

***Listen to What Breaks Your Heart***  
**Palm Sunday March 25, 2018**

Last Sunday afternoon, Chuck, Oliver, and I went to see the movie *Black Panther*. In the lobby a member of this congregation – who shall remain nameless – greeted us with “I don’t know if my minister should be seeing Black Panther.” We laughed – and I said, as I always do, “I’m sure there’s a sermon in it.” And there is – and who would have thought that it’s a Palm Sunday sermon.

Because *Black Panther* and the story of Palm Sunday are ultimately both about power and suffering – how we use our power to respond to a suffering world. Do we let our hearts break open or do we keep them closed? Do we place ourselves in the midst of the suffering or above it?

How many have you have seen the movie? For those who haven’t, I apologize for the plot spoilers, but don’t let them stop your seeing it. *Black Panther* takes place in Africa in the fictional country of Wakanda. Vibranium, the most powerful metal in the world, can only be found there, and for centuries the people of Wakanda have guarded the power of the metal – using it to develop their country as one of the most prosperous and technologically advanced – but presenting their country to the rest of the world as impoverished and undeveloped. Through the years of slave traders, colonial invaders, and now of ISIS and Boko Haram, they have kept themselves safe but done nothing to help others on their continent. They do not let their hearts be touched by others’ pain. But when the king’s brother N’Jobu spends time as a spy in Oakland, California in the 1980’s his heart is broken by the conditions of African Americans there. He arranges to steal vibranium from his country to use it to improve the conditions he sees around him. When the theft is traced back to him, he is killed by his brother the king, but his son N’Jadaka grows up in Oakland with his heart broken and as an adult makes it his goal to become king of Wakanda, take control of vibranium, and use it to help people of African descent around the world overthrow the governments and the people who have kept them oppressed. Although he’s the bad guy in the movie, I sympathized with his goal of helping the oppressed and sharing his country’s resources with those who need them, While the Wakandas see themselves as separate from other people of color not from their country, N’Jadaka sees their pain as his pain.

But he doesn’t see his power as their power. He wants to make their lives better, but he wants to achieve this goal by force. His plan is to force the Wakandans to share their resources and to force those in need to take part in armed rebellions against those who have oppressed them. His heart is broken but not

enough to let his pain unite him with others in pain. He ultimately prefers power and – like all comic villains – world domination to his goal of liberation for all who suffer.

In the end, of course, as a comic-book villain must, he is defeated by the current king of Wakanda, his cousin T'Challa. But his broken heart opens the heart of T'Challa. As the movie ends, he ends Wakanda's isolation, opening in Oakland the start of an international social service project for impoverished black children and youth. He has let his heart break open and places himself, his country, and his resources with those who are suffering, not above them as N'Jadaka would have done.

The Sufi mystic Rumi announced, "You have to keep breaking your heart until it opens." The author of *Psalms 51* wrote, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (*Psalms 51: 17*) When I came across that line in my 20's, having suffered my share of romantic broken hearts, I thought, "What kind of God wants you to have a broken heart? Ugh! That's not my image of God." But with time, I understand better what that line means. It's not about romance, to which our culture tends to limit broken hearts. It's about suffering of any kind and how we handle it. Do we close our hearts around the pain, pretending our lives are fine and in control, or do we let the pain crack our hearts open wide, so that we take in not only our own suffering but feel ourselves connected through that suffering to the suffering of all? Does our broken heart isolate us or unite us? Rumi and the psalmist do not want us to suffer; they recognize though that suffering is a part of every life and challenge us to let the suffering work through us in ways that will bring greater life to ourselves and to others. As the UU minister and composer Jason Shelton phrased it in his prayer song, "Love, once again, break our hearts open wide."

Today on Palm Sunday we remember Jesus as one whose heart was broken wide and filled with a love which embraced the suffering of those around him. We remember him riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, a parody of the military parade taking place at the other end of town. Jesus entered Jerusalem through the East Gate. But at the same time at the West Gate, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, along with his military officers was riding into the city not on donkeys, but on steeds, brandishing not palms but spears and swords, followed by ranks of Roman soldiers, all hailed with the fanfare of trumpets. This parade happened every year on the day when Jews from the surrounding towns and countryside poured into the city for the Passover. As they retold the story of their sufferings in Egypt and their liberation from them, the Roman occupiers didn't want them to get any ideas about

liberation today. Jesus' parade mocked their power. But many of those who saw it didn't understand what he was doing – they thought he was like N'Jadaka and would use his broken heart to amass power equal to the oppressor. They were ready to fall in behind him to fight. They didn't understand that he was inviting them to join him in standing with the suffering and using the power of love to liberate.

