

Learning to Welcome Conversations about Race

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, September 24, 2017

Opening Words

"Brave Space" - by Micky ScottBey Jones

<http://www.mickyscottbeyjones.com/invitation-to-brave-space/>

Together we will create brave space
Because there is no such thing as a "safe space."
We exist in the real world
We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.
In this space
We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world,
We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,
We call each other to more truth and love,
We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.
We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.
We will not be perfect.
This space will not be perfect.
It will not always be what we wish it to be
But
It will be our brave space together,
and
We will work on it side by side.

Meditation and Prayer

- by DeReau K. Farrar, Director of Music at First Unitarian Church of Portland in Oregon

<http://www.uua.org/braverwiser/change-world-wheels>

"If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change."
~ Mahatma Gandhi

Every Sunday morning, the church choir and I spend time in reflection and silence before we begin the first worship service. I often offer my thoughts on the day's theme or the state of the world, providing context to the message we bring.

On a recent Sunday, I said to the choir, "So often, we make the mistake of living according to our hopes instead of according to our realities." I didn't mean to say it, and I didn't know that I would. But as I did, the statement became immediately true.

I wonder if, in our efforts to "be the change we wish to see in the world," we stop short at our ideal selves: the idea of ourselves we are most comfortable with. I wonder how often I think I've already been the change — and I'm waiting idly for the tendencies of the world to catch up. I'm unsettled by how frequently I'm surprised by my own social idiocy. How many times need I screw up the same person's preferred pronouns, or note that I am not surprised that the person who just nearly ran me

off the road is of a certain race and/or age, or make immediate assumptions about someone because of what I perceive to be their class?

Or maybe this is a better question: How many times do I need to make mistakes at the expense of other people, or people's groups, before I'm ready to admit that I'm not any better at this than the bigoted and willfully ignorant?

I am liberal. Often painfully so. I am not enlightened. I am not elevated. I am not better. But I believe, with everything I am, that I can be.

"Change" is a word on wheels. It's not a destination, but a journey. If I am to "be change," I must commit to humility and refuse to settle for my own comforting achievements.

This is my prayer:

That which is in us and all around us and which constantly draws us to our holiest selves, remove from me any spirit of complacency that would aim to prevent me from seeing the truth of myself. Strengthen me as I commit to a lifestyle of development. And, remind me that that lifestyle is simply called love.

Reading

"Visitors in the Struggle for Racial Justice"

- by Aisha Ansano

No matter what tactics and methods racial justice activists use, the general response of society will be a collective head-shaking and tsk-tsk-ing — because what people are actually complaining about are not the specific tactics that are being used in the struggle for racial justice, but that the struggle for racial justice exists at all.

I imagine that for most people, the immediate reaction to that statement is defensiveness. "I really don't think that the struggle for racial justice shouldn't exist," some might respond. "I just think there are better ways to go about it than blocking traffic and making me late for work. I get annoyed and frustrated and it really doesn't convince me to join your fight."

What, exactly, is going to convince that person to join the fight? Picket signs on the side of the road? Then they'll just think, "Look at those troublemakers disturbing the peace over there," as they drive on their way to work. Then they'll promptly forget about it.

It's not the specific methods that are making people uncomfortable. It's the fact that the struggle for racial justice is seeping into their awareness in ways that they can't ignore.

Think about it in terms of this metaphor: You're visiting a foreign country where the customs are very different from what you are used to, and the language is different, and some of the things they do are not only different but make you feel deeply uncomfortable. As a guest in that country, it is not for you to say that the things that people who live there are doing are wrong. Instead, your role is to learn, to pay attention and try to understand how things work, and to adapt. But if you do something that goes against their norms, it's also your role as a guest to not insist that they let you do things however you want to do them. It is your role as a guest to pause and consider what you're doing.

White people tend to be visitors to the struggle for racial justice, ones that aren't forced to be there but can choose to come in and leave whenever they like. People of color reside in the struggle for racial justice by virtue of their race. As people who are constantly in the struggle, people of color have the right to make claims on what they find okay and not okay, what they see as helpful and not helpful.

Sermon Reflection

What does it mean to be a people of welcome? That has been the thematic question, the organizing inquiry for our worship services for the month of September. Each week we have examined a different aspect of what that question means to us as a religious community and how we both individually and together are called to answer it. Many of you are familiar with the term *radical hospitality* – that's what we're talking about. The kind of welcome and hospitality that goes beyond the social niceties and **reaches for a deeper sense of acceptance and understanding**; a sense of welcome that challenges us and invites us to step out of our zones of comfort, to encounter more deeply ourselves, one another and the stranger. The welcome exemplified by a radical hospitality is nothing less than a spiritual practice that goes to the very heart – in fact, is a foundational root - of who we are as a people of faith. So, this is no small thing we're talking about here.

