.

• • •

In our tradition, music is a fundamental expression of the holy in our midst. This church would not be what it is without this amazing trio. We become a sanctuary for ourselves and each other when we allow the music of our being to find its expression and its voice. In gratitude, and in full harmony, let us offer to each other, and to Yukiko, Laura, and Michael, this song of coming home – their gift to us each and every week.

Make us aware we are a sanctuary
Each made holy and loved right through.
With thanksgiving, we are a living
sanctuary anew.

SERMON

About That Arc

The Rev. Anne Bancroft

A relatively new friend to our church asked me several weeks ago about our services. Their family had visited a number of times and each time things were somewhat different and exceptional and they were curious about what the “regular” service was like. I thought about that afterwards and realized there ARE indeed things one can count on here:

- We will gather, and chat if we’re early, to welcome each other; and, discreetly find seating if we’re late.
- We will listen for the bell that signals the start of our service. Sometimes we will hear it, sometimes we will work hard to hear it.
- We will sing, every week, more than once. Some hymns you will like, others you won’t.
- We will have a time to be thoughtful, which some refer to as prayer and others don’t, and it may or may not be especially quiet, even the “silent” parts.
- We will hopefully leave with thoughts to be considered again during the week ahead, after some effort at making meaning of our lives, but there’s no guarantee that a particular message will reach you, only that it might reach someone’s ears or heart and maybe another week yours.

Other than those things I’ve mentioned, each week still might look somewhat different, actually – and if it wasn’t supposed to, in all likelihood it might anyway – as the spirit moves, and that, I think, is a part of our living tradition. Today we sang for our new members and thanked our music staff deeply for all they bring to our worship, and now we will consider, if not for enormous amounts of time, the message of our namesake. My goal each week, for what it’s worth, is connection, relevance, and the experience of wonder that might touch our hearts or move us to action. Other than that, you just never quite know because week to week we celebrate this curiously and engaging lived faith as it continues to evolve in our hearts.

• • •

Jolie shared with us earlier some short portions from Theodore Parker’s sermon, *Of Justice and the Conscience*. I commend it to you each – you can find it online in his book *From Ten Sermons on Religion*. His writing is dense in a 19th century fashion – this sermon alone is 11 pages of small, single-spaced text, and he builds his argument from the very ground up. There is MUCH to consider. And of that volume of writing, just four sentences were pulled from the middle and redacted into a 13-word statement made famous by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. If people know Parker at all, it is likely through that statement, sufficiently shortened and out of context so that it is, in fact, hard to know the full extent of his message.

The theme for this month is possibility, and the question I want to offer is whether it might be possible – given our present political and social environments – that the moral arc does not, in fact, bend indefinitely toward justice but might, actually and over time, reverse itself, or maybe its trajectory is not the straight, consistently upward movement we imagine. The idea that someone significant (like Parker or King) has said it, and it resonates to us and feels good, and we hear it often enough that we imagine it to be true and in some cases imagine we can stop worrying about what we need to contribute to the bending because it's going there regardless – all feels a bit risky. What if justice is not our continual path or our inevitable destination? Would it change, as E.B. White asks us to consider, how you plan your day? Would you feel less confident in our journey? (You may remember the author of *Charlotte's Web* saying that waking up with the urge to savor the world or save the world made the planning endeavor difficult.) If you felt you couldn't count on the idea that as a human entity we are moving in the right direction, how would that feel? Maybe I should ask, how DOES that feel?

Because having spent quite a while with Rev. Parker lately, I can assure you that his concept of the bending was not a given based on human tendency, nor was King's.

In Parker's sermon, he pokes repeatedly at our human efforts: significantly in politics, where he said, "Did the mass of men [excuse his gender exclusivity] know the actual selfishness and injustice of their rulers, not a government would stand a year. The world would ferment with universal revolution." And, in the social arena: "The foremost class in culture, wealth, and social rank have less than the average proportion of morality. Hence comes the character of laws, political, social and ecclesiastical institutions, [not leaving churches out, of course] not designed for all, but for a few, at best a part, because the makers did not start with adequate moral power, nor propose justice as an end."

His sermon is full of examples of leadership that is more swayed to its own success than the general well-being, lest we think this is a new phenomenon.

How is it, then, that Parker speaks about the moral universe and its arc of progress? Perhaps it will not surprise you, though it has been lost in translation I think, that according to Parker, it's not about us . . . justice is essentially God's doing.

As Jolie read for us earlier, "God has made man with the instinctive love of justice in him, which gradually gets developed in the world."

"His justice . . . shall one day create a unity amongst all men. . . . Justice is the idea of God. . . ."

I think we can agree that a large percentage of our population are a bit cavalier about the idea of God these days, right? I mentioned to you at some point a lawn sign at the Baptist Church near my house that proclaimed, “God doesn’t question YOUR existence!” The inference being obvious . . . God’s existence is more in doubt than its certainty, for sure.

