

Rev. Linda Simmons
June 4, 2017
Antigone's Dilemma

Antigone's dilemma is a Greek tragedy about many things, including how sacred or moral law and written law should be balanced.

The play takes place in the Greek city of Thebes, after the war between the two sons of Oedipus for the throne. Antigone and Ismene, the two surviving daughters of Oedipus, open the play as they meet in secret. Antigone laments their tragic family fate as the daughters of the late King Oedipus. Their parents are dead and their brothers have slain each other in an attempt to gain control of power.

Their uncle, Creon, has taken over the rule of Thebes and declared an honorable burial for one brother, Eteocles, who defended Thebes, but he has decreed that the other brother, Polyneices, is not allowed any funeral rites because he and his army attacked the city. One brother is hero, the other is traitor. Polyneices is to be left unburied, prey to the animals as an example to traitors.

Ismene asks what Antigone would have her do? Antigone asks her to join in giving burial to their brother Polyneices. Ismene declines, saying it is against the law. Antigone declares she will do it alone then. Ismene reminds Antigone they are only women and cannot fight the law made by men stronger than they are.

Antigone says she will not urge Ismene, but she will bury her brother alone. Burial rites were a sacred duty to the dead, because the dead person would not be accepted in the underworld without proper burial. Her brother's spirit would wander forever, dishonored. Antigone feels more horror of that than of the certain death she will earn by rebelling against Creon. She says "I have to please the dead far longer than I need to please the living."¹ I read this as, I have to live with my conscience much longer than I have to live with the consequence of the law. Antigone is indeed caught trying to bury her brother and is walled in a tomb alive.

Who gets to decide when the written law or the moral law is followed? What guides us? When does our faith ask us to break laws? Unitarians and many others broke the law in helping Jews during Nazism and we break laws still in resisting unjust laws to help refugees. People broke laws during the civil rights movement and times of apartheid. People break laws doing climate justice work and as whistle blowers bringing us all valued information that keeps us informed of illegal activities at the governmental level.

When should a moral law, if you will, be called to mediate or contest the written law and what guidelines do we employ in doing so?

¹ <http://www.novelguide.com/antigone-sophocles-lines> 74-76.

The next part of this sermon was inspired by a sermon by the same name, Antigone's dilemma, preached by Rev. Diane Miller² in which she did some primary research by calling funeral directors in Massachusetts to gathering information. She was my supervisor when I interned at her church in Carlisle, MA, when I was in divinity school.

Diane writes about a similar question in what became something of our own modern Antigone's dilemma here in Massachusetts when following the Marathon bombings, the body of Tamerlan Tsarnaev lay without burial for about 27 days from the time he died on April 19th.

On April 15, 2013, Marathon Day, a tradition from ancient Greece, close by where the laurel wreaths were given to the winners, two bombs were set among the festive crowds. They killed and maimed people who were in Boston to celebrate runners. We know how horrifying, devastating, unbelievable, and nonsensical it was. We lived through it. And when it emerged that two brothers were the suspects, our outrage focused on them. There was no justification for what they did. It seemed to be terror for the sake of terror.

The confrontation with police a few days later left one of the Tsarnaev's killed by bullets and run over by the car driven by his brother, while the other was captured the next day hiding in a boat in a Watertown back yard. Tamerlan Tsarnaev was first taken for emergency care, but could not be revived. His body was conveyed to the Medical Examiner.

Boston grieved those who were killed by the Tsarnaev brothers, with funerals and memorials, and supported those who were injured. Honors were paid. As for Tsarnaev, there was a furor over burial.

Peter Stefan, a Funeral Director in Worcester, at Graham, Putnam & Mahoney, accepted the body, even though there were protesters who wanted to make sure that the body was not buried in the US. Mr. Stefan told the Associated Press:

"We take an oath to do this. Can I pick and choose? No. Can I separate the sins from the sinners? No. We are burying a dead body. That's what we do."

But it was complicated.

Rev. Diane Miller spoke with funeral directors she knew in Bedford and in Concord. They told her that when a body is released by the Medical Examiner, normally it is released to the next of kin. In the case of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, that would be his wife. She had left Massachusetts and taken her daughter to live with her parents in Rhode Island.

The wife authorized attorneys to claim the body and to take it to a funeral home in North Attleboro. A media circus erupted, and there was a riot of sorts over the presence of the

² Rev. Diane Miller, "Antigone's Dilemma" First Religious Society, Carlisle MA June 2, 2013.

body in the town. That funeral home wanted out of the spotlight. So they contacted Peter Stefan, who picked up the body and took it to Worcester.

In the many news stories about this issue, Peter Stefan seemed to have a clear perspective. When Diane called him, he made the argument that in this country we don't drag bodies through the streets, we bury the dead. He mentioned many killers, convicted and presumed guilty, who had all been buried without furor. Lee Harvey Oswald. John Wilkes Booth. Jeffrey Dahmer. Ted Bundy. Timothy McVeigh. The Boston Strangler. Osama Bin Laden. Adam Lanza. And more.

It has long been accepted practice in war that fighting would cease after battles and burial details would recover the bodies of the dead.

This tradition goes back to the Greeks. Even the Romans gave the body of Jesus to his disciples and family after he was crucified, so that the rituals of Jewish burial could be followed. But this was different, and many angry people seemed to think that Tamerlan Tsarnaev was the exception to the rule. The anger toward the body seemed unprecedented.