Today we will conclude our exploration of welcome with a focus on learning to welcome conversations about race. I need to begin by providing a little background. At our board of trustee's annual visioning and planning retreat in August 2015, our leadership committed to racial justice as a primary social justice focus for our congregation. A list of books and films was generated for use in our adult religious education program as well as a periodic worship focus on racial justice to deepen our understanding of the Black Lives Matter movement and to learn how we – as a primarily white congregation - could be better allies in this work.

The books chosen that first year were *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stephenson, *Selma Awakening* by Mark Morrison-Reed, and *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander. It's unclear how many of us actually read the books but we did sell out of all the copies we purchased. And even though very few people attended any of the book discussion opportunities or film viewings offered throughout that year, the congregation nevertheless voted unanimously at our annual meeting in May 2016 to purchase and hang a Black Lives Matters banner on the front of our building.

Last year we attempted to go further with our study and discussion with the reading of *The Third Reconstruction* by the Rev. Dr. William Barber, but the results were identical to year one. Books were purchased and reportedly read, but despite our attempts at creative scheduling, only a handful – of mostly the same people – attended any of the discussion group opportunities. The second book

selected for last year - *Cultivating Empathy: The Worth and Dignity of Every Person – Without Exception* by Nate Walker - remains atop the cupboard in my office. We needed to figure out what was going on here...

We have this big yellow gold banner hanging over our front door that proclaims our belief that “Black Live Matter” - and includes the invitation “Join the discussion here.” It begs the question - what discussion are we inviting others to join us in?

There are many possible answers to that question, and all of them undoubtedly hold some aspect of the truth. Many of us possibly feel that we’re already educated enough about racial justice and that our hearts are already in the right place - what more do we need to know? What more do we need to do? Perhaps I’m wrong about this, but I think we need to be reminded to **beware the white privilege that allows us to so easily step away from the work that needs to be done** as well as the white fragility that prevents us from truly hearing the words of confrontation we need to hear.

“True change in the world is intimately related to our internal transformation, which is intimately related to our presence to ourselves.” – Karen Quinlan

I would like to bring another voice to the table now, so to speak, and share with you a TED talk that exposes many of the stumbling blocks we face in our efforts to engage with one another in dialogue about race. This talk was produced in 2011 so it doesn’t possess the “fierce urgency of now” one might expect as it predates the cultural awareness of the ongoing prevalence of racial violence that has been exposed in recent years due to the advent of cell phone video technologies as well as social media. But the presenter’s authenticity, humor, and directness delivers a helpful message for us all.

Jay Smooth is host of New York’s longest running hip-hop radio show, the Underground Railroad on WBAI 99.5 FM in NY, and is an acclaimed commentator on politics and culture.

“How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU&list=PLrubwoNQcGdT3fOBsyFGouycB4VsL1NT7&index=2>

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~ Mahatma Gandhi

“A spirituality that is only private and self-absorbed, one devoid of an authentic political and social consciousness, does little to halt the suicidal juggernaut of history. On the other hand, an activism that is not purified by profound spiritual and psychological self-awareness and rooted in divine truth, wisdom, and compassion will only perpetuate the problem it is trying to solve, however righteous its intentions...

We have very little time in which to awaken and transform ourselves, to be able to preserve the planet, and to heal the divisions between the powerful and the powerless. Let us go forward now with firm resolve and profound dedication.”

– from *Savage Grace: Living Resiliently in the Dark Night of the Globe* – by Andrew Harvey and Carolyn Baker <http://www.andrewharvey.net/sacred-activism/>

Closing Words

“Principles”

- by Danez Smith

let us not be scared of the work because

it's hard

let us move the mountain

because the mountain must move

let us, oh lords above us and within

let us be useful to our neighbors

& tender their wounds

let us be more bandage than blade

unless the blade is needed

let us be a sword against what does not

bring us closer to home

let us be dangerous to that which fails us

and bring us a world good to us, all of us

all us

all us

amen

Closing Song

[“I Am Willing”](#) by Holly Near

Chorus:

I am open and I am willing

To be hopeless would seem so strange

It dishonors those who go before us

So lift me up to the light of change

There is hurting in my family

There is sorrow in my town

There is panic in the nation

There is wailing the whole world round

May the children see more clearly

May the elders be more wise

May the winds of change caress us

Even though it burns our eyes

Give me a mighty oak to hold my confusion

Give me a desert to hold my fears

Give me a sunset to hold my wonder

Give me an ocean to hold my tears