As Unitarian Universalists, on Palm Sunday we also remember other women and men whose broken hearts led them to walk with the suffering. Today especially we remember Viola Liuzzo, a 39 year old white mother of five, who responded to Dr. King's call for Americans to join demonstrators in Selma, Alabama, after the violence on "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, when state troopers attacked marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Viola Liuzzo left her family and her home in Detroit and drove in her family car to Alabama. She participated in the march from Selma to Montgomery, and then stayed on to help with coordination and logistics. Fifty three years ago today, on March 25, a Thursday in 1965, she and Leroy Moton, a black activist, were on their way back from dropping participants at the Montgomery Airport, when a car with four KKK members pulled up next to hers at a red light. When they saw a white woman and a black man together in the car they shouted racist taunts, and sped after them when the light changed. Viola Liuzzo tried to outrun them, but one of the Klansmen pulled out a gun and shot her twice in the head. She died there. Covered in her blood, Leroy Moton pretended to be dead when the Klansmen came to check the car, but survived to identify and testify against them. Three of them were sentenced to ten years in prison for her murder.

Many people heard Dr. King's call for people of all races and religions to come to support the marchers. Most turned away, saying to themselves, "This isn't my cause." Why did Viola Liuzzo respond? In an interview last year, her daughters remembered her as someone whose heart had been broken open to others' pain because of the pains of her life. She had grown up in poverty in Tennessee, in a one-room shack without electricity or running water. She felt keenly the way wealthier people looked down on her and her family – but recognized that the black children were treated even worse. She had grown up Catholic, but left the church when they refused to bury one of her children who died at birth because the child hadn't been baptized. She became a Unitarian Universalist. She joined the NAACP. Her best friend was a black woman who helped care for the children after Viola was killed. She was aware of all the ways people excluded one another, asking her young daughter one Christmas as they shopped in a local department store, how she'd feel

if every Santa she saw was black instead of white, and another time, when her daughter was a teenager, how she'd feel "if the magazines [she] loved never put pretty white girls on their covers." So when she called her husband to tell him she was leaving for Selma, and he, shocked and afraid, begged her not to go, saying this "isn't your fight," it was natural for her to respond, "It's everybody's fight." Her heart was broken open wide by suffering and by love. Her story is part of our Palm Sunday story of hearts were broken open to love.

Yesterday around the world people Marched for Life, for sensible measures to control guns and place human lives at the center of our laws and our values. The march was organized by students who survived the shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School on February 14. Instead of suppressing their terror and their grief and their anger they have let the pain connect them to the pain of others dealing with gun violence – other survivors of school shootings, but also people who live with violence on their streets or in their homes. They have let their hearts be broken wide. But they didn't have to. They could have retreated from the pain, seen their survival as a blessing, and let it separate them from those not so lucky. Or they could have used their privilege as mostly white, mostly affluent, to make the march only about what concerns their lives directly – safety in suburban schools. But instead they reached out to share leadership with students in inner city schools who are equally afraid but often receive less attention. Their hearts are broken open wide.

What breaks your heart today? Just from this week's headlines –

- Is it the shooting of Stephon Clark, the father of two young boys, shot twenty times by the police as he spoke on his cell phone in his grandmother's backyard?
- Is it the news that racism is so entrenched in our economic system that black boys who grow up in wealthy homes are more likely to become poor when they reach adulthood than to stay wealthy, while their white counterparts remain in wealth?
- Is it the news that for black women and white women, the economic news is equally bad – there is no wealth gap between them, only between their economic health and that of white men.
- Is it the news of the death of the last male northern white rhino and the extinction of yet another species?
- Is it the news of yet another school shooting in Maryland, with the shooter excused as a love-sick youth?

Whatever it is that is breaking your heart open, I would ask you to sit with it this week. Think about why it breaks your heart. What does it evoke from your own life and experiences? How does it connect you with others who are suffering? How might you stand with them – walk with them – march with them – work with them to bring new life out of this pain? How might love break your heart open wide - to spread love?

- Pamela M. Barz