"Selma Revisited"
Sermon Presented by Rev. Dick Leonard at United First Parish Church
November 30, 2003

Good morning! What a delight it is for Polly and me to be in your church, with all of its history, and to have already enjoyed the hospitality of Victoria and Brian. We look forward to getting to know many of you after the service.

I also must say that when Forrest and Galen and Jan, the other ministers at All Souls in New York, heard that I was going to be here today, I thought I detected a bit of envy on their part - you might do well to invite some of them at a future date to enjoy the experience we are having this morning.

In March of 2002 some 450 Unitarian Universalist ministers held a 3-day convocation in Birmingham, Alabama. Convocations of UU clergy are held about every seven years, and the fact is that I had never been to one.

But it was being held in Alabama, and my book "Call to Selma: 18 Days of Witness" had come out in January. We were also immediately in the post-9/11 period, and Polly and I decided to attend.

The organizers then added a post-convocation bus trip to Selma for those wanting to see that city today and relive the events of 1965, when the whole world focussed on that Alabama town.

We signed up for the bus trip, and I was also asked to do a lecture as part of the convocation, which I agreed to. I discovered that among the convocation attendees would be UU ministers Orloff Miller and Clark Olson. The two had been with James Reeb when they were attacked by thugs outside of Walkers Restaurant, leading to Reeb's death and a further impetus to the voting rights drive.

Polly and I took 20 copies of my book to Birmingham and found that the organizers fortunately had brought in 100 more to sell. At that we ran out of them the first night and had to take orders for more, which we mailed from New York on our return.

The 3-day convocation produced many fine lectures and discussions on a variety of topics. It was followed by the bus trip to Selma, which involved 54 of us and would have taken more of our clergy if the interest had been anticipated. Altogether it was for Polly and me an unforgettable experience.

Before I talk about the one-day trip to Selma, I would like to tell you about the impromptu session following my lecture. The question and answer period after the lecture was going 'hot and heavy,' and they needed the ballroom to get ready for something else.

So we adjourned to another large room, followed by a great number of clergy, others from the press and some tape recorders. Four of us found ourselves in a free-wheeling discussion of what we remembered of the 1965 events.

The four were Orloff Miller, Clark Olson, myself, and Gordon Gibson. Gordon is a big affable UU minister right out of the deep south, who was involved in civil rights activities in the heartland before some of us yankees took our concerns south of the border.

The fact is that all four of us had different slants on the Selma events and could add considerably to each other's understanding. (There is a video tape available from the UUA in Boston that caught that long discussion.)

Because Orloff and Clark had been walking with Jim Reeb when he was clubbed, the government immediately took them out of Alabama as material witnesses, and for their own safety. They were in Massachusetts when the march to Montgomery was finally permitted. And they professed to have learned much from my book and my lecture.

Gordon was able to fill everybody in on the events preceding Selma, and the tremendous involvement of places like our Birmingham church while the events of Selma were going on. (At one point 200 UU's were sleeping there on a floor that looked like it could hold 50 sleepers.) Our churches in the South were willing to take risks, to lose some members, possibly even be bombed, to support the movement for equal voting rights for all citizens.

Now, about Selma today.

The city has grown. Blacks, as in 1965, outnumber whites if one includes the environs. Many positions in the local government and law enforcement are held by blacks. Several years ago the 1965 white mayor of the city, Joe Smitherman, was voted out of office and replaced by Selma's first black mayor, James Perkins.

The now long-time black president of the City Council, Dr. Fred Reese, as a young minister of another denomination had been head of the Voting Rights League of Dallas County. We had stood shoulder to shoulder with him at the Selma Wall. Now, while we had lunch in the Strong's #2 Cafe, (renamed from Walker's Cafe and the scene of the attack), Dr. Reese came in. He and I recognized each other immediately across the crowded lunchroom, after the 40 intervening years.

Brown Chapel is still there, looking completely serene on a lovely warm day, with hardly any traffic or people on what was once Sylvan Street, now Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard. It was hard for me to convince myself that once upon a time it was the dead center of world attention, the church packed to overflowing, Dr. King's voice ringing inside, busloads of people arriving, police and deputies in great force, or people standing and singing at four in the morning, floodlights playing down.

On our recent visit I had a bit of difficulty even pointing out to our people where the clothesline had finally been strung separating the protesters from the police, who were thus saying, "This far but not one step further."

Inside the chapel we met the present minister, who was pleased that we could fill him in on events that happened about the time he was born. We all laughed about the rain of money from the balcony when ushers could not get up the stairs because of the crowd.

We looked at the plaque in the front of the church commemorating four martyrs, Jimmy Lee Jackson, James Reeb, Viola Liuzzo and Jonathan Daniels. Jimmy Lee Jackson, of course, was the young black resident of Selma who was killed by police in a demonstration in a neighboring town in January, 1965. His death helped to draw attention to Selma, leading to the March 7 march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge which was broken up by the police, witnessed by millions on TV, and led to Dr. King's call for clergy to come to Selma in support of those trying to march.

Jonathan Daniels was a young Episcopal minister who had gone to Selma early in the voting rights drive, who stayed on while many of us returned to pressing duties elsewhere, and who was murdered brutally six months later.

From Brown Chapel we went to lunch and then to the Voting Rights Museum, full of large photographs and memorabilia from the years surrounding 1965. I was particularly touched by the memorial room they had set up to commemorate James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, the three rights workers buried in a dam in Mississippi. Andrew Goodman, by the way, had been a student at the Walden School in New York, where my daughters attended and where I later did the fund raising for the Andrew Goodman Building, which exists today.

