

## **The Moral Arc of the Universe: The Careening Career of a Quotation**

Amos 5:14-15; 18-24

Romans 12: 14-21

“I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”—from a sermon, *Of Justice and the Conscience*, preached by abolitionist preacher, Theodore Parker, 1852.

### First Scripture Lesson

This weekend we celebrate the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr.

Now King was many things, but first and foremost he was a preacher. And preachers quote—frequently and freely. King was no exception.

Of course, he quotes the Bible. But he also quotes poets and presidents, theologians and philosophers, hymns and spirituals, the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address. The passage I’m about to read, from the Old Testament prophet Amos, closes with the one of King’s favorite quotations. If you’ve heard any sound bites from his sermons or speeches, you’ll recognize it.

Amos, Chapter 5, the theme is justice. Listen now for God’s Word to us:

Seek good and not evil,  
that you may live;  
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,  
Hate evil and love good,  
and establish justice in the gate;  
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,  
will be gracious to you.

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!  
Why do you want the day of the Lord?  
It is darkness, not light;  
as if someone fled from a lion,  
and was met by a bear;  
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,  
and was bitten by a snake.

Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light,  
and gloom with no brightness in it?

I hate, I despise your festivals,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

### Second Scripture Lesson

The Apostle Paul—he was a preacher too. We know this from the Book of Acts. Wherever he went, he preached; you couldn't stop him if you wanted to, and many wanted to. And Paul quoted, too—frequently and freely. First, of course, the Hebrew Scriptures, but also ancient poets and philosophers, Proverbs and folk sayings, temple inscriptions and historians. On several occasions, Paul even quotes himself.

In the passage I'm about to read, from Paul's Letter to the Romans—and Paul's letters are really just sermons in letter form—in the passage I'm about to read, a mere eight verses—one scholar identifies no less than 49 possible sources.

I say "possible" because . . . well, did I mention frequently AND freely? No footnotes of course; and often no attribution. And even more than that, Paul quotes for his own purposes. He'll take a quote, adapt it, modify it, tweak it, link it to another one, and then another and then another—all to make the point he wants to make.

And there's good precedent for this: Jesus (also a preacher) does the same when he quotes the Hebrew Scriptures. It's enough to send the scholars scurrying back to find the sources, which it does. So Romans Chapter 12 verses 14-21. Again, the theme is justice. You might even hear some echoes of the Amos passage. Listen now for God's Word to us:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.  
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.  
Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.  
If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, [and here Paul quotes Proverbs

25:21-22] “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

### Sermon

It’s not just preachers. We all do it. Quote, that is.

Politicians and presidents, professors and teachers, scholars, journalists, writers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, television announcers, bosses and co-workers. And not just in the workaday world, we all quote all the time—frequently and freely, when we tell jokes and stories, gossip, complain, praise and blame.

No footnotes of course; and often no attribution. We adapt, modify, tweak our quotations, all to make the point we want to make. Have you ever had a child quote your own words back to you? And so there you are, left stammering: “Yes, I know I that’s what I SAID, but that’s NOT what I MEANT.”

Quote. We all do it. And that can lead to some interesting consequences—quotations can take on a life of their own, have their own interesting careers if you will. Especially now that we have the internet. Case in point, this quotation: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

You hear that quoted a lot these days. It was even woven into the rug in the oval office in the White House. It’s often attributed to Martin Luther King Jr., and he did say it, many times (like the Apostle Paul, King often quoted himself). But it’s not original to him. It’s from an 1852 sermon, called, *Of Justice and Conscience*, by the Abolitionist preacher, Theodore Parker.

So again, we have the preacher’s practice of quoting and re quoting. Clayborne Carson, Professor of History at Stanford University and director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, puts it this way:

Often what happens is the first time [a preacher] use[s] a quote, they do cite it. The second time, it’s probably “[as] someone once said.” And then the last time, it’s “as I’ve said previously.” So it goes through a process in which the person kind of incorporates that [quotation] into their own oratory.

But here’s where the internet makes things interesting: you can track down a quotation, trace its career, if you will, on-line. All you need is a tablet, a search engine, and a little insomnia. For example, I was able to find the 1853 edition of Theodore Parker’s collected sermons on-line, scanned into the Internet Archive. The sermon *Of Justice*

*and Conscience* runs a full 36 pages. The passage King quoted from (I put it in your bulletins) runs—in full—like this:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.

You can hear. It—can't you?—how King, in adapting the quotation, made it better. He compressed it, shortened it—made it pithier, gave it more punch, made it more memorable.

The quotation in question has an interesting career.

Yet, at the same time as the internet helps you trace the careers of quotations, it also accelerates those careers exponentially. Quotations are adapted, modified, tweaked, linked, attributed—and oh yes, misattributed—almost at the speed of light on-line—all to make some point or another, or sometimes (at least it seems) no point at all.

And you know a quotation is in trouble when the first thing that pops up on your search engine is a series of images, images of inspirational posters, each with some version of the quotation. It's not that the quotation itself is banal; often there's much wisdom in it. But when it's gotten to the point of being on inspirational posters . . . well, it's probably grown worn-out, tiresome, cliched.

Case in point: the starfish story. You know, the starfish story, don't you?

Two people are walking down the beach. (In some versions, one of them is Jesus). Thousands of starfish (hundreds of thousands, in some versions) have washed up on the beach, which means they're dying. One of the two walkers picks up a starfish, and hurls it back into the ocean.

"Why did you do that?," the other asks. "Look at all of them! What difference can it possibly make?"

Without a word, the first person bends down to pick up another starfish. "It makes a difference to this one," he says hurling it into the sea. "And," bending down again, "to this one, too."

