

**A Moral Revolution**  
**Rev. David A. Morris**  
**Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks**  
**September 18, 2016**

***The Higher Ground Moral Declaration***

*We declare that the deepest public concerns of our nation and faith traditions are how our society treats the poor, those on the margins, the least of these, women, children, workers, immigrants and the sick; equality and representation under the law; and the desire for peace, love and harmony within and among nations.*

*Together, we lift up and defend the most sacred moral principles of our faith and constitutional values, which are: the economic liberation of all people; ensuring every child receives access to quality education; healthcare access for all; criminal justice reform; and ensuring historically marginalized communities have equal protection under the law.*

*Our moral traditions have a firm foundation upon which to stand against the divide-and-conquer strategies of extremists. We believe in a moral agenda that stands against systemic racism, classism, poverty, xenophobia, and any attempt to promote hate towards any members of the human family.*

*We claim a higher ground in partisan debate by returning public discourse to our deepest moral and constitutional values.*

Last Monday, in at least 30 states, coalitions of people including advocates for racial justice, immigration reform and the protection of immigrant families, living wages and workers' rights, women's reproductive health, universal access to healthcare, public education, equal rights for LGBTQ people, environmental justice, and criminal justice reform came together in what was called the National Higher Ground Moral Day of Action. Longer versions of the declaration you've just heard, with thousands of signatures, were simultaneously delivered to state houses across the country.

To quote the summary shared on Wednesday by the Rev. William J. Barber II, the President of North Carolina's Chapter of the NAACP, "in 30 state capitols and the District of Columbia, rabbis, imams, priests and preachers stood with people impacted by unjust policies to declare, in one voice, that some issues are not liberal or conservative, but right versus wrong."

Rev. Barber has joined with the Rev. Dr. James Forbes, senior minister emeritus of the Riverside Church in New York City, Sister Simone Campbell, a Roman Catholic nun, lawyer, and justice activist, and the Rev. Dr. Traci Blackmon, the United Church of Christ's executive director for Justice and Witness, in a Revival tour, calling for a "Moral Revolution of Values" in our country. They have already delivered the Higher Ground Moral Declaration to both the Republican and Democratic Party conventions and held events in D.C. and in New York; in the next few weeks they'll appear in Kansas City, Richmond, Ferguson, Missouri, Louisville,

Minneapolis, Charleston, and more, with revival events that will be streamed online for those of us who cannot attend in person.

A movement for justice, equity, and compassion is stirring across the country. Unitarian Universalists are part of it in many places. If we choose to be, we can too.

It's no coincidence that the peak of activity by this growing coalition of moral dissenters is happening as the election draws near—or that it's focused on Presidential battleground states and on states where legislatures have been systematically dismantling public education, access to healthcare, voting rights, and civil and economic protections for their states' poorest and most vulnerable people. The Moral Revolution calls for political change—and this is one of the most critical election years in recent memory, maybe one of the most critical in the history of our nation. Yet this is not at heart a political movement, in the partisan electoral sense.

The movement's organizational roots go back to the coalition of sixteen organizations that created the first North Carolina People's Assembly in 2007, drawing thousands of people in the February cold to a historic gathering for education and advocacy on Raleigh's Jones Street.

Its moral ancestry goes back further, to the multiracial, multi-faith coalitions in our nation's history who worked for the abolition of slavery, who fought for women's rights, who helped create racially integrated legislatures during Reconstruction, and who resisted the renewal of legalized white supremacy and white racial terrorism from the time Reconstruction was abandoned to the Civil Rights Era. Unitarians and Universalists were part of those coalitions, too.