So then, what happens to our beloved idea about the arc of the moral universe – what is the possibility of its bending toward justice when God is no longer an accepted or even imagined exemplar?

“Sometimes men fear,” Parker wrote, “that justice will fail, wickedness appears so strong . . . Shall justice fail and perish out from the world of men? Shall any thing that is wrong continually endure? When attraction fails out of the world of matter, when God fails and there is no God, **then** shall justice fail, **then** shall wrong be able continually to endure; not till then.”

Not till then. It may have seemed a long way off to him. And here we are – not that God has failed, necessarily, but that our relationship, surely, has changed.

So where does that leave us? In a bit of a pickle, I suspect, if Parker gets any credit. When we want to trust that our human capacity is productive, that we are ever able to effect a more just world, that we would respond to the “better angels of our nature” even as we question more and more the construct of God, let alone angels. “Man, though finite, is indefinitely progressive,” Parker assured us, “continually unfolding the qualities of his nature; his history, therefore, is not the whole book of man, but only the portion thereof which has been opened and read.” We keep trusting that the next chapter will be more filled with justice than the one before.

The question becomes whether the quality of our nature alone is sufficient to the task? I have my doubts, and I think even Parker would wonder, by current evidence at least.

Is the ideal even available, if the divine example is not engaged? Which is to say, if we don’t believe in the God of which Parker speaks, have we not enough ideal to live up to?

• • •

In the interest of 21st century relevance, let’s consider a more contemporary essay by linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky. (This essay was shared with me by Dave Harrington last year.) Chomsky writes that “In recent years, humans have constructed two huge sledgehammers poised to destroy us, with others waiting in the wings. . . . In brief, human **intelligence** has created a perfect storm. If it continues to rage, the human experiment is unlikely to survive for very long.” (Noam Chomsky,

Prospects for Survival, from a talk delivered in Montivideo, Uruguay, July 17, 2017, *The Massachusetts Review*)

Chomsky is referencing the two evils of nuclear weapons and environmental catastrophe, but the common observation between Chomsky and Parker (even nearly 150 years apart!) is that our intellect, our sense of our own mental capacity, is way out ahead of us in ways that predictably work against the common good. For Parker, our focus on intelligence is ahead of our moral compass. “. . . (C)ultivated men commonly seek large intellectual power, as an instrument for their selfish purposes, and neglect and even hate to get a large moral power, the instrument of universal benevolence.”

For Chomsky, our intellectual achievements challenge more basic capacities of adaptability. He references a modern biologist, the late Ernst Mayr, who questions the claim that “it is better to be smart than to be stupid.” Mayr points out that “as we move up the scale of what we call intelligence, biological success declines.” We become less facile, less adaptable. “In other words, what we call intelligence may be a lethal mutation.”

For both Parker and Chomsky, it appears that what we CAN do is getting the better of what we SHOULD do relative to both justice and survivability. It is our intellectual hubris that deters us from the common cause.

Not to mention, the concentration of money and power that is exacerbating that problem by placing authority in the hands of the few, and more recently in the hands of corporate enterprise.

Remember that pickle I mentioned earlier?

There is no doubt that many of us are committed, as Parker was, to the idea that we are the hands of what he imagined was God’s work; we are the instruments of the ideal. I think the problem is one of being so impressed with ourselves that as we have moved away from the construct of God – as we have discovered and invented and progressed our capacity to manage and even control our environments – we have neglected to reconsider the source of our capacity. We have been so busy with our impressive achievements that we have neglected to ground our hearts in a vision of anything larger than our own immediate needs.

I am inspired by Parker’s encouragement (even as my sense of the holy may be less dogmatic than his was) that the idea of justice comes from somewhere deep and more creative than ourselves alone, but how have we named it? And if we don’t take the time to do that, isn’t it just so very easy to overlook?

Culturally, we have forgotten the step between inspiration and achievement – even, sometimes, when we put our hands to work for the good, and certainly when we press on in our technical abilities. Think, for example, of our capacity to engineer human life and the unanticipated consequences that will result from our self-impressed and headlong journey towards the engineering before having considered the impacts. Examples of how we humans have bounded forward like excited puppies, so pleased with our ability without taking stock of the impacts of our efforts, nor the moral or spiritual vision that might be aligning them with the common good.

I'm guessing that the moral arc of the universe bending towards justice is not simply a function of our hands getting busy but our hearts engaging, again and ever, with the why of it all, taking the time to determine what the ideal is that we are serving, and how we make sure not to lose that humility, that grounding.

Maybe Parker's best gift to us is not his insistence that the arc is bending, but the moral imagination to encourage us towards that end. The trajectory of the arc, and the survivability of our species, is more a function of **moral engagement as a starting point** than where we eventually put our hands to service.

Let's be about **that** possibility here on a regular basis. It will no doubt do more to move the arc in the "right" direction.

Amen.