

# "Just Commit!"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister  
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, January 1, 2012

Happy New Year! You know, every New Year's Eve I used to write grueling lists of absolutely unattainable resolutions with no plan. Usually ten of them — I am a true list-maker at heart. It was my annual "beat myself up for what I hadn't done the year before but make a new list anyway." I now see my list as a yearly plan and a way to bookmark my own progress, a way to keep track of how I am applying my values to my daily life. I set my year-long goals on New Year's Eve, emailing a letter to myself on futureme.org, and then spend some time on New Year's Day scheduling in my calendar checkpoints throughout the year and plotting specifics.

Many of you may know that I completed my first triathlon in ten years this past September. That was part of a longer-range goal that I have to do a Half Ironman at forty. I will do an Olympic distance in April, my birthday is in August, and the Half Ironman is in September. What I am absolutely clear about is that my success thus far is not my own. So, essentially, I have created "Team Tamara". I have a coach with whom I shape my goals and who inquires about my progress, a group of swimmers to push me in my swimming, a running group to run with once a week, and, of course, support from family in helping with Beckett to help me create space to do any of this. Not only is it pivotal that I dream and dream big, but I must tell someone what I plan to do, so that it is not just rustling around inside my head; I am speaking it into reality. Telling our goals to a community of folks to help hold us accountable — people whom you trust and whose opinions you value, people whom you do not want to disappoint — helps keep us on task. Dream! Make a commitment! Get connected! Take action! I also see this kind of pressure as a way to not just change me, but to change the world. We'll come back to that.

January's theme is justice, and this is the first of a sermon series we are calling, "The Five-Fold Path to a Justice-Driven Life." We are proposing that a justice-driven life requires some attention in five different areas of your life: commitment, spiritual practice, willingness to honor diversity and celebrate difference, willingness to put your money and resources toward your goals, and finally, some thinking outside the box. We will spend a Sunday on each topic, focusing on each of these and then asking you to commit in a specific way to support that area in 2012. My goal this morning is to talk about the relationship between justice and commitment. So let me begin just by making sure we are all on the same page about our call to *do* justice as religious people.

We are a diverse group in so many ways, but I think we agree on a broader claim on our life. Marlin and I have both spoken publicly about this claim in the past month. There was a fantastic article in *Urban Tulsa* where Marlin was quoted as saying, "...the people who attend my congregation are seriously looking for ways to connect their values with the way they live every day. They are seeking to redefine the idea of 'the good life' in ways that are morally, environmentally, and economically responsible." And there was a beautiful spread in *Tulsa People*, bragging about our Partners in Education and Reading Program at the Laura Dester Shelter, where I said, "At All Souls, we believe it is our responsibility to work today to help create the world as it should be. We all agree that service is how we live out our values in the world."

We are called as religious people to be bound to this church community. And we are also called as religious people to help those in need, to care for those outside of our community as our own, to offer our time and our talent and our treasure to live out our values in this world. Am I right? See, I have come this morning with a bit of an assumption that I need to check out. I come to church this morning with the assumption that you believe that injustice is prevalent in the world; that life for most people is not fair. Even though there is considerable beauty, and love, and friendship, and compassion, and grace in this world, there is also injustice. When there is injustice in the world, there is an accompanying moral outrage in the hearts of those willing to recognize it. And if you do not have some sense of moral outrage – a driving desire to do something about that injustice – then my assumption is that your moral outrage has been tempered by being overwhelmed by all that begs for your attention. If you do not have a deep-seated ache to have an impact on this Earth while you are here, a way to use what you have to make a difference in this world, then my assumption is that you may just be stuck because you are unsure where to begin. Is that right?

