We Shall Overcome
A Sermon by Rev. Fred Small
First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist
January 16, 2011

This morning I will not so much preach a sermon as tell a story, which of course is the best kind of sermon anyway.
It’s not a story about a hero, although there are many heroes in it.
It’s a story about a song, probably the most important song of the twentieth century, which not only gave strength and nurture to the American civil rights movement, but has continued over the decades to inspire and sustain struggles for freedom and dignity all around the world.
It’s a story about people of different colors working together toward a common goal of justice. It’s a story about many small contributions, seemingly insignificant at the time, synergistically creating a timeless work of music, poetry, advocacy, and community. And finally it’s a story about a social movement that changed the course of history and made this country a better place in which to live and raise our children.

“We Shall Overcome” has been sung in Indonesia, North Korea, Beirut, Soweto, and Tiananmen Square. It has been sung throughout Latin America as “Nosotros Venceremos” and “Todos Venceremos.” A dozen years ago, when I toured Japan as a folksinger, I was greeted at a train station by a dozen students serenading me with “We Shall Overcome.”

As far as we know, “We Shall Overcome” began as a work song first heard in the brutal fields of American slavery. Doubtless it preserved strains of ancestral songs from Africa. Like all work songs, it helped pass the endless time and distracted the mind from the burden of hard labor. Though the exact tunes and tempos that may have been sung have not survived, one version passed down through the folk process goes like this:

I’ll be all right
I’ll be all right
I’ll be all right someday
Deep in my heart
I do believe
I’ll be all right someday.

In 1903, the Reverend Charles Albert Tindley, a gospel songwriter and pastor of a large African-American Methodist church in Philadelphia, published a version with a somewhat different tune, titled “I’ll Overcome Some Day.” It went: “If in my heart I do not yield, I’ll overcome some day.” Although it’s possible the Rev. Mr. Tindley came up with the idea on his own, it seems more likely that, as often happens, he was adapting, perhaps unconsciously, the traditional song he’d heard.

The song flourished in various versions in the gospel singing of African-American churches. But it didn’t cross over into political use until 1945, when hundreds of employees of the American Tobacco Company in Charleston, South Carolina, went on strike. For African-American workers to stand up to a powerful employer in mid-century
South Carolina took a lot of courage. But at a wage of forty-five cents an hour, they figured they didn’t have much to lose.

They sang the song on the picket line with the lyric “We will win our rights someday.” But they didn’t all sing it the same way.

Delphine Brown knew a fast gospel version from church:

\begin{verbatim}
We will see the Lord
We will see the Lord
We will see the Lord someday
Oh deep in my heart
I do believe
We will overcome someday.
\end{verbatim}

But Lucille Simmons liked to sing it very slowly, in a free and easy long-meter style: “We will overcome.” When her fellow picketers saw her coming, they knew they were about to hear the song sung slower than anyone had heard it before.

Pete Seeger says that it was Lucille who changed the “I” to “We,” but Delphine had learned it that way in her church. So both “I” and “We” were already in simultaneous use in the African-American religious tradition.

Two of the union members from the Charleston strike traveled to Highlander Folk Center in Tennessee, which trained labor and civil rights activists. Rosa Parks had attended a two-week conference there six months before her civil disobedience launched the Montgomery bus boycott. The tobacco workers taught the song to Zelphia Horton, Highlander’s music director. She began singing it in long-meter style in workshops across the country in the late 1940s, still as “We will overcome.”

In 1947, Horton visited New York City on her annual fundraising trip for Highlander. There she taught the song to Pete Seeger. Pete sped it up to a medium tempo and added a boom-chinka banjo accompaniment. Pete immediately had the song published in People’s Songs, a left-wing music periodical that later evolved into Sing Out! magazine.

Pete began singing it wherever he went; given his politics and his blacklisting in the McCarthy era, most of his concerts were in the more liberal northeastern and West Coast states. Pete is usually credited for changing “will” to “shall,” but Pete, with typical modesty, shares credit with Septima Clark, an African-American schoolteacher from Charleston, South Carolina, who was Highlander’s director of education.

“It sings better” with “shall,” Pete says, because you have to open your mouth wider to sing “shall” than “will,” so more sound comes out.

On Labor Day weekend of 1957, the Reverends Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph David Abernathy came to Highlander to help celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary. During the festivities, they heard Pete Seeger sing a song they had never heard before. After a visit of barely three hours, the two ministers had to leave for an engagement in Louisville.