Peter Stefan is experienced in this field. He is the Chair of the Massachusetts Board of Funeral Directors, a governor's appointment. He is known for taking the dead who have no one to bury them, for caring for AIDS victims before others would. "We take all the poor people" he told Diane.

And, he said, about the Tsarnaev burial, "we taught the world some ethics."

A number of UU ministerial colleagues publicly expressed the view that our faith tradition called for us step up and offer a place for the body. Citing our Universalist values and our first principle declaring "the inherent worth and dignity" of all persons, they articulated our Standing on the Side of Love stance, and called upon communities to provide a place for burial. No one stepped forward.

It gets complicated doesn't it when there is so much at stake. Would we here have taken on the burden, risk and media attention of this step if we'd been asked?

How would that conversation have gone if it came this way? Would we have reacted like Ismene feeling the law of the land so to speak was too strong for us to stand against? Or would we have had the courage of Antigone and known that doing the right thing, doing the humane thing, living to love,³ mattered more than anything else, come what may? Chances are, another occasion will arise. It's good to consider together.

Peter Stefan, Funeral Director, was pretty much on his own. No one wanted to help him. Not the Governor, not the City of Cambridge, not the City of Worcester, not the Federal Government. Towns did not want a terrorist buried in their cemeteries. The Police Chief in Worcester appealed to the public for a burial place, saying this is what we do in a civilized

society. Peter Stefan told me that he was waiting for “some leading clergy” to say that he was doing his job, or offer a place – it was silence in every direction.

Tamerlan Tsarnaev’s mother wanted her son’s body to be returned to Russia, to Dagestan where she lives. It was complicated to arrange: Mr. Stefan was talking with the Kremlin, the KGB, the Russian Consulate, and to John Kerry, Secretary of State, who was raising the question diplomatically.

What Peter Stefan needed was a tomb, a holding place until the arrangements could be made to send the body abroad. But again, Boston and Cambridge and other cemeteries did not want to cooperate by offering a tomb for storage.

Martha Mullen, a Richmond, Virginia, woman who’d been following the story thought “somebody ought to do something,” and decided that she was somebody. A practicing Christian who cited Jesus’s injunction to “love our enemies” as her inspiration, a woman who has a theological degree although hasn’t served in ministry; she began looking for solutions.

She found a tiny Muslim cemetery in rural Virginia, a Muslim burial society, which agreed to accept the body. The body was moved there quietly and Tamerlan is interred there in an unmarked grave.

What does this mean to us as a people of faith and it does seem to me that we are a people of faith. “But what do we have faith in Linda?” People always ask me when I say this. And I answer: when we gather, as we come together to question each other and the world, to look into each other’s hearts, minds and souls, we begin to know more than we can alone about what is good and right and true and sometimes we do not like all what we learn and cannot even understand all of it but we are sure that it has been tested through the conscience of others who gather each week in song, words, music and silence, to open ourselves to becoming more than we could become the week before. We have faith that this process of becoming together will show us the way to love.

So, as a people of faith, what this means, living to love rather than to hate, is that when confronted with hate, be it a hate that the law condones or that society condones, we resist, we question, we bring it to the test of our conscience and stir it around privately and together, even when it rubs against some beliefs and values we hold dear about one thing or another.

When confronted with a practice that is rooted in hate, we resist as part of our religion even when we agree that the practice is rooted in more than hate, like a grieving heart or a history that has deep roots. Even then. Even then my friends, we resist the temptation to act from hatred. And resistance belongs to us and our conscience. It will not be scripted by this religion or by me or anyone else in Unitarian Universalism because that is not the way we do things. It will belong to us together and our goodness and our love and our way of making justice, as it always has.

Rev. Dr. Stephanie May in her sermon also entitled, “Antigone’s Dilemma” who gave me the phrase, *living to love* writes, “Of course, living to love can be a demanding and costly commitment. It cost Antigone her life. And yet, living to love also grounds our lives in a vision of a common humanity that exceeds the social and political divisions that seek to make us forget that all human bodies are human. Even black bodies. Even women’s bodies. Even refugee bodies and displaced bodies. Even your enemies’ bodies.”⁴

Where do we stand as people of faith? With whom do we stand? Would we have stood between that man on the train in Portland and the Muslim women he was speaking hate to? Would we stand beside those who are being deported who are good, working people contributing to our country and who deserve a place here as surely as you and I? Would we put our reputations at risk, even our freedom, to protect or even bury another? If a boat of refugees arrived off of our shores, would we go to sea to save them and bring them into our homes? Might we too, like Antigone, be willing to know a law above the law of the land if that law advocates for something other than seeing the humanity in another?

Would we too be willing to risk something to live by the dictates of a morality hewn here among us that calls us to honor the inherent worth and dignity of all people?

I am arguing not for a disregard of the law but for an engagement with the law as people of faith that demands a consideration, a balancing, a calling forth of human dignity and love. Living to love asks something of us. We must decide together, in covenant, side by side, in this deep caldron of community, what it asks and allow the answer to rise between us and change us.

May we hold fast my friends. May we hold fast to our common humanity, as if our lives depend on it, because they do.

Amen.

⁴Rev. Dr. Stephanie May, “Antigone’s Dilemma,” sermon October 9, 2016: <https://www.uuwayland.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/2016.10.9.AntigonesDilemma.pdf>