So in these pews today, there are those who feel that they are spending their lives in service to something greater. They have found a way to use that moral outrage to serve, organize, volunteer, run for office, show up at meetings, read to kids, and inspire others through their service. How many of you are already doing this kind of work? Can I see some hands? I know you are out there because this church is already doing amazing things, and you are part of it. Based on my assumption, alongside those who have found a way to serve, there are some angry, overwhelmed, or unsure folk. Marlin, on the one hand that makes me think we should be a bit nervous. But I am not nervous at all, I am excited. What we have already done is amazing, but what excites me is the untapped potential in this room to make a significant impact on this community, on Tulsa, and as an example to the world. It is simply incredible. But it takes people knowing what they want to change, and perpetually, continuously, showing up: staying at the table to do something about it. It takes

people who dream, commit, connect, and take action. And if you do not see the injustice in the world at all, then you and I need to have a more in-depth conversation, and I am including you in my prayers.

So as a religious people, we are outraged, incensed, and downright ticked off at the state of the world. Why? Because what we are outraged about demonstrates to the world what we value. What we are outraged about shows the world that we are invested. But outrage is not enough: we need commitment, and commitment implies action. We need to show the world that we are taking responsibility; that we will not sit idly by while someone else defines what is important to us. We need to show the world that, as religious people, we will not continue to make choices that disregard our values, that we are invested in seeing that the wrongs of the world are righted. We are invested in creating the world as it should be.

I am outraged that there are children in the world and in this city who go to bed hungry, when there is enough food to feed everyone. I'm angry that we are still at war. I'm angry that our veterans do not receive the respect they deserve and the care they need. I'm angry that our planet's limited resources are being squandered by a system that I am a participant in. I'm outraged at the homophobia that persists, especially among religious people: that my primary relationship is condemned, and that Oklahoma will not let my partner and I domestically adopt or foster a child together. I'm angry that we imprison the mentally ill and the addicted. I am angry at absolutism, classism, and dualism; egoism, fatalism, and hedonism; apathy, imperialism, and materialism; over-intellectualism, nihilism, and pessimism; fascism, reductionism, sexism, and triumphalism. And I am going to do my best to spend my life in service of a world where all of these "isms" are no more — cast out into the fire — a world where each person has inherent worth granted to them by God simply by being born, and the resources to live out the claim on their lives.

As the religious people God calls us to be, let us be morally outraged together, so that this world knows what we care about and what our vision of the Kingdom on Earth (The Beloved Community) will and will not include. I am making an assumption that it is not *whether* you are going to make a difference in this world that may be holding you back, that may have you stuck, but it is *how*. Is that true? The interesting thing about our call, Church, is that I am not here to tell you what you need to do, or when, or even how. I will walk with you, help you seek, ask you tough questions. But ultimately, your call to do justice is between you and God, as you walk humbly with him in the way you are called to do. Your call to do justice is between you and your own heartbreak. Our job is to

continually remind you of the possibilities of a future where your dreams come true, where your values are lived.

Let me tell you a story: it is about a Belgian mountain climber who was famous for his attempts to climb the biggest, snowiest mountain in the Alps. He had tried it at least thirty times, but each time had come short of the peak and returned to base camp. He would begin the ascent at a good pace, focusing on the snowy summit, imagining the marvelous view and the sense of freedom there. But as he went on and his strength dwindled, his gaze would lower, and more and more often his attention would be drawn not to where he was going, but to his worn-out boots. Finally, when the clouds had gathered round him near the peak, and he understood that he wouldn't be able to enjoy the view from the summit that day, he would sit down to rest, and begin his descent back down to the village, though slightly worried about all the people who would give him a hard time for another failed attempt. On one of these occasions, he went up the mountain accompanied by the town optician, who was able to see the climber's pattern of failed attempt first hand. The optician was the most encouraging to the climber of all the townspeople, and presented the climber with a pair of special sunglasses. "If it starts clouding over, put these glasses on, or if your feet start hurting, put them on too. These are special glasses; they'll help you."