During the drive north, Dr. King kept humming the tune and recalled its name, “We Shall Overcome.” “There’s something about that song that haunts you,” he told his companions.
Two years later, a young guitar-player named Guy Carawan arrived at Highlander Center. (Members of this congregation know Guy as the composer of “Tree of Life,” which we sing here.) By then Zelphia Horton had died, and Guy stepped in as music director. A few years before, while a graduate student in sociology at UCLA, Guy had learned “We Shall Overcome” from Frank Hamilton, who had learned it from Pete. Frank had added some nice guitar chords that can still be heard in the rich harmonies we now associate with the song.

Guy began teaching “We Shall Overcome” to young civil rights demonstrators coming to Highlander for training. In 1960, Guy brought it to the founding convention of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, meeting in Raleigh, North Carolina. Guy remembers that “At a certain point those young singers who knew a lot of a cappella styles, they said, ‘Lay that guitar down, boy, we can do the song better.’ And they . . . sang it a cappella with all those harmonies that had a way of rendering it, a style, that some very powerful young singers got behind and spread.” Among those powerful musicians were the SNCC Freedom Singers, one of whom, Bernice Johnson Reagon, would later found Sweet Honey in the Rock.

Now established as “We Shall Overcome,” the song was carried by the civil rights movement throughout the South, sung through the choking mist of tear gas, sung by protestors bloodied by police batons, sung in the dangerous darkness of southern jails. John Lewis, now a Georgia congressman, had joined the civil rights movement as a teenager. His skull was fractured in Selma on the day still remembered as Bloody Sunday. “It was one of the most powerful and at the same time sacred moments,” Lewis reflects, “when we would sing ‘We shall overcome.’ And especially if you have been beaten, arrested, and jailed, and thrown into a paddy wagon, thrown into some waiting area, and the group just stand there and sing together ‘we shall overcome.’ It gave you a sense of faith, a sense of strength, to continue to struggle, to continue to push on. And you would lose your sense of fear. You were prepared to march into hell’s fire.”

So many protestors marched into and through hell’s fire that the tide of national opinion turned in favor of federal legislation to guarantee civil rights.

The evening of March 15, 1965, President Lyndon Baines Johnson addressed Congress and seventy million Americans watching on television. He called for a Voting Rights Act to protect the constitutional right of every citizen to vote: “It is the effort of American Negroes,” Johnson declared, “to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause, too. Because it’s not just Negroes, but really it’s all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.”

As the president’s words were interrupted by thunderous applause by Congress, some listeners chafed at hearing the slogan of the civil rights movement spoken in the first person plural by a wily white politician from Texas. But John Lewis, who watched the speech with Martin Luther King Jr. saw Dr. King wipe away a tear when Johnson uttered the words “we shall overcome.”

Not everyone sympathetic to the song’s purpose approved of it. The writer Lillian Hellman once remarked impatiently to Pete Seeger, “We shall overcome someday? someday?” But when Pete conveyed Hellman’s complaint to Bernice Johnson Reagon, she replied, “If we said ‘next week,’ what would we sing the week after next?”
I will leave to Martin Luther King Jr. the final words on “We Shall Overcome.” They’re from a sermon Dr. King delivered sometime around 1960. As I would be foolish to imitate Dr. King’s distinctive style of delivery, I will not attempt it.

He said:

There’s a little song that we sing in our movement down in the South, I don’t know if you’ve heard it. It has become the theme song: ‘We shall overcome.’ . . . Though I join hands so often with students and others behind jail bars singing it, we shall overcome. Sometimes we’d have tears in our eyes when we join together to sing it, but we still decided to sing it: We shall overcome. Before this victory is won, some will have to get thrown in jail some more, but we shall overcome. Don’t worry about us, before the victory is won, some of us will lose jobs, but we shall overcome. Before the victory is won, even some of us will have to face physical death. Physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent psychological death, then nothing shall more redemptive. We shall overcome. Before the victory is won, some will be misunderstood and called bad names and dismissed as rabble rousers and agitators, but we shall overcome.

And I tell you why: we shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. We shall overcome because Carlisle is right: No lie can live forever. We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right: Truth crushed to earth will rise again. We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right: Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne, yet that scaffold sways the future and behind the dim unknown standeth God within the shadows keeping watch above his own. We shall overcome because the Bible is right: You shall reap what you sow. We shall overcome. Deep in my heart I do believe we shall overcome.

And with this faith we will go out and adjourn the councils of despair and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism. And we will be able to rise from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope. And this will be a great America: we will be the participants in making it so.

Amen and Blessed Be.

Benediction  Martin Luther King Jr.

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. I believe that even amid today's mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. . . . I still believe that one day . . . nonviolent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land. “And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together . . . and none shall be afraid.” I still believe that We Shall Overcome!