

No Time for Casual Faith

- by UUA President, the Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray; delivered on Sunday, June 24, 2018 at the UUA General Assembly closing worship service in Kansas City, MO.

<https://www.uua.org/ga/off-site/2018/worship/sunday>

- presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

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Introduction

As a capstone to our Summer Worship series on “Sharing the Stories of Living Our Faith,” it seems wholly appropriate to bring to the table the voice of our current UUA president, the Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray and the sermon reflection she presented at the closing worship service of this year’s General Assembly in Kansas City, Missouri – a message titled “No Time for Casual Faith.” Hear now her words.

Sermon Reflection

[Edited out personal introduction directed to GA attendees]

[This past year] has been a time of enormous challenge, heartbreak and urgency.

A time where we are called to bear witness to so much pain, to acknowledge the past we are coming from, and to do the work that enables us to create a new story from where we are now.

Last August, just days after I arrived in Boston with my family, having packed up and moved from Phoenix, AZ, the call came for faith leaders to show up in Charlottesville, VA. Local faith leaders, including Unitarian Universalists, called others to join them in fortifying an effort to stop white supremacist violence descending on their town.

I didn’t hesitate because at its best our faith teaches us that the humanity of every single person is threatened when we let those who dehumanize others go unchallenged. And because I know that it is not enough to intellectually want to change the world, then shrink when that change calls us to take risks, to show up, to sacrifice to protect one another. It was important to show up and follow the challenging call of our faith **to embody a fierceness of love in the face of hate.**

Being in Charlottesville was terrifying and traumatic. A number of Unitarian Universalists were injured on the streets that day and Heather Heyer was killed.

Even as the news cycle moves on with the day's latest shock and tragedy, it matters that we not forget what happened in Charlottesville in August of 2017, for it revealed explicitly what is at stake in these times.

The violence and dehumanization that undergirds racism, white supremacy, patriarchy, anti-Semitism, islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia—were all on full display in that white supremacist rally. It made the power and renewed boldness of these movements in our nation undeniable. And it revealed the federal administration, the police, and the state's complicity and protection of these movements. To be clear, this is not about individual police officers—people of dignity and worth—it is about **the system of policing**. Let me be specific about what I mean by complicity.

The night before the rally, white supremacists marched through the campus of the University of Virginia with fiery torches. They assaulted members of the Black Student Alliance and they marched on to the Presbyterian church where faith leaders were gathered in a peaceful interfaith prayer service. Throughout this the police were...nowhere. The police were similarly absent as men armed with long guns marched in front of the Charlottesville synagogue during services shouting hate-filled Nazi slogans at the faithful worshippers. In fact, the synagogue had specifically requested police protection, but none showed up.

The next morning, the police again stood back, far from the crowds. We faith leaders stood face to face with well-armed white men, dressed in surplus military gear, long guns, and hundreds and hundreds of rounds of ammunition, a right-wing volunteer militia supposedly "policing" the event. And then, when dozens and dozens of white supremacists came marching down the street chanting and yelling with shields and helmets, wooden clubs and sticks, coming right at faith leaders and peaceful protesters—the police were nowhere to be seen.

It was terrifying to see that level of white nationalist violence, and terrifying to see it be completely unchecked by police. And I own how my shock reveals my own white privilege and the degree to which I assumed the police are in the business of protecting me, my body, my life. That is an assumption not everyone gets to make.

Let us just take a moment to reflect on the fact that the police largely stood down to give space for armed white men to carry out intimidation and violence throughout the community of Charlottesville—and compare this to what happened in Ferguson, MO, when unarmed black people came out to the

streets to protest and mourn the killing of the young Michael Brown and were met with a militarized police force armed with tear gas and tanks.

This disparity brings into sharp relief the reality that Black Lives Matter organizers have been naming for years - the racism and broader system of white supremacy in our nation and its system of policing. This is not about individual officers, this is about a **system of policing** that has been set up to preserve order in a system that is fundamentally unequal, untenable, and oppressive, particularly against communities of color and the poor. In fact, as injustice, inequity and disparity grow in our country and globally, our nation's investments in policing, jails, weapons and warfare all grow—**seeking to protect profit motives over human lives and human dignity**. It begs the question—would we need such investments in warfare, violence and militarism if we had justice and equity for all?

It was important to be in Charlottesville with UU's from across the South and East—ministers and lay people—who came to support the local congregation, its leaders and be in solidarity and witness to the larger community. And your UUA was there in ways both visible and behind the scenes—providing communication support to the organizers and staying after for trauma response and pastoral care. This is one of the ways that we can hold each other as a collective faith in this time. I know from my previous ministry in Phoenix, and in the struggle for immigrant rights and combating the abuses of Sheriff Joe Arpaio, **the power of the UUA and our shared faith** when we show up for and with one another in times of crisis and turmoil and challenge.