The climber accepted the gift without giving it much mind, but on his next climb, when his feet started hurting again he remembered what the optician had said, and he put on the glasses. The pain was pretty bad, but with those new sunglasses he could still manage to see the snow-covered summit, so on he continued. Just as nearly always seemed to happen, misfortune returned in the form of cloud cover just before the peak. But with his glasses on, he could still see the summit through the clouds, and so he kept climbing, leaving the clouds behind, forgetting his pain, and finally arriving at the summit. It was certainly worth it. His feeling of triumph was incomparable; almost as magnificent as that wonderful view, resplendent in its silence, the mountain below surrounded by a dense sea of clouds. The climber didn't remember the clouds being as thick as that, so he looked more closely at the sunglasses, and realized the optician had engraved a light image on the lenses, in the form of the snow-covered summit. It was made in such a way that you could only see it if you looked upwards. The optician had understood that whenever the climber lost sight of the mountaintop, he would similarly lose sight of his dream, and his will to continue would wane. We need to regularly be reminded of our vision of that world as it could be, and then keep putting one foot in front of the other. And it certainly helps to bring someone along with you.

On the one hand, that makes our job as ministers really easy, because your participation is mostly up to you: we cannot command you to do it. And on the other hand, it makes our job incredibly difficult, because we can only help point the way. We have a vision of what could be – we can show you why we believe there is a call on all our lives, demonstrate that call in our own lives, and then ask that you take responsibility and commit. See, our church is founded on religious freedom. It is why I can stand in this pulpit today, as who I am, and speak from my heart. But it is not just my freedom; it is also yours. And so, this morning is not about justice and commandment, but justice and commitment. We do not propose a creed, but a covenant. We do not propose a morality derived from the letter of the law. We inherited a richer understanding of the commandments handed down to us, an understanding of the spirit of the law, and we are free, Church, to covenant with whom we chose. We have been tasked by our Senior Minister to let compassion, courage, and connection be our guides, and to step up and take responsibility. So what will you do with your moral outrage? What will you *do*? My prayer is that you will commit, you will freely commit to do something with that fuel in your soul. And may I suggest that if you are stuck about the one right thing, that you commit to do something in the meantime. Maybe try something on for this year. Commitment is its healthiest when it is made in spite of doubt.

Our sermon series this month looks at how you can commit to walk five simultaneous paths to a justice-driven life:

- 1) By committing to volunteering your time to *do* justice.
- 2) By committing to a spiritual practice outside of Sunday morning to re-energize your justice work.
- 3) By committing to spend your money wisely and share your resources with those organizations who profess your values.
- 4) By committing to grow and change by intentionally seeking out diversity.
- 5) By committing to expand your capacity to respond to injustice by deepening your creativity.

Every Sunday, we will give you an opportunity to reflect on one of these topics and to commit to something for the year. If you want to fill them out each week, you may. If you want to hold on to one and turn it in at the end of the month, you may. If you turn in multiples and change your mind on one we will assume the later date is the one that is correct. If you are unsure about how to get connected in the community, there will be a community volunteer fair in Emerson Hall on Sunday, January 8. This fair showcases nonprofit organizations in Tulsa associated with members of our church, either by serving as an employee or on the board. They will have booths telling of their

services and of volunteer opportunities they offer. Then, on January 22nd in Emerson Hall, we will have All Souls' own outreach programs offering a presentation on what they are doing, and how we can each become involved or receive assistance as the case may be.

Dream. Commit. Get connected. Take action. We are asking you to take responsibility and to commit publicly. We have devised a follow-up process for those items that concern the church, so we will be organizing these in February and following up. Although, let me suggest that because of the freedom you have in this church, that you take the initiative to get going on your commitment; our follow-up will be the safety net or the back-up plan. For our lives to change, we must change. For the world to change, we must commit to do something about it.

Please take the time of Sermon Response to reflect on what you are being charged to do. Write it down and place it in the vase in the foyer on the way out. If you need support in figuring out what to do, take time this month to explore your possibilities, but do not forget to turn them in so that we can help you make your commitments come true.

Dream. Commit. Connect. Take action.