Then it was time for us to march across the bridge, the same bridge where the beatings took place 37 years before. Polly and I were asked to lead the procession.

As we approached the bridge on foot, I realized that we were on the wrong side of the street. To continue on that side would be to not exactly follow the path of the two historic marches. But to cross over to the left side meant to interrupt a steady flow of late-afternoon traffic going in both directions.

So, without asking help from the police, our column simply stopped traffic and crossed over. Instead of honking horns or even attempting to run us down, which could have happened in 1965, we were greeted with smiles and even waving hands from some of the drivers, who must have recognized that we were on a pilgrimage the likes of which may occur in Selma once a week these days.

It was this different spirit, and lack of fear, that most struck those of us who had seen Selma in another era.

The far end of the bridge brought us to the spot where the beatings took place and where two days later hundreds of us were halted in our march, expecting to be beaten. The place is marked today by an impressive collection of memorials created by the citizens of Selma.

We joined in a circle, sang "We Shall Overcome" and several other songs of the era, and looked down a peaceful highway to a traffic light beyond which lay the road to Montgomery.

I must tell you about two other places we saw on our recent visit to Selma.

One was the Baptist Tabernacle, which existed in 1965 but was not in an area where the excitement was. It is built on a corner, basically a large cubical building, with identical faces and entrances on the two sides facing out toward the cross streets.

You guessed it. One entrance was for blacks, the other entrance was for whites. I don't know how the interior of the tabernacle was arranged, but the elaborate identical entrances were their attempt to provide separate but equal facilities within the framework of the early Supreme Court decision. I didn't find out what happens today at the Baptist Tabernacle. It would be nice to know that one entrance is used by those with birthdays through June, and the other by people with birthdays from July through December.

The other place we drove past was Hoggle's Used Car Lot, still run by Duck Hoggle. (That's right, not Dick, but Duck.) He was one of the three men accused of beating the three UU ministers, between Walkers Cafe and the Silver Moon Bar, into which they are believed to have fled. They were tried and acquitted by an all-white jury in spite of the testimony of Clark Olson and Orloff Miller, one of whom had caught a glimpse of the man wielding the 2x4. And there had been other witnesses to the crime.

The other two attackers have since died. But Duck Hoggle runs his used car business, ironically selling most of his cars to blacks, who either don't know of his trial or think he is innocent.

Well, I think you've gotten the sense of what our recent visit to Selma meant to us.

Since my book came out, I'm asked to speak periodically about Selma, and I'm always delighted to carry along with me memorabilia from those 18 days, the jacket I wore, the umbrella I carried, the White Citizens Council flier, and more importantly the list of clergy in prison that I one day made on the back of an envelope.

When I read that list to the Birmingham Convocation, a young clergywoman came up afterwards crying, saying that she hadn't known that the beloved clergyman of the church she grew up in, now deceased, had been in jail in Selma.

I've brought most of those items with me today and will be happy to have them out for you to see following the service, along with copies of my book, which you can have at the reduced All Souls Bookstore price, where I get them.

Of course, the most important question is: What do those events of 1965 mean for today?

There's no question but that everyone involved in civil rights in 1965 just assumed that equal voting rights was the key that was going to open the doors to a balanced, racially at ease society of equal economic opportunity.

It didn't happen in Selma, or at least it hasn't happened yet in Selma or elsewhere in the U.S. And yet I can't find anybody who doesn't think that the right to vote wasn't an absolute prerequisite to any good that can follow.

I don't have to tell you that almost forty years after the Voting Rights Act, punishment is still meted out disproportionately to minorities. The last hired (often black) are often the first fired; the gap between rich and poor grows. And as one black person said to me, "You may think about your being white several times during a day, but every moment of my life I have to remember that I am black, at my peril."

And now our situation as a country is overlaid with a war, and a threat of terrorism, that makes it easy to forget more long-standing but fundamental problems in maintaining a democracy. We have to cope with all of these things.

When I spoke to the children of the Grace Church School, (and there were 300 of them aged 7 to 13 sitting on a hard gymnasium floor; I expected the youngest ones at least to be fussing in the hour that I was with them), they were immobilized by the opportunity of hearing a veteran of 1965 - it was like Napoleon came back from the dead.

After speaking and answering their questions, I left them with two thoughts.

One was that it was almost chance that took me to Selma. I went not thinking of myself as a leader, but rather as a follower, somebody to be counted, someone who would jot down notes so that I wouldn't forget what I was seeing and hearing, not the writer of a book.

But as hundreds, and then thousands, of people poured into Selma, even a few days after I got there, I found myself answering questions and accepting leadership because there was no other choice. Eventually one might find oneself standing up against the President's specially-appointed representative, as I did, and saying, "You're wrong - you are taking us down the wrong path!" I suggested that each of the children in their time, whether they wanted to or not, would find himself or herself being asked, "What do we do now?" That's when you find you are a leader, not a follower.

The other thought I left with them had to do with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s message. It dawned on me, as I heard them discussing among themselves, that they regarded both the man and the message as being almost other- worldly. I told them that King's message, while in my mind delivered more eloquently in our day than anyone else could do it, was essentially the same vision that had empowered religious leaders of many religions and democratic politicians of many countries for centuries, the idea that it was possible to have a world where people could, in spite of their differences, live at peace with each other and build societies based on law and justice.

I would like to conclude this sermon with words from Dr. King, these from his "Letter Written From a Birmingham City Jail." He said: I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time... It is a strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes from the tireless efforts and persistent work of people willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.