

Centre Congregational Church, UCC
The Rev Dr Scott Couper
Sunday, June 18, 2023
Third Sunday after Pentecost
Juneteenth (observed) at Centre Church
Father's Day

“...Blow the Damned Abolitionist Down the Bank”

Scripture: Luke 4:14-30



A Unitarian-Universalist preacher named Theodore Parker once wrote about the abolitionist cause: “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. And from what I see, I am sure it bends toward justice”. Martin Luther King, Jr. paraphrased Parker in at least four of his published statements or speeches saying

“the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice”. The conventional wisdom of this quotation is that ‘[good] change takes a long time, but it does happen’. It is no discredit to King that Parker originated this wisdom. Great people always borrow brilliant ideas from previous sages.¹ Much of what Jesus preached are theologies, phrases, and out-right quotations from the prophets.²

Yet, this morning I would like to take Parker and King’s point further and state that as people of faith, and as members and friends of Center Church, we are called daily to decide: ‘on which side of the moral arc do we find ourselves’? Another way of asking the question is, and we must do this as a daily practice, as daily contemplative devotional: ‘on which side of history do we find ourselves, for any given issue, and in general’?

I would like to reference three issues on which we as people of faith have in the past discerned. Slavery. That’s pretty easy issue on which to decide, eh? Yet, in our church, it wasn’t easy 190 years ago. Sexuality. Many of us today might think

¹ Wikipedia, “Theodore Parker”, found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_Parker#:~:text=I%20do%20not%20pretend%20to,later%2C%20Martin%20Luther%20King%20Jr., accessed June 18, 2023.

Fun fact, Theodore Parker also came up with the Abraham Lincoln’s phrase capturing democracy as being “of all the people, by all the people, and for all the people”.

² According to one source, Jesus quotes the prophets nineteen times!

Thomas Olmstead, “The Savior’s Use of the Old Testament”, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, July 2002. Found at: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2002/07/the-saviors-use-of-the-old-testament?lang=eng>, accessed June 18, 2023.

again that that is a pretty easy one on which to decide. Yet, it wasn't ten years ago when we discussed and decided upon whether our church would be in solidarity with, and thus offering protection and affirmation of, those who do not find themselves on a sex, gender, and sexuality binary (we all find ourselves on a spectrum). Toilets. You might think the provision of this basic need would not need much discussion. Yet, it was not easy to decide upon two weeks ago when we as a congregation agreed to place a porta-potty on our front lawn. All three issues placed this church on the moral arc. The question we must always ask ourselves is: 'where are we placing ourselves on the moral arc, as demonstrated by Jesus the Christ?' This is what I believe Lynn Herzog and Lisa Keller did for us when they quoted Jesus in our congregational meeting: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink [...] I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25:31-40).

In 1837, almost 190 years ago, another local Unitarian-Universalist minister, The Reverend Edward Tyler, sponsored antislavery lectures in Brattleboro. At the time, public sentiment was against any discussion of this question. The leading citizens encouraged a mob to disturb the lectures held on Elliot Street. Even, the minister of our own Centre Church, The Rev Dr Charles Walker, refused to read in

his pulpit a notice of these lectures. He also refused a notification of a “prayer meeting for the oppressed”. Reverend Walker recommended church discipline, or expulsion, of members who attended the lectures”. One Justice of the Peace said he would find “powder for the mob if they would blow the damned abolitionist down the bank”.³ Ironic that a justice of the *peace* said this! A little bit of further research revealed that those who opposed the lectures, many of which were presumably from our church, set-off cannons on Elliot Street, firing them continuously to drown-out the speakers.⁴ In age without sound systems, I imagine this was effective! Yet, the Reverend Tyler carried on and held the lectures despite the tumult. I think it is safe to say who was on what side of the moral arc.

Vermont became the first state to introduce civil union on July 1, 2000. Our own minister, The Rev Fred Edmonds, performed civil unions despite the angst of many more conservative members of our church. Same-sex marriage in Vermont has been legal since September 1, 2009.⁵ Ten years ago in 2013, our church became an Open and Affirming congregation. I would like to, on this ten-year

³ Dorothy Vander Meulen, *This Jewell on Main Street: Centre Congregational Church at 200 Years 1816-2016* (Shires Press, Manchester Center, 2015), 51.

