THREE DAUGHTERS OF FREEDOM

January 15, 2012, First Unitarian Church of Saint Louis

Early in my life as a preacher I gave a sermon on the spiritual life of Martin Luther King Jr. In the congregation was a woman from the Transylvanian region of Rumania, near to where we have a partner church. Notice the red banner to my left from Csokfalva. She was proud of her heritage. After that sermon she asked me, "knowing hundreds of years of Unitarian history and the many great Unitarian leaders, why did you spend an entire sermon talking about a Baptist?!" Of course I responded with something about how we do not draw circles to shut people out. Today I expand on that by saying that we honor all children of Freedom, the sons and the daughters. Anyone who works for justice and freedom can be one of Freedom's children. What does freedom mean to you? Often we accept a limited definition, freedom from restricting rules, freedom to do what you want. But "spiritual freedom", as the old saying goes, "Is not the right to do as you want but the liberty to do what you ought". Freedom is power, it is conspiracy with change, and wouldn't you know it but Freedom is a woman. *Liberty* is a woman who stands in the harbor; her flaming torch leading people not just to freedom *from* oppression and unjust limitations, she also offers freedom *to be:* to be creative, to be a leader, and free to work at building the Beloved Community. Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day so today is Civil Rights Sunday; a celebration of the Civil Rights movement, especially from 1955 to 1968, we celebrate its key leader the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. and its countless workers as well. This sermon is about how three of these workers became daughters of Freedom. I hope you will see something of your own desire in their stories. To paraphrase the choir this morning: those who take the road less traveled are children of Freedom. Those who follow freedom hold to something like a star.

When I came across the book by Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*: *The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970*, I knew I wanted to give a sermon inspired by daughters of freedom. [All page references in this printed sermon are to her book] I do not follow her work exactly, since she names many women I do not, and I include much in the story of Ms. Liuzzo that she did not. Of course men were essential, in the struggle for women's rights, as well as in the general Civil Rights movement. But often women's contributions have been minimized and forgotten because the men were so visible. As a congregation and as a movement Unitarians decided long ago that some leaders happen to be women and others men. What matters is not their gender but their spiritual parentage and the quality of their character. Only a couple of weeks ago we lifted up Sonia Pierre and her fight for rights in the Dominican Republic.

Today I lift up these three women because they remind us that we can all follow freedom. It could be you are seeking liberation from fear or addiction or oppression. Maybe you think gay or lesbian or bisexual people should be treated as persons rather than as symbols of promiscuity. Perhaps you want to empower young men or old women who are wasting their lives in dissipating distractions and dispiriting attitudes. Or do you may want humanity to live in harmony with the trees, and the great herons, and the coyotes, free from the oppressions of greed and materialism; then know that the journey to justice demands that you claim your power in the midst of powerlessness, that you must organize with others, and that you must be willing to accept sacrifice with no clear reward; it will demand years of effort, often more than any one life can hold.

One woman who knew about claiming power in powerlessness was **Fannie Lou Hamer**. She was the driving force behind the Mississippi right to vote movement and her voice was heard across the nation. Fannie Lou was the youngest of 20 children raised in an extremely poor sharecropping family. In a family like that, even the five year old girls are laborers; even the food is hand-me-down. She knew hardship and she knew about endurance. Despite everything she grew up, and married. In 1961 she needed to have a benign cyst removed from her abdomen. A local, white, Doctor, removed the cyst, but it was not until much later that she learned that he also sterilized her because he wanted fewer poor black children around. She knew powerlessness from the inside out.

In 1962, "She attended a mass meeting at her church one hot summer night and heard [voting rights organizers] James Forman and James Bevel talk about how blacks, by registering and voting could get rid of the corrupt white officials who made their lives miserable." Until that night she did not know it was possible for her to vote. Despite being legal, she knew that the reprisals for registering would be certain and harsh. Yet when the two men asked for volunteers she raised her hand before anyone else. "The only thing they could do to me was kill me," she said "and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time ever since I could remember [pp.253-254.]" Knowing the violent opposition to liberation Fannie Hamer once said that Mississippi was "The land of the tree and the home of the grave." But we should remember that lynching of black and white people took place even in the free state of Missouri.

Fannie Lou became a powerful organizer. She knew that the alliance between civil rights workers and local people could be powerful, but it took time to claim. Fannie Lou once said to Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader John Lewis. "If you're going to come to Mississippi, you can't just come here and stay for just one day or one night. You've got to stay here for the long haul. I know Mississippi [she could have said the same of Detroit or St Louis] and you'd better be ready to move in [pp.252-253]."