And unfortunately, we are getting more and more opportunities where this is needed. Because, let's be clear, it is not just about Charlottesville.

As a people—a people of faith—that says we are committed to justice, compassion, and equity; as a faith that says we are committed to the inherent worth and dignity of all people; as a faith that says we are committed to respect for the interdependent web of all life—we have a critical role to play in this time.

Two things that are absolutely clear: #1—**This is no time for a casual commitment to your faith, your community, and your values**, and

#2—this is not time to think we are in this alone.

This is no time for a casual faith. As Unitarian Universalists, we are first and foremost religious communities, religious communities that practice love as our foundation—and we are living in times of

heartbreak, violence, struggle, and pain. In this time, we need communities that remind us of our humanity in this very inhumane time.

Fifty years ago, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was asking what it would take for we as a nation to turn away from the giant evils of racism, militarism and economic exploitation that infected so much of our society. He said it would take a kind of powerful, unconditional, overflowing goodwill for all people, a **universal love for humanity**. He called this kind of love “agape love” and he said it could very well be the salvation of human civilization. King said of agape love that “it is the love of God operating in the human heart.” Even if you need to translate the theistic language, feel the power and the calling in this message. Agape love is “the love of God operating in the human heart.”

We need communities that teach us how to love with this fullness, this boldness, this courage, unconditionally **in the midst of propaganda and politics that tell our hearts to be afraid**. We need communities where we can bring our heartbreak—and the fullness of our pain and be reminded that we are not alone in this. We need communities of both courage and compassion, of resilience and resistance. And we need to nurture in our children this faith and these values.

We may not all be able to be on the streets in places like Charlottesville and Ferguson, but we all have a vital role to play—and we can all make a stronger commitment to nurture healthy, vital, radically inclusive, communities and the powerful practice of this faith that helps us build a courageous and **fierce, embodied agape love** that fosters what is best in us as human beings.

I know from talking with many of you that when UU’s witnessed what happened in Charlottesville, many turned to their congregations for healing and to hold the trauma from what we witnessed. **But where we want to be a salve to the wounds of the world, we must also be a mirror to our role in their infliction.**

My prayer for we as an association is that we answer both of those calls, to hold each other in times of pain and to hold each other to account, in acts of courageous love when we or our institutions contribute to harm. Ours has never been a monolithic faith and it does not have to be limited by the monocultural roots of its past.

The promise of our faith means liberating ourselves from the systems of dominance and exploitation we all suffer under. The promise of our faith means making compassion a way of being, it means creating a collective sense of both community and responsibility. It holds the vision of a yet to be

realized future where our collective survival, our liberation, and a practice of the fullness of our theology is possible.

When we stepped into the streets in Charlottesville as faith leaders, we knew our safety could not be guaranteed nor expected. Our faith gave us strength, but it wasn't just faith holding us. **The other thing that gave us courage and strength was that we were not alone.**

Friends, this is no time to go it alone—we as Unitarian Universalists can't go it alone. We as individual congregations cannot be in this struggle alone. I was strengthened by the faith leaders who I stood with shoulder to shoulder, arm in arm, on that line. Christian, Jew, Muslim, Unitarian Universalist—Siding with Love.

Now is the time to build stronger relationships across our faith, deeper partnerships and commitment with those most impacted on the frontlines of campaigns for liberation.

Theologically, our Universalism tells us that no one is outside the circle of love. However, we must understand that in our lives, in the context of oppression and discrimination, that **the circle has never been drawn wider from the center.** It has always grown wider because of the vision, leadership and organizing of people living on the margins who truly understand the limits and costs of oppressive policies—and what liberation means.

This time we are living in is one of tremendous opportunity and needed change—and the health and strength of our communities and our commitment to our values, to this theology of love and interdependence is crucial. I know this work is calling more from us, but I also know that we have been readying for it. And I know it will change us, but I also see that day when we will look back and see the measurable change in our hearts, in our communities, in our faith and in our society that were nurtured by our struggles and our courageous love today.

Now this change won't come through optimistic hope or casual practice. It will take a **greater commitment and generosity** to communities that sustain courage, love, hope and resiliency. It will mean new ways of living our faith and reaching out more boldly, lovingly and faithfully with others for justice. And it will take each of us finding our work, our place—**where our gifts help call something new**—something life giving—into this world.

[...]

May the spiritual community **that we practice** strengthen all of our hearts, may it give us courage, may we not be silent or shrink back from the demands of love. May we hold one another in love as

we follow new pathways of joy, of community, of change, of risk and of joy. And may we all be held by the practice of [agape] love that leads us to the liberation we all need—until all are free.