⁴ The Brattleboro Historical Society, “Reflecting on the Struggle for Racial, Gender Equality in Brattleboro”, *The Reformer*, August 14, 2020. Found at: https://www.reformer.com/history/reflecting-on-the-struggle-for-racial-gender-equality-in-brattleboro/article_2cd0746d-30bf-5f6c-ba97-2381074c42cf.html, accessed June 18, 2023.

⁵ “Wikipedia, “Same-sex marriage in Vermont”, found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Same-sex_marriage_in_Vermont#:~:text=Same%2Dsex%20marriage%20in%20Vermont%20has%20been%20legal%20since%20September,so%20by%20a%20court%20decision., accessed June 18, 2023.

anniversary, publicly honor and thank Fred for his prophetic stance. He paved the way for Carra McFadden to enable our church to be on the correct side of the moral arc.

Two weeks ago, our church voted to host a porta-potty on our front lawn. Now, truth be told, it is Groundworks Collaborative, and thus Josh Davis and Peter Elwell, who deserve praise. Not me. Not Centre Church. Yet, we did make the commitment to host this bathroom. Since the porta-potty was installed, I have seen bikers use the bathroom. I have seen runners use the bathroom. I have seen senior citizens who are walking in town use the facilities. I actually have not seen one indigent person use the facilities (although I did find one beer can in paper bag which suggests an indigent person used it). No matter if you have a home or not, everyone needs to go! We are providing a basic human need for all the people in our town. I believe this is laudable. We have placed ourselves on the right side of the moral arc! For over a week, I have read nothing but praise for our church's hosting of the public toilet.

As I conclude, allow me to make two subtle, but important, qualifications. I am *not* suggesting that those who are conservative are *always* on the wrong side of the moral arc. And I am not suggesting those who are progressive are *always* on the correct side of the moral arc. Any student of history knows that the anti-

slavery movement took many forms, with many strategies and with many degrees of radicalism. Some abolitionists were very violent, and to be honest, a little crazy. For example, John Brown. As we honor Father's Day, I am not sure how great a father John Brown was. He dragooned many sons onto his warpath and three died violent deaths with him.⁶ You can be a conservative and a progressive and still be on the right side of the arc. Tactics and strategies differ! Some tactics and strategies are more conservative and some are more progressive than others. Yet what is key is that one decides to be on the correct side of the moral arc. Tactics and strategies can be legitimately debated – as we did, for example, discerning the *location* of the porta-potty. Aslo, I am not suggesting that I have always fallen on the correct side of the moral arc. I have often decided wrong. And this is O.K. None of us can be self-righteous. When we realize through God's word, or through education, or through a relationship in solidarity with another that we were on the wrong side of the arc, we confess, we repent, we ask forgiveness, and we move in a new direction. And God forgives us, abundantly, over and over and over again. No one is always on the correct side of the moral arc.

Ultimately, Centre Church fell on the correct side of the moral arc as it concerns the abolition of slavery. Thirty years after Edward lectured on Elliot

⁶ Study.com, "How many of John Brown's Children Survived?", found at: <https://homework.study.com/explanation/how-many-of-john-brown-s-children-survived.html>, accessed June 18, 2023 (subscription required).

Street, his brother and *our minister*, The Reverend George Tyler, preached the town's eulogy of Abraham Lincoln and heralded the abolition of slavery. Hence we observe Juneteenth in this service, the day that the last slaves received and were informed of their freedom in Texas. Ultimately, Centre Church fell on the correct side of the moral arc as it regards the issue of the full rights of and protections for queers. Thank you, Fred Edmonds and Carra McFadden. Ultimately, I believe Centre Church fell on the correct side of the moral arc when we voted to host a porta-potty, providing a basic need for all the citizens of our town. I do not know where Jesus would have put our porta-potty, but I believe that Jesus would have also preached, 'when I had to go to the bathroom really bad, you provided a place for me'.

This was the Word of God. And it was spoken to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen"!