

**Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan
June 7, 2020
Andrew Frantz, contract minister**

Compassion Begins Within

For the reading today, I paraphrased the words of three Black Unitarian Universalist leaders -- Everette Thompson, Ellandria Williams, and Paige Ingram. I want to connect their words with my morning message today. My topic today is compassion. The connection is found within our Unitarian Universalist principle of *Justice, equity and compassion in human relations*. I am going to start by talking about compassion, and that will lead to justice.

On the wall of my office in the Fellowship here, I have the following quotation: *I am the only one who can make my well-being my top priority. I owe it myself to take care of my body, mind, and spirit.*

I also have posted on my bulletin board my mission statement as a minister: *As a minister, my mission is to spread love and justice to the whole world with no exceptions, using the principles and the institution of Unitarian Universalism.*

And next to that, I have another index card that I've tacked up and it says: SELF CARE. Because I can't accomplish my mission as a minister without taking care of myself first.

In this moment of racial awareness when we are all reminded of the racism that pervades our society, it may be problematic for a white person to say I'm putting my own needs first. I identify as white, and I have white privilege, so is it in fact me being selfish to say that I'm taking care of myself first? I will amend this to say that when you thrive, I thrive; and when I thrive, you thrive. And more importantly, that self-care means doing the work to get rid of the poison of racism in my mind, in my blood. If my self-care means that I am accomplishing that, then I can go forward and do the work of justice and spreading love in the world.

This week I struggled. It's been a hard week. I can't believe that it was just one week ago, last Sunday morning at 10:00 before the service I heard that there would be a protest that afternoon down on Broomfield Road. And I went. I went and I held my sign and I listened to the speakers. But I went with some trepidation. I didn't know who would be there. I didn't know if other ministers would be there. I still feel sort of new in this community and I don't know how I fit in. But I showed up.

The next day there was another march, which turned out to be a much bigger one, and I chose not to go to that one. I was taking care of myself, doing other work to support my mission...and the truth is that I was sacred again. It was uncomfortable to think of going. So both are true, and I'm being honest in my own journey and how I'm engaging in this moment.

To connect this back to compassion, my intention is to have compassion for myself: that when I am doing my best, that is enough. Not going to every protest is OK, as long as I am trying my best to live up to my mission.

Now what I want to name right now, and to point out very carefully, is that I'm a person who identifies as white, and I'm preaching right now about my story. I am centering the story of my whiteness in this moment of great national awakening around racial justice. And of course that's me being authentic—I only know my own experience, and I don't know what it's like for you, especially if you don't identify as white. It is part of my white privilege that I can choose when to engage with the racial struggle and when not to. My Black brothers and sisters and siblings don't have that choice. My 10-minute sermon should

not be the most you hear about race and racism this week--I urge you to balance that with Black voices. That's why I shared the comments of those three Black UU leaders as my reading, and that's why I urge you to watch the whole video of that service from Tuesday night. It was inspiring and challenging.¹

Compassion: I have compassion for myself, I take care of myself to do this work. Compassion is a visceral human reaction when we see a Black person being killed by police—yet another Black person. And that is what sparked this whole moment that we are in. Compassion is natural if we witness anyone dying or suffering. When they are killed unjustly, compassion turns to anger, and (hopefully) we turn that anger into action – because anger that is kept within only harms ourselves.

As Paige Ingram said, action is not doing the Facebook post, attending the webinar, or even holding the service. We had a beautiful service on Thursday night that many of you came to, to honor this moment. That is part of the work. But she is saying, and I agree, that the real work comes after the protests and after the marching. It's giving money to bail funds to bail out people arrested in the protests. That's a little more like real action.

And here comes the big one. The idea that is challenging for me right now, and that is being advocated in our UU leadership. What about abolishing and defunding the police? That's the idea that I'm just starting to hear—because I'm just starting to listen. On this call on Tuesday night, with national UU leaders, the president of the UUA, the Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray was calling for the abolition of police. She is bringing this radical idea, and I'm challenged by it and I'm bringing it you, to see how it lands. Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray pointed out that a brutal system of policing is necessary to maintain this oppressive system. It was necessary during slavery, during Jim Crow, during the New Jim Crow of mass incarceration. The police system enforces a system of oppression where some thrive and get rich while others are kept poor. A police system that oppresses is necessary to a capitalist, hetero-patriarchal white supremacist society.²

This is my homework to wrap my mind around this, to look into this idea of abolishing the police. Because I have been raised to believe that the police are there to protect me...and guess what? They are. But it would feel very different if my skin were a different color.

This is a radical idea, and I am being challenged by my fellow ministers and by other leaders in our religious movement to ask: what would it look like to defund the police? How much are we spending on police, and what if we put that money to education and other social programs? What would it look like to re-think the roles of police in protecting our neighborhoods? These are radical ideas, and this is a radical religion.

Here's the thing: until now--until this week, I would say--having a Black Lives Matter banner was radical. It never should have been a radical message—that people's lives matter—but it seemed like it was. The beauty of this moment is that suddenly that's not a radical message. Suddenly that's becoming a mainstream message. It's painted in letters twelve feet high on the streets of our nation's capital. It's on cardboard signs, not only in Denver and Philadelphia, but in Paris. If that's true, that Black Lives Matter is becoming a mainstream idea now, then Hallelujah.

And now here's this new idea, and it follows naturally. If we're going to decry police brutality, then what? And let me just see how that lands with you, this radical idea of abolishing police. My fellow ministers and the other leaders of this religion are pushing me out of my comfort zone, with ideas like this. I welcome it. Come to GA and you'll see more of that.

My message began with Compassion – the necessity of self-compassion and self-care. For those of us who have been socialized into an identity of whiteness, getting rid of racism within us is part of that self-care.

Compassion calls us to care about injustice, and this week it was in our face in a way we couldn't ignore. Through compassion we go toward action to create better world. And one of our principles as Unitarian Universalists is *Justice, equity and compassion in human relations*.

May we be compassionate, alive to the injustice and the suffering in the world. May this awareness lead us to action. May we embrace the radical notion that none of us is free until we all are free and that my well-being—my spiritual well-being, my happiness, not my material wealth or my status--depends on the uplifting the oppressed in my society.

May we be committed to this work, and may we support one another in doing it.

¹ UUA prayer vigil, June 2, 2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/TheUUA/videos/749798395762653/UzpfSTUxNTU1NTc4ODoxMDE1ODQwMjU1OTY5MDc4OQ/>

² Please see Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray's full message about this, "A special UUA president's column: A message to white Unitarian Universalists." June 4, 2020.

<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/president-special-message-policing>