Despite harassment and threats she talked to anyone she could, personally got them to register and then to vote. Her voice and presence had the power to set a room on fire. In those days in Mississippi they had to go to the county courthouse to register, not just to a local driver's license office. In Sunflower County this was Indianola, often a full day's bus trip for sharecroppers who had no cars. She would ride busses with others to courthouses and help them fill out the forms, protesting at the inevitable resistance and degradation. Hamer is most well known for her confrontation with Lyndon Johnson about the inclusion of blacks at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. But my favorite Hamer story is about the preacher near Ruleville who was resistant to getting involved in worldly stuff like voter registration drives.

He was reading from Exodus about the release of the Israelites from slavery. "After the reading the minister smiled at Hamer. "I'm right pleased that Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer has joined our service this mornin'," he said. "…Would you like to say a few words to the congregation?" That was his mistake. I don't know if they ever got to his sermon. "She transfixed the congregation as she equated their plight with that of the children of Israel… Pharaoh is in Sunflower County!" She declared. "Israel's children are building bricks without straw at three dollars a day!" That was their wages then in Mississippi. "They're tired! And they're tired of being tired!" She paused, then turned to the minister and pointed her finger at him." There congregation was silent straining to hear what she would say knowing her conflict with the minister. "And you, Reverend Tyler, must be Moses!" she cried. "Leadin' your flock out of the chains and fetters of Egypt- taken' them yourself to register –*tommorra*- in Indianola [p.256.]" Claim your power in this world, she told him, not powerlessness.

She was not always so successful. In June 1963 she was falsely arrested in Winona, Mississippi. She and those with her were nearly beaten to death by some black inmates recruited by the police to do their dirty work for them. One of her kidneys was shattered and an eye permanently damaged. She spent more than a month in the hospital. But she did not give up to powerlessness. She kept going, kept claiming her power and getting others to do the same, because she was a daughter of Freedom.

Rosa Parks was claiming her power long before Martin Luther King Jr. came on the scene. Now Martin King Jr. was a great man. He knew what he was doing when he consciously crafted the public image of Rosa Parks as a poor seamstress, tired after a long day's work, who just happened to "get on a bus one day and ignite a movement" [p.97]. But we know that Mrs. Parks, not only had been working on the issue of desegregation and equal rights for years, she was part of organizations of men and women that had been doing the same. Olson notes that "Rosa Parks, together with E.D. Nixon, was the mainstay of the Montgomery NAACP through the 1940s and 1950s. On her lunch hours, in the evenings after work, and on weekends, Parks would be in Nixon's office, answering phones, handling correspondence, sending out press releases to newspapers, keeping track of the complaints that flooded in concerning racial violence and discrimination" In the 1940 she helped organize the NAACP Youth Council and became its adviser, encouraging then to try and desegregate the public library [p.97.] Rosa was an activist and organizer, part of a long line of women activists. She was tired, not from a day of work, but of daily oppression and lack of freedom.

Another woman, Jo Ann Robinson, president of the Women's Political Council in which both middle class and working poor people actually worked together, had begun the struggle to desegregate the busses of Montgomery Alabama in 1949 [p.89.] In April of 1955 a fifteen year old girl, Claudette Colvin, had been arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus. Rosa Parks was part of those trying to organize a mass boycott in response. Then some male leaders of the Negro community decided her case was not ideal and the boycott collapsed. Rosa Parks was frustrated by that failure. Because Ms. Parks had been harassed by bus drivers in many ways for her refusal to obey their rules and once before she was physically tossed off of a bus. The driver grabbed her and raised his fist. She said to him, "I know one thing for sure: you better not hit me." He didn't, but he threw her into the street [p.98]. This was part of her nature, to fight for what was right, to stand up to injustice. She had long prepared for such confrontations. But she did not always work alone.

Often she was bitter about how long it all took. Often, as when the proposed boycott concerning Ms. Colvin evaporated, she despaired that anything would ever change. But she did not give up. She devotedly returned to the courthouse three times just to register to vote. All the while she also kept connecting with others, forming relationships and organizations, so that when the time was right they all would be ready. One day she resisted yet again, and that time the boycott held. The rest is history.

Another woman who stepped out of the paths proscribed for her and organized with others was **Viola Liuzzo**. She decided that if she was truly to help the most oppressed she would have to face the dangers that they faced. Viola was a Unitarian Universalist who worked for education and economic justice, and who gave her life for the cause of civil rights. Born on April 11, 1925, Growing up she lived in Tennessee and Georgia, and in poverty and hardship. Yet she could see injustice beyond her own difficulties. According to the Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography [http://www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/], at age six, when her mother

was manager of a small Georgia grocery store, Viola took money from the cash register and gave it to a black child whose family was even poorer than her own.

