

ethikos Volume 32, Number 2. February 01, 2018 Insights for modern ethics from Theodore Parker's "Of Justice and the Conscience"

BY Sally Afonso

Sally Afonso, JD, CCEP-I (sallyafonso@gmail.com) is Compliance Advisor from Amsterdam, Netherlands.

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“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Among the many who have used and referred to this quote, one of the most beloved wisdoms of progressive social values, are Martin Luther King, Jr., during the march from Selma, Alabama and in his final sermon at the National Cathedral; President Barack Obama, throughout his campaign and presidency, and even in a rug in the redesigned Oval Office; and most recently, Senator Doug Jones on the eve of his electoral victory in Alabama.

This popular quote underscores the faithful determination that morality is in favor above all else, of fairness, and that truth will prevail in the end — even if it takes a long time and a lot of work to reach that aspiration. The older lines on which these words are based come from Theodore Parker, a 19th century minister, abolitionist, and Transcendentalist scholar. Parker wrote many sermons evoking the virtue of moral service and the importance of ethical living for all people.

As the reforming minister of the Unitarian church, the foundation of all of Parker’s texts was, of course, religious faith. However, due to Parker’s engagement in social theology and many of the reform movements of his era (most notably abolitionism, but also included women’s rights, peace activism, and economic inequity), his sermons are often imbued with insights about secular living and worldly concerns just as much as they are theological in nature.

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