

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan
Rev. Andrew Frantz, contract minister
August 23, 2020

Defunding the Police

I am honored to add my voice to Brigitte's voice in talking about Anti-Racism today and in sharing the perspective I gained from attending General Assembly this summer.¹

Resolution at GA

At GA, there are workshops and worship services, and there are also business meetings. Sometimes we vote on statements of conscience and calls to action on social justice issues. At one of the business meetings an anti-racist resolution was passed with 82% support of the voting delegates, and it contained strong language about defunding the police.

These are two of the reasons given in the resolution:

WHEREAS, police departments and officers across the United States have taken the lives of Black people, including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Nina Pop, Rayshard Brooks and so many others;

WHEREAS, our ...-universalist theologies call us to bring an end to all hells that exist and calls for accountability and transformation, not punishment.²

Practical and Theological

In calling for defunding the police, this resolution gives one practical reason and one religious reason. The practical reason is that police are killing Black people. The religious or spiritual reason is that universalism calls us to "end all hells that exist"—therefore we must theologically support "accountability and transformation, not punishment."

Those are some of the reasons given for defunding the police at General Assembly. It would be interesting to debate the same resolution here in this congregation and see if 82% of the people here would vote for it—maybe more, maybe less. The national voice of Unitarian Universalism isn't exactly the same as the beliefs of this congregation. But we are guided by those voices, and connected to those voices.

Susan Frederick Gray

In that spirit I will offer a quotation from the Rev. Susan Frederick Gray, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Our national president:

*"This moment calls us to be prophetic and to imagine a world without policing. Black and Indigenous people and other folks of color have already created alternatives to policing because these structures don't keep them safe. We must follow the lead of these communities and **imagine a world that centers collective care, community investment, and restorative justice, rather than surveillance, punishment, incarceration and policing.**"³*

Challenge for me as a white person

This is a challenging idea for me, and I think for others in this congregation. I recognize for myself that I have always thought of police and being there to protect me and to keep me safe – and I realize now that this stance towards police is informed by my experience as a white person in this society. I imagine that for those who experience life as a Black person, the visceral response to the police might be totally different.

Defund vs. Abolish

Let me seek here to define “defunding the police.” and to differentiate that from abolishing the police. Defunding means to re-allocate money from the police budget and put it towards social services, youth services, housing, education, and health—including mental health and addiction services.

You might agree with defunding the police up to a point but not abolishing the police altogether. There is room for nuance and disagreement here. “Abolish” means eventually (not right away) completely getting rid of police and replacing police and jails with something else entirely. Something that’s hard to imagine. A world of care and accountability and mutual safety.

Not Taking Away, but Creating

Seen this way, advocating for defunding and even abolishing the police is not taking something away but building something nourishing and safe. It is a bold commitment to effective care for everyone in society.

Consider these two hypothetical scenarios:

Imagine that people are sleeping on benches in a city park. A call is made to the community care hotline. Trained city workers come and talk to the people sleeping in the park, offer them a place in a shelter to sleep if they want that, and see if they need any other public services.

Imagine that a person is experiencing violence from an intimate partner. They call a hotline, and a specially trained team comes to help. An hour later, the victim of the violence is in a safe place, talking with a counselor to make long-term plans for their safety and their children. The perpetrator of the violence is referred to a support group as well.

If we can fund armed police to respond to calls like these, we can fund and equip and support unarmed professionals to respond to calls like these.

The world that we imagine in these scenarios may be far off, but we can’t create that world if we can’t imagine it. And if that’s the world we want, for ourselves and our children, we should demand it and we should work and sacrifice for it.

I will end my remarks with these questions for you to consider:

What would it look like to have a system of justice and accountability that was in line with your beliefs?

What action are you willing to take to make the first step toward making that ideal system a reality?

¹ This short sermon is part 2 of a three-part anti-racism message shared on this day. Part 1 was Brigitte Bechtold speaking about reparations; part 3 was Jessica Jernigan speaking about the spiritual practice of anti-racism.

² “Amen to Uprising: A Commitment and Call to Action,” Action of Immediate Witness passed at General Assembly 2020. Full text at https://www.uua.org/files/pdf/2/20200625_aiw_amen_uprising.pdf

³ Susan Frederick Gray, quoted in “The Unitarian Universalist Association Says it’s Time to Defund the Police.” Retrieved at <https://www.uua.org/pressroom/press-releases/unitarian-universalist-association-says-its-time-defund-police>

Hospitality, Reparations, and the First Principle

Brigitte Bechtold

UUFCM Sermon, August 23, 2020

One of the workshops at the General Assembly was titled “Hospitality, Reparations, and our First Principle,” namely the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Verbal support of the reparation movement and actions to effect reparations are forms of anti-racism.

Several speakers in this workshop pointed out that before we talk about reparation, we must address the use of words like “slave” and “slavery.” The word “slave” is itself racist. Why? “Slave” derives from “Slav”, a word to denote white people speaking Slavic languages who lived in what is now Eastern Europe, and who were captured and forced to labor in the plantations of the Mediterranean. So, it is insensitive to talk about “slaves who were taken from Africa.” We should be speaking about *people* who were kidnapped from Africa, stripped of their humanity, turned into property, exploited, raped, and murdered. When we use the word *people*, we are less likely to make statements like Senator Tom Cotton, who called slavery a “necessary evil to build the union.” There is no possible moral justification for the evil inflicted on people who were the victims of chattel slavery.