In truth, the Moral Revolution's ancestry goes back further. Religious leaders who are part of the movement trace their responsibility to work for justice all the way back to the ancient scriptures and stories of their faith, and ground their work in a divine call for justice. Rev. Barber himself likes to quote the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah, who conveys these words from God to the rulers of the people:

“Is not this the fast that I choose:

To loose the bonds of wickedness,

To undo the thongs of the yoke,

To let the oppressed go free,

And to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

And bring the homeless poor into your house;

When you see the naked, to cover him,

And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

This is not a partisan political agenda. When Hebrew prophet Micah says that all God requires of the people of God is to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God,” the question of whether God’s party is Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Green, or Socialist Worker doesn’t come up.

In the next few days I’ll work with our Facebook and Web Page folks to post links to pictures and information from the Higher Ground Day of Action. If you want to feel good about people putting our faith into action, you should take a look. In picture after picture from those 30 state events, you’ll see those yellow Standing on the Side of Love banners and t-shirts, and U.U. clergy members among the people posing in front of State Capitol Buildings.

Some U.U.’s engaged in the Moral Revolution identify as Jewish or Christian, and for them those ancient words from the Bible are as compelling as they are for any Evangelical, urging them to “bring the good news to the poor,” as Jesus instructed in his very first sermon. For others, the “holy ground” they stand upon is different: Perhaps a firm belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person is the foundation of their moral understanding; or perhaps it’s Buddhist teachings of universal compassion. The ethical teachings of humanism that firmly place responsibility for building a just and equitable society into human hands are compelling for some.

For me, the fundamental interconnectedness of all human life convinces me beyond doubt that no one is free when some are oppressed, that no prosperity is sustainable when some are destitute, that there is no “security” to be found by harming others.

What is that holy ground for you, the place where you can stand firm and sure in seeking justice, equity, and compassion? We need to know, because if we choose to be part of the Moral Revolution, we are in for the long haul, and only a sure sense of our own moral foundation will sustain us. However convinced we may be that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, there is no doubt that struggle will be necessary to help it make the curve. Struggle is always necessary, as the liberated slave Frederick Douglass reminded us in 1857 when he wrote:

“The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. . . . If there is no struggle, there is no progress. . . . Power concedes nothing without demand; it never has and it never will.”

Today, the powers that seek to keep systemic inequality and injustice in place are strong, and they are determined, and they do not hesitate or hold back from using any means necessary to hold on to political power. If we choose to “lift up and defend the most sacred moral principles of our faith and constitutional values,” as the Higher Ground Moral Declaration says, we will need every spiritual resource we can find to keep us in the struggle.

So what do you think? Are we part of the Moral Revolution? Do we want to be?

The organizers of last Monday's Day of Action ask for two things from those who are ready to sign the declaration, which you can do online if you choose to. First, they invite anyone and everyone to organize, get to the polls, and vote for candidates who will embrace a moral agenda. Sister Simone Campbell's organization provides online resources and tools for engaging the election as effectively as possible. Second, they ask rabbis, imams, priests, pastors, and other clerics to preach and teach about the moral agenda at least twice between now and November 8th. So if you're wondering why this came up today. . . now you know.

I have one other invitation for us: Rev. Barber's most recent book, *The Third Reconstruction*, published by our Unitarian Universalist Association's own Beacon Press, is the U.U.A.'s "common read" selection this year, a book that all UUs are invited to read and engage. Starting in October, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Thursdays of each month, I will be facilitating a drop-in, social justice-related book group for anyone who would like to join, and this is the first book we'll explore together. If you're interested, send me an email or text this week and I'll order books for us together when my Study Leave ends next week, so we get a discounted price. I encourage you to get and read the book even if you can't join the group—it's powerful and moving, and well worth your time.

Throughout the history of our country, there have been moments of great promise and great peril, when we have had the opportunity to move toward a greater fulfillment of our founders' incomplete vision—or to move further away from it. We have done both over time. I believe we are living in one of those moments now. Right now, we have the chance to become a more inclusive, more just, more compassionate and equitable society—or to make another agonizing u-turn, and take a detour that could be fatal.

Each of us and all of us can help to choose the better path.

May we be the ones to make it so.