You see the point: even if the arc of the moral universe seems at times to be flat—that is, to be no arc at all—even if the universe seems at times overwhelmingly indifferent to both justice, and to all our efforts towards it—we should still keep trying, because for someone, somewhere, somehow, we can make—and do make—a difference.

It's a good story. Heard for the first time, it can be inspiring. It's just that, by the time it gets on inspirational posters, it can be a little hard to hear: it can sound like a cheap and

easy way of dismissing our very real—and let’s admit it, at times, justifiable—doubts about the arc of the moral universe.

And let’s admit this too: sometimes that quotation, “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice,” can sound the same way. Now, I don’t think that’s King’s fault. As I said, I think that, by making the quotation shorter, he made it more memorable. But therein lies the danger, because being more memorable, it gets repeated again and again and again, until, well . . . it ends up on an inspirational poster.

Another quotation for you:

Religious ideas have the fate of melodies, which, once set afloat in the world, are taken up by all sorts of instruments, some of them woefully coarse, feeble, or out of tune, until people are in danger of crying out that the melody itself is detestable.

(Now by my reckoning, that’s at least the third time I’ve used that quotation in a sermon. So as for its source—“As I’ve said previously.”) But here’s where the internet can be not only interesting but helpful. Because sometimes, if you track down the original quotation, trace its career, you can hear the words again in their fuller, deeper meaning—they’re no longer flat and uninspiring—you can hear their power and their glory.

The starfish story? It comes from an 1970’s essay by the scientist and writer, Loren Eiseley. And his point is, not that we make a difference in the world, but that we should always choose life.

Or to take another example: go back to Theodore Parker’s 1852 sermon, *Of Justice and Conscience*. Again:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.

***That*** is no cheap and easy dismissal of our doubts about the arc of the moral universe.

Just the opposite: Parker himself knows, shares, our doubts. He doesn’t pretend to understand or to see the arc of the moral universe—at least not with a distinct well-defined, outward vision, be that physical or intellectual. No, he sees it inwardly, divining it with the eyes of conscience: thus he has an inner conviction. He can see, and feel it, inwardly: the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice.

But is he right? Is it true? Does the arc of the moral universe bend toward justice?

It's an important question. We want to know—I want to know and I assume you do too—in the end, do our lives, and how we live them, matter, matter at all? To the universe? To God?

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good, Seek good and not evil, Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate.

Does the universe care about any of that? Does God? To answer, “Yes, God cares about that more than anything else—more than all our festivals, burnt offerings and solemn assemblies put together.” To say that—to see it, to feel it—with a sure inner conviction born of conscience: What would that look like? How would it feel?

“I know why the caged bird sings . . . . I know why the caged bird sings.”

That's right: another quotation. Most people know it as the title of the poet and writer Maya Angelou's 1969 autobiography. But it's not original to her. Here in Dayton, we know that she's quoting Dayton's own, the African-American poet and writer, Paul Laurence Dunbar. It's from his poem called *Sympathy*, which goes in part like this:

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!  
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;  
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,  
And the river flows like a stream of glass.

Caged though the bird may be, he still knows, he still feels: it's spring. But in response to spring, the song he sings is “not a carol of joy or glee.” No, the caged bird “beats his wing Till its blood is red on the cruel bars; And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars. He beats his bars and would be free.” The song the caged bird sings is no “song of glee” but a plea, a prayer that he “sends from his heart's deep core, that upward to Heaven he flings—I know why the caged bird sings!”

The sympathy of the poem's title is, yes, a sympathy of the narrator with the bird, but more than that, it is a sympathy, an affinity, between the bird and springtime: the bird was made for spring, and spring for the bird.

As the caged bird is to spring; so we are to justice. We were made for justice, and justice for us. Theodore Parker in his sermon puts it this way: We were made to “reverence and love justice,” . . . even to “delight” in it. “Justice is to the conscience,” he says, “what light is to the eye, and truth to the mind.”

And yet, Parker continues, “we do not see that justice is always done on earth . . . many a knave is rich, sleek, and honored while the just man is poor, hated, and in torment. . . . The cry of the world of suffering from Abel to the slaves of America comes up to our ear.”

And so the caged bird—our conscience within—sings, not a song of glee, but a prayer and a plea—from the heart's deep core upward to heaven:

“How long Oh, Lord, how long? How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?”

And heaven's answer to that prayer is clear: “Not long, not long.” Again, Theodore Parker's sermon:

There once was a man on this earth whom the world could not understand. He was too high, too wide, in every way too great . . . the greatest moral genius of our history, he came to bless mankind. And yet men mocked him, gave him a gallows between two thieves: “Savior, save yourself,” they taunted him.

And his response?: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

“Truth crushed to the ground will rise again.” There is a sympathy between heaven and earth: we were made for him, and he came to earth and died for us. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God chose life—for us and our salvation.

How long? Not long! The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice—that is our sure inner conviction born of our conscience.

But sometimes . . . sometimes our conscience needs to be reawakened, its vision re-focused, our inner assurance revived. The injustice of the world can do that to us.

And so God sends us prophets. And as I've said, the internet can be helpful here, because, when you track down the original quotation, trace its career, you can hear the prophet's words again in their fuller, deeper meaning, in their power and their glory.

Witness then words of one Martin Luther King Jr.:

I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, that it will not be long, because “no lie can live forever.”

How long? Not long!: because “you shall reap what you sow.”

How long? Not long!: because “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

How long? Not long!: because “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, the stone of hope.

With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood, and speed up the day when, in the words of the prophet Amos, "Justice will roll down like waters; and righteousness like a mighty stream."

How long? Not long!

His truth is marching on. His truth is marching on.

Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah!

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.