In early 1943, she met Sarah Evans, a black woman and they became closest of friends. Often, Evans cared for Viola's children while Viola worked as a waitress. In 1956 Viola married James Liuzzo, a union organizer for the Teamsters. They had three children and Jim legally adopted children of Viola's previous marriage. Evans worked as the Liuzzo family's full-time nanny and housekeeper.

At age 35 Liuzzo, a high school dropout, decided to improve her life and attended classes at Wayne State University. She continued to be active in local efforts on behalf of reform in education and economic justice. Twice in her life she was arrested, pleaded guilty, and insisted on a trial to publicize the causes for which she was an advocate. Evans said of her friend, "Viola Liuzzo lived a life that combined the care of her family and her home with a concern for the world around her. This involvement was not always understood by her friends; nor was it appreciated by those around her." This was very true in the Catholic congregation she had joined. Raised without religion she had become Catholic by marriage, yet she worked for social change in a way that those particular Catholics did not, nor was she traditional or domestic as they expected her to be. Feeling out of place she went looking for a new religious home and found one. In 1963 Liuzzo began attending the First U. U. Church of Detroit. She became a member of that church on March 29, 1964. The same year Sarah Evans and Viola drove to New York City to attend a United Nations Seminar on civil rights sponsored by the U.U. Association.

Many members of that UU church had been Freedom Riders. A year later, March 9 of 1965, the UU Reverend James Reeb, was attacked on a street in Selma by a group of whites on and died two days later. She attended a memorial at First Unitarian Universalist for the Rev. Reeb and participated in a Selma sympathy march, on March 16th. That night Viola complained to her husband that there were "too many people who just stand around talking." She decided that she had to help, and that she was going to Selma for a week. She asked Evans to explain to her children where their mother had gone and to tell them she would call home every night. Sarah warned that Viola could be killed. Liuzzo replied simply, "I want to be part of it."

After the Selma to Montgomery March was over, many people had to be ferried to the airport or back to Selma. Viola used her car for this with a young man, named Leroy Moton, for her protection. Late in the day they dropped off five passengers and headed back to Montgomery where Moton lived. About half way back four men pulled their car up next to hers and fired a gun into her car and body. The 39-year-old mother of five was killed instantly. Her car rolled into a ditch. Soaked in her blood Moton escaped death only by pretending to be dead.

Jim Liuzzo learned of his wife's death at midnight. The following day President Lyndon Johnson called Jim and said, "I don't think she died in vain." At one gathering The Rev. James Bevel said, Viola "…gave her life that freedom might be saved throughout this land." On March 28, at San Francisco's Grace Episcopal Cathedral, Rev. Martin Luther King said of Liuzzo, "If physical death is the price some must pay to save us and our white brothers from eternal death of the spirit, then no sacrifice could be more redemptive." On March 29 the NAACP sponsored a memorial service for Liuzzo at the People's Community Church in Detroit. Fifteen hundred people attended, among them, Rosa Parks. On March 30 at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Roman Catholic Church in Detroit, despite her religious affiliation, a high requiem mass was celebrated for Liuzzo. Some protested the mass, citing Liuzzo's divorce and remarriage. But the Priest, Father Deasy said, "I felt very strongly about this woman and her goodness. She inspired us all. Her energy, enthusiasm and compassion were contagious and put many of us to shame."

Yet when the trial began for the men who killed her it seemed as though she was the one on trial. Many began to criticize her for leaving her family and risk her life for a cause that was not hers. The defense attorney accused her of having an affair with Mr. Moton. All he had to do was ask, "Why [else] would a white woman from Detroit desert her husband and children to ride around in a car with a black man?" Certainly James Reeb, the young UU minister who also died in Selma, was not accused of abandoning his family or risking his life in some sordid affair. Her sacrifice was tainted by mere rumors from people who could not understand giving one's life for the cause of freedom.

But I think we understand. We understand that she was one of Freedom's Daughters. We can understand and affirm those who are moved by the voice of the prophets to grant justice to the underprivileged and oppressed. We understand those who are willing to suffer with the suffering, those who are willing to make the struggle personal and organize with others, those who claim their power in the midst of powerlessness. Let us be guided by the words and deeds of prophetic women and men who teach us to confront the powers and structures of evil with the transforming power of love, until all people choose to become sons and daughters of Freedom.