What is reparation then? Restoration, repair of harm that has been inflicted, healing. Recognizing the harm is to be willing to see the crack in our civil society. Leonard Cohen famously said that everything has a crack in it, and this is how the light gets in! There is need for both internal reparation or self-repair, and external reparation to undo the continuing harm resulting from the inhumane actions that started 400 years ago and that we see the effect of today: Huge disparities in health, in wealth, in education, and a criminal justice system that serves as the new Jim Crow. Reparation requires economic, ethical, and moral actions to repair this harm.

Reparation is both appropriate and needed to heal our society. As Bryan Stevenson says: “To make change, you have to change the narrative.” Making reparations will change the very *soul* of America. Instead of saying “this is who we are” as Tom Cotton does when he talks about slavery as a necessary evil, let us say “this is who we aspire to be and will become.” Why do we so often read and hear about whites who spit on someone of color, or who throw trash and feces in the yards of their black neighbors? The perpetrators are victims too. Many people are unable to face up to our nation’s past and compensate for the lack of healing by engaging in such actions, by placing locks on their doors and by supporting a police system that is always “flashing red” to protect the interests of whites.

Making reparations will allow not just economic healing but spiritual healing for all of us, victims and perpetrators, so we can transcend the legacy of chattel slavery. And there is much to be done to make this happen: The dollar amounts are huge. Moreover, reparations are only complete when those who have been harmed say they are complete, not when those who make the reparations say so. And most importantly, reparation needs to be accompanied by deep apology, and its implied affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of all persons. This is what will allow *reconciliation*, and our coming together in the beloved community where all are welcome. And *this* is the anti-racist work we are called to do in the title of the workshop: hospitality, reparations and the first principle. Let us do some of this work.

Source: UU General Assembly 2020, Workshop # 319 (Cir L’Bert Jr., Rev Patrice Curtis, Woullard Left, Rev. Keith Kron, Ari Merretazon, Chris Cameron)

On Wednesday night, Kamala Harris described how her Christian faith inspires her to imagine the United States “as a Beloved Community—where all are welcome, no matter what we look like, where we come from, or who we love.” She also talked about structural racism, identifying it as the source for so much of the inequity we see in our society. This was a powerful moment: the first Black woman nominated to run for our country’s second-highest office asserting the reality of structural racism on a national stage. I was, personally, struck by Harris’s use of the phrase “beloved community” because I have been thinking about the connection between doing anti-racism and building the beloved community since General Assembly.

One of the sessions I attended at GA was called “Antiracism as a Spiritual Practice.” In his talk, Dr. David Campt stressed the importance of compassion to anti-racism work. To the extent that I had ever thought the role of compassion in doing anti-racism, I’d thought in terms of compassion for Black people—which is to say that I was motivated to act by a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of Black people. But this isn’t what Dr. Campt was talking about. He was saying that, if we’re going to be effective in addressing racism when we encounter it, we need to have compassion for people who perpetuate racism in their words and deeds.

This was a revelatory moment for me.

Social justice is important to me. The Unitarian Universalist commitment to social justice brought me to this congregation. But if I’m honest I have to say that I have been more likely to approach social justice work from a place of anger than a place of compassion. Listening to Dr. Campt talk, I realized that it’s not possible to build the beloved community out of righteous rage. I can only help build the beloved community with love.

I want to take a moment to be very clear about what I don’t mean and what I do mean when I’m talking about having compassion for someone who is doing or saying something racist. I am *not* talking about centering whiteness or white feelings. What I *am* talking about is calling people in instead of calling them out. This involves taking a moment to center myself before I react. This involves asking questions and being genuinely curious about the answers. This involves remembering that even people who say and do racist things have inherent worth and dignity. And this involves being honest about my own missteps and blind spots around race.

This honesty I just described is, ultimately, compassion for myself. I don’t want to identify with people who do and say racist things because I don’t want to be racist, but if I’m not admitting where I have had to educate myself or allow myself to be corrected—if I’m not admitting that I still have work to do—then I am alienating myself from myself. I am denying myself the opportunity for spiritual growth. I know that several members of this congregation have been working with the concept of “white fragility,” so I trust you’ll understand that when I’m talking about having compassion for myself I’m not talking about prioritizing my own comfort but, rather, moving beyond a way of thinking that makes it easy to be defensive instead of open to change.

As I’ve been talking this morning you have no doubt heard echoes from the Unitarian Universalist principles woven through my words, and now I would like to talk briefly about the Seventh Principle. When I have considered the interconnectedness of all things in the past, I have thought about it from a spiritual perspective and I have thought about it from an ecological perspective. At GA, Dr. Campt’s teaching partner Allison Mahalay compelled me to think for the first time in terms of social and historical connectedness. I am connected to racism and racists. If I imagine that I can separate myself from racism and racists, I am stepping away from my obligation to dismantle racism. I’m making it more difficult to forge the honest, open connections that dismantling racism requires. If I hold the interconnectedness of everything in my mind, though, if I remember that we are all connected and all accountable to each other, I find that compassion is the only possible response.