



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

---

## “Still Dreaming 50 Years On”

© by **The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen**

A sermon delivered August 25, 2013

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*Freedom means the supremacy of human rights everywhere. Our support goes to those who struggle to gain those rights and keep them. Our strength is our unity of purpose. To that high concept there can be no end save victory.* Franklin D. Roosevelt

*Freedom is the right to share fully and equally, in American society – to vote, to hold a job, to enter a public place, to go to school. It is the right to be treated in every part of our national life as a person equal in dignity and promise to all others.* Lyndon B. Johnson

*There are all too many people who, in some great period of social change, fail to achieve the new mental outlooks that the new situation demands. There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution.* Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.  
1965 Oberlin College Commencement Address

*It means a great deal to those who are oppressed to know that they are not alone. And never let anyone tell you that what you are doing is insignificant.* Bishop Desmond Tutu

*[For the anniversary, let's] bring people together across cultural and political lines to celebrate our common humanity in creative and uplifting ways in the spirit of the dream.* Bernice A. King

### Sermon

This coming Wednesday will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The event almost didn't happen. Politicians, including President John F. Kennedy, tried to have the organizers cancel it. They feared inviting thousands of people onto Washington's streets would result in violence. To encourage marchers to come and leave town quickly, the march occurred in the middle of the week. Schools in DC closed. Businesses shut down. Police were on high alert. One New York Times journalist reported on the event from a helicopter to keep him safe from anything that might ensue. It kept him away from what did occur.

At least two hundred thousand people descended upon Washington and marched peacefully through the streets. Black, white, rich and poor, all stood side-by-side to cheer, to sing, to support, and witness to the day's remarkable events. One speech at the March became iconic,

ushering in more rapid social change than might otherwise have occurred. The moral arc bent a little more towards justice and freedom because of the March and other events leading up to and following it, including the awful bombing of a Birmingham (Alabama) church that left four beautiful little girls dead.

Fifty years have passed since the speeches were delivered and the songs sung, but we remember that one defining speech delivered by the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., the last scheduled speaker. The organizers knew no one would want to appear after Dr. King. But even Dr. King had no idea how the day would end. He began by reading his typed words. But behind him, the singer Mahalia Jackson kept prompting, "Tell 'em about the dream, Martin. Tell 'em about the dream." She repeated this a few times and finally Dr. King went off script. He said:

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.

Dr. King continued on, repeating that memorable phrase, "I have a dream."

When the event was over, King himself declared the March, (quote) "the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation." (USPS news release) Principle organizer of the event, [BUY-ard] Bayard Rustin, noted, "What made the march was that black people voted that day with their feet." It gave African Americans "an identity which is a part of the national struggle in this country for the extension of democracy."

As a result of that historic moment and other timely civil rights events, just months later in 1964 Congress passed and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act which outlawed public school segregation and job discrimination based on race. Following in its wake, in 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed, providing federal oversight of voting rights in the south. And since those signings more and more people of color have found themselves in positions of influence and authority. Three years later, in 1967, Thurgood Marshall was named the first African American Justice to serve on the Supreme Court. Now other people of color sit on that exalted bench. And the US enjoys African, Latin, and Hispanic Americans, as well as people who identify with other minority groups, serving in elected office, White House cabinet positions, and even as President of the United States. Much progress in equality and opportunity has taken place. There is much to celebrate.

But Dr. King's dream is still a dream. For many African Americans their lives remain a nightmare. Author Michelle Alexander, in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, documents that freedom and equality are far from a reality for black Americans. She describes how the justice system has been used to create a new form of discrimination, prejudice hiding behind law. Felons, for

example, are stripped of their voting rights and discriminating against them in employment is legal. And who makes up the majority of felons in this country? Not white people. The statistics are frightening. One in three of all African Americans are behind bars, on probation, or somewhere in the criminal justice system. That number is more than the number who were ever enslaved in this country's past.

Over 80% of black men living in urban centers in our country are either in jail, on parole, or somewhere in the criminal justice system, writes Alexander. In our nation's capital where they commemorated the March on Washington yesterday, she says three out of every four young black males are expected to serve time in prison. Imagine if that was three out of every four white males. Whatever your skin color, when you frame that statistic within your own group, it feels horrific. And you can believe if that number represented white males, whites would not be sitting idly by. Sadly, that power and privilege has not been extended equally to all racial identities. Too many whites sit idly by because it is not a white statistic.

