

History's Arc

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

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“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

I remember the first and only time I went sailing on a boat small enough that I got to help sail it. I was part of a two-man crew, captained by my friend, Tom Speers, who took me out in his sunfish dinghy on Squam Lake in New Hampshire on a beautiful summer afternoon. After making sure I knew how to swim and that I understood that the most important thing for a novice in a sailboat is to be sure to stay out of the way of the boom, Tom and I set sail toward the many small islands in the center of the lake. Off we went, zigging and zagging across the lake, just inches above the crystal clear water. I was amazed at how fast the boat moved, even on a relatively calm day. And I learned that day that it is possible to sail into the wind by tacking, that is, by moving the sail back and forth so that the wind partially catches the sail, drives you sideways and a bit forward in one wrong direction, and then, when you switch the angle of the sail, the wind drives you sideways and a bit forward in the other wrong direction. And by continually switching the angle of the sail and sailing mostly in the wrong direction, you make slow but steady progress toward your destination and you eventually, as the Shaker song says, come out right.

In addition to learning about sailing that day on Squam Lake, I also learned something about history, which, I believe, operates in a similar zig-zagging manner. History moves, and I believe it moves forward, but not in a straight line. There is such a thing as progress – slavery, for example, is no longer taken for granted, as it was for most of human history – but progress comes in fits and starts, and it's often easier to see how we're moving in the wrong direction than to see how we may be making progress. I think that's the main reason most people most of the time have said that the country is on the wrong track in poll after poll, since at least 1972.

We thrive on misery – as long as it's other people's misery. If you ask most people how they think their life is going, however, as opposed to how the country is going, the vast majority – about 84% -- will tell you that they're satisfied with their life, and that number has been consistently that high since Gallup began asking people that question in 1979. And it's fairly easy to account for the discrepancy: people get to determine the direction of their own lives to a far greater degree than they get to determine the direction of the country, and we all make decisions maximizing our satisfaction with life.

And it's those decisions that make history. I saw a poster in a shop window in Cleveland Heights a couple of years ago that said, “People make choices. Choices make history.” It's true for us as

individuals, and it's just as true for us as groups. The choices we make, individually and collectively, determine history, and the key to making the world a better place is to make the right choices not for ourselves, but for history. If you want to make the right choices, you've got to take the long view. And Christianity, which uses eternity as its frame of reference, takes the longest view of all. We play a very long game in the church.

I think that's what Dr. King was talking about in the quote of his that I've taken as my text for this morning's sermon. "The moral arc of the universe is long," King said, "but it bends toward justice."

King was talking about that long view of history that all sensible and sensitive people have to take if we're to account for the bulk of the evidence and retain our sanity. History in the short term can be and often is a horrid, bloody, senseless, immoral affair, but history in the long term – the very long term, beyond the horizon line that blocks our view – that history, we believe, bends toward justice.

And the reason we believe that is both because we've seen glimpses of the direction of history's arc – evidence, in other words -- and because of an article of our faith which we call divine providence, and the one reinforces the other.

I don't believe, on the basis of the evidence, that we're simply going round and round in circles. Yes, of course, history repeats itself, but each of those repetitions is unique, and there are some features of history that we do not repeat. We are not, for example, going to disenfranchise women. It took many centuries for women to get the right to vote, and that was a hard-won campaign. We are not going to turn our backs on that progress, just as we are not going to turn our backs on educating girls and women. Malala Yousafzai is one of the world's most prominent advocates for the right of girls and women to get a basic education, and she's going to win that fight because the tide of history has turned, thanks in part because of the dedication and courage of ordinary people like Malala making extraordinary decisions.

And that's what history's arc teaches us. Ordinary people making extraordinary decisions is what changes the arc of history. History is such a bloody, chaotic mess because most of us refuse to accept our responsibility to make extraordinary decisions. We make ordinary decisions. We do what's expected. We don't make waves. We go along to get along. We don't stick our necks out. We don't speak out. And because we don't, we feel we're the victims of history rather than the makers of history.

But the lives of people like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King and Ruby Bridges and Jackie Robinson and countless others tell us that it's not extraordinary people who determine the arc of history, but ordinary people making extraordinary decisions. Rosa Parks simply refused to get up. Martin Luther King decided to speak up. Ruby Bridges just went to school, and Jackie Robinson simply played the game he loved. They all did so in the face of complacency and opposition, and that made their decisions extraordinary, and that's all it takes for our decisions to be extraordinary, as well.

Those of you who were kind enough to remain for my presentation after church last Sunday heard me say that Peter Gomes used to ask his preaching students, "What do you want the people

listening to you to think, feel, or do differently after your sermon?” and what I want you to think, feel, and do differently after this sermon is to see yourselves not as the victims of history’s arc – the resigned “What can we do?” – but rather as the creators of that arc – “What can we do with this moment to turn it into history?” I want you to see yourselves not as the riders of history’s arc, being carried along hither and yon without purpose or meaning, but rather as the writers of history’s arc, determined that no one will write your story but you, and that no one will write our story but us. As I’ve said to you many times, there’s absolutely nothing stopping us from being exceptional except us.

Edmund Burke, an eighteenth century British statesman, said, “Nobody made a greater mistake than the person who did nothing because he could do only a little.” We change the world by doing little things in extraordinary ways and for extraordinary reasons. That’s all it takes to be extraordinary. The great mass of people will live only for themselves and those they love; the exceptional people are those who live for a cause greater than themselves and are willing to sacrifice for that cause.

“Our lives begin to end,” Dr. King said, “when we become silent about things that matter.” Black Lives Matter, friends, and Black History Month matters because it draws ordinary, kind-hearted people like ourselves out of ourselves to see a bit more of history’s arc. And in that flash of light, we may recognize lives very much like our own, and every bit as worthy of our love and attention and effort. We don’t just float around in history, friends, we make it. Let’s make it right.