

A Thermostat of Transformed Nonconformists

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

*January 19, 2025, Second Sunday after Epiphany, Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday
verses from Isaiah 49; Luke 4:14-30*

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this on this Second Sunday after Epiphany and Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday. Welcome VTones, and thank you!

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

We are a spiritual community that values the teachings and actions of Jesus as exemplary of true goodness and the sacred way that is most conducive to the flourishing of life on earth, so it is only common sense to ask what Jesus would do in our time and place, and try to follow his lead.

The answer to that question led us to become an Open and Affirming Congregation, pledging unanimously “to work to end oppression, discrimination and hateful behaviors whenever we encounter them” and to build a beloved community that includes all, so it is also only common sense to ask what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would do in our time and place, and try to follow his lead.

Today we meet on the eve of a huge change in this nation, with all branches of the federal government falling into the control of people who are openly opposed to values represented by Jesus and Martin Luther King Jr. as we understand them.

If we ask what Jesus and King would do in our situation, I think the first thing would be to strengthen this loving community for the time ahead by extending compassion and encouragement to one another and making sure everyone here feels welcome and included in our care and support. So please go out of your way to greet one another today, reaching out especially to those you know least well and those you know are struggling. Everything else we do here depends on our being a loving, caring community.

Call to Worship Today we will hear the story of Jesus emerging from the wilderness full of the Spirit, and how it led him into what the late Congressman John Lewis would call “good trouble.”

We also will remember the Spirit working through John Lewis’s colleague in the Civil Rights Movement, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and how the Spirit led him into good trouble.

We also will hear the words of the Prophet Isaiah, and remember how the Spirit led all the Hebrew Prophets into good trouble.

Again and again the Spirit has driven faithful people into struggles and trials who then emerged as powerful instruments of God’s love for the poor and oppressed and suffering of the world.

That same Spirit is here today and wants to do the same with us. Our job is to open as Isaiah, Jesus and King did, to listen to the voice of the Spirit within us and discern its calling. Let us join our hearts and minds together in worship and in the pursuit of good trouble.

A Thermostat of Transformed Nonconformists

Seventy-seven million Americans voted for the winner of the Presidential campaign, which was 49.9% of the vote—just under half. Seventy-five million voted for the runner up, or 48.4%.

The winning party has tremendous power to control the thermostat that will transform the mores of our society, as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put it, and while that resetting may be supported by seventy-seven million, it will be opposed by seventy-five million. So while the power of the winning party is vast, it is not total. The exact setting of the thermostat will depend in part on what the seventy-five million decide to do.

The winning party is completely open about how they intend to reset the thermostat.

They plan to return to the deregulation, tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations and other steps that since 1981 has moved \$50 trillion from the bottom 90% of Americans to the top 1%, \$50 trillion from the pockets of the poor and middle class to the coffers of the super-rich.

(Heather Cox Richardson 1/17/25)

In addition to cutting taxes for the rich, they plan to cut existing programs that support the poor and middle class, including programs that many of us depend upon for our health and wellbeing.

In addition, they plan to eliminate environmental regulations that address the climate crisis and other ecological threats—freeing mega-corporations and the super-rich to get richer and increasing the burden of environmental cancers and lung disease on the poor who already suffer most, and leading to greater wildfires and floods, damages paid for disproportionately by taxes on the poor and middle class—not to mention possible consequences that would be far worse.

They plan as well to attack the rights of LGBTQ+ people. They plan to deport immigrants ruthlessly. They plan to exact hateful retribution on people and institutions that oppose their policies, seeking to disempower and intimidate the 75 million into passive submission.

This is just a small portion of the list of how the winning party intends to reset the thermostat of our society, but it is sufficient to make clear that many of the changes that will begin tomorrow go against much of what this congregation has stood for and worked for over the years, and our vision of what is good.

I advocate the spiritual tools of avoidance and denial when necessary, but the time has come when we need to decide how to respond to this situation, because damage to people and the earth that we love is about to increase dramatically.

We cannot escape the decision of how to respond. Remaining silent in the face of what is happening is itself a decision, the first of three kinds that we can make.

The second category of decision would be to support the new policies. Some churches and independent Christians will find scriptures and church dogma to justify what is being done.