Why are more black people incarcerated? Are they somehow more immoral than other races? Although there was a time in our history when many educated, moral, white Americans justified enslavement and unequal treatment of minorities because of perceived deficits of character and ability, we know this isn't true. Blacks are no more likely than whites to engage in criminal activities. Statistics show the rates are similar, but the arrest and incarceration rates are not the same. For example, when the war on drugs was established in the 1980s, crack cocaine was cheap, therefore the urban poor who were predominately black, used it. Powder cocaine was not cheap, therefore the suburban rich who were predominantly white, used it. The justice system established harsher penalties on crack cocaine users than that received by powder users. Racism found a new field to play on.

In the last 30 years since the war on drugs was announced there has been a 700% increase in the American prison population. Guess whose profiting off these policies? Private companies. Their profits depend on filling up prisons. Recently, Attorney General Eric Holder announced new policies concerning drug crimes which will reduce, in his words, 'draconian mandatory minimum sentences' for minor, non-violent drug offenses. His "Smart on Crime" initiative intends to lower the federal prison population, too.

Although we may be moving to correct some forms of discriminatory criminal justice, some states in my opinion are moving in the wrong direction. Just recently the Supreme Court dismantled a piece of the Voting Rights Act, likely leaving many citizens at risk of voting disenfranchisement. North Carolina reduced its early voting schedule making it harder for some parts of the labor force to have time to vote, in part because longer lines and less optimum time periods remain. Voter ID laws target the poor who may not own cars and therefore not have driver's licenses and who may have no need of picture identification cards, credit cards, or the like. These laws have been changed despite there being no history of voter fraud problems.

Florida's 'Stand Your Ground' law is another case in point. After George Zimmerman was acquitted of murdering Trayvon Martin, an artist replaced King's face in a picture of Trayvon wearing a hooded sweatshirt, or hoody. Many have asked "What would Martin do?" in response to the killing of that young teenager guilty only of 'walking while black' in the sight of an armed

neighborhood vigilante. You don't have to agree with my characterization, but I believe Trayvon was profiled and an incident created where none needed to be. No crime was being committed when Zimmerman called 911 nor when he confronted and shot Trayvon.

On a recent news show, the Reverend Al Sharpton was asked, "What would Martin Luther King have done in response to the events and the trial?" Sharpton pointed to the stand your ground laws and said Dr. King would speak out against injustice anywhere and he would work to change Stand Your Ground laws. Some of us here today will speak out against injustice this Wednesday at a rally sponsored by the local NAACP and in part by our Social Action Committee. I believe your announcements tell about this event. I'll be there wearing my standing on the Side of Love t-shirt because love needs to bring us together. Love will make us one. Hate and fear divide us.

It's easy to create categories of people that divide us into racial groups which create an artificial 'us' and 'them'. When the George Zimmerman's of the world treat all young black men as criminals they are objectifying all black men. They do not affirm an individual's worth. The person becomes the category. I'm not saying we ignore differences, but we must acknowledge we are different as individuals with different experiences and ideas, not because of the color of our skin or the language we speak. We embrace diversity in this congregation so that all of us can share our experiences and ideas, and be the richer for it.

'Us' and 'Them' thinking keeps many from acting to eliminate injustice. We dismiss it as 'their' problem. But because I believe we shouldn't objectify others and because our First and Seventh Principles tell us every individual has worth, and all individuals are inseparably connected in one grand 'life' category, then what happens to one happens to all. We are one and we must act as one.

Under my clerical robe I'm wearing my Standing on the Side of Love t-shirt in solidarity, as one with all who are oppressed and marginalized—Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, immigrant, women, children, poor, and those physically and mentally challenged. Love calls me on to work for justice and equality and freedom for all of us. If you affirm the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism and commit yourself to them, then you, too, stand on the side of love. Love calls us to dream as it called Dr. King. He envisioned a time when we will be judged by our character, not our color. May our actions speak of our character. May we not only dream but work to bend the moral arc towards greater justice, freedom, and equality. We can do it. Let us make it so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Share a time when you felt the sting or power of prejudice, racism, or marginalization for being who you are.
2. When do you feel most free and when do you feel most bound by cultural limitations?
3. How might UUFA and its members respond more actively to human rights needs in the greater Athens area?