For instance, if Jesus spoke as he did in Nazareth to an American Christian nationalist congregation, implying that God rejected their treatment of the poor and oppressed, we can imagine that the result would be similar, that they would seek retribution against Jesus for opposing them.

The first decision, to be silent, is easy, and the second, deciding to support the new thermostat settings, is comfortable.

The third decision is less easy and comfortable, yet Jesus and the prophets tell us that it is the path of meaning and joy.

This third way is the decision to be what King called a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists who turn our culture's thermostat in the direction of love of neighbor and the Golden Rule and compassionate preferential care for all who are vulnerable or marginalized or in need.

We naturally want to know what that word nonconformist means we need to do, but before we can know that, we need to pass through the word transformed. King said, "Only through an inner spiritual transformation do we gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in a humble and loving spirit." He said we need that higher power transforming us in order to have the will, the courage and insight to deal with overwhelming problems.

As you have heard me say for seven years now, I believe that a Spirit of creation exists in the universe, whether we think of it as a personal God or impersonal higher power or Tao. It sparked the first single cell organisms to life on earth and drove evolution over billions of years all the way to the dawning of human consciousness. The Spirit wants life to flourish, and it endows its creations with gifts to serve the flourishing of life in their time and place.

I believe the meaning or purpose of human lives is for us each to decide what the Spirit of life calls us to do with the gifts and opportunities we have been given, and then serve the Spirit's cause of love and life the best we can with all we have.

This takes transformation and makes us nonconformists because the ego or narrow self in us each would rather not do what the Spirit asks, and the culture of our society tends to be dominated by forces of selfishness that go against the Spirit's way of unselfish love.

So we have both inner and outer obstacles that block us, and the ego part of us is happier being blocked than fulfilling our life calling and purpose in the Spirit.

Yet Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer was wise when he said, "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know—the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

I urge you not to be silent. I urge you to act boldly and bravely.

I can't tell you how to respond to the world that will rapidly unfold beginning tomorrow, but I can tell you how to undergo the inner transformation necessary to discern how the Spirit is calling you to serve as an individual and a congregation.

First, let this transformation be the goal of everything you do. Let it be the reason you read and meditate and pray and are part of a spiritual community. Let it be the reason you take care of the health of your mind and body. Let inner transformation be what shapes your outer life decisions. Let it be what you are doing when you walk in nature or wake in the night or work at any task. Be seeking Spirit. Consciously and purposefully seek its inner transformation, and open yourself to follow where it leads you in response to a rapidly changing world.

The late spiritual master and co-founder of Centering Prayer, Thomas Keating wrote, “If one is truly transformed, one can walk down the street, drink a cup of tea or shake hands with somebody and be pouring divine life into the world.... The essential thing...is the transformation of one’s own consciousness.” (Mystery of Christ p. 275)

Both King and Keating understood the spiritual path of transformation that I have taught here, called by its ancient Greek names, kenosis, metanoia, agape and koinonia, where the constant practice of kenosis or the self-emptying of our narrow self-concern through mindfulness or prayer leads to being refilled with the expanded consciousness of metanoia, which sees the true oneness of all people and the earth, and so leads to agape, the kind of unconditional, universal love God has for all, which leads to koinonia, the creation of the all-inclusive beloved community, a society ruled by love. “Kenosis, metanoia, agape, koinonia” would be a good mantra to repeat throughout the day to keep yourself on the path.

Anyone transformed in that direction will be a nonconformist in a self-centered society that perpetrates injustice and violence against people and the earth, and any actions such transformed nonconformists take will turn the thermostat in the direction of peace, justice and care for the earth.

The Spirit seeks to move through all people, each with their own gifts and temperament and place in life. It doesn’t matter how small we are or how small the contribution we can make. The Spirit doesn’t need us to do everything, it needs us to do only the part that is given us to do.

We can trust the Spirit to do its part. All we have to do is discern what our part is, and join together as a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists, each contributing what we can, and we will be the thermostat the Spirit needs.

Let us pray in silence, reaching out to hear or feel where the Spirit is leading us ...

Haiku by Mel Goertz
Animals and birds
have gone home for the night.
Only a misty moon.