

## **“The Shelter of the Ancestors” (all ages service)**

Message delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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In the basement of the library at Yale Divinity School where I went to seminary, you have to make your way through several tall bookcases and past the study carrels to the far wall to find the door to a small chapel.

The chapel is very plain looking with walls and floor made of stone and no windows. But, in the center of it, behind the lectern, is a striking painted, wooden panel. This is primarily a Christian seminary so the main figure in the panel is Jesus. But, this isn't a typical Jesus painting. Instead, this Jesus has more native or indigenous looking features.

The chapel was formerly a Byzantine chapel but it was renovated and refurbished and dedicated to the theologian Henri Nouwen who taught at Yale. And so, painted on the side panels are the images of historical figures who influenced Henri Nouwen. They are all looking in the direction of Jesus - there is Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Teresa of Avila and Vincent Van Goh amongst others.

In both the Jewish and Christian traditions, people talk about the “cloud of witnesses” that surround us. This comes from a line in the Bible that says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us...” (Hebrews 12:1) This “cloud of witnesses” is often celebrated on All Saints Day.

The wooden panel in the Nouwen Chapel depicts a “cloud of witnesses” that can serve as a reminder of people whose lives can inspire ours.

I love imagining who would be part of this cloud of witnesses for me and who is part of that great cloud of witnesses for all of us.

Right now as we sit here in this sanctuary, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses - our ancestors whose photos and names are on our altars.

Especially when times are hard, it is this cloud of witnesses that can be called upon to hold us up, to inspire us, to remind us that we are not alone, that reminds us that we come from a line of people who have come before us who also faced challenges and found a way through them.

For many people and communities, remembering the ancestors is not just a cultural tradition but it is a form a spiritual sustenance - a way to keep going through difficult times when the forces all around you challenge your safety and existence.

It can bring a sense of great comfort and sanctuary to remember the ancestors.

A few weeks ago we talked about how the theme of “sanctuary” can invite us into places and spaces to “come and rest.” To find peace and shelter in the storm.

And, a place of sanctuary is also where we come to be filled and go. To be sent forth.

What we can be filled with as we remember our ancestors is all that they have taught us and passed on to us.

Our ancestors who fled religious or ethnic persecution, who stood up against hate, who always chose kindness, who worked for peace, who welcomed anyone to their table...

Those ancestors of ours in this congregation who gave of themselves in so many ways so that they could pass on a strong and healthy religious community for all of us.

These legacies can fill us up as we rest so that we can go out and spread more love and compassion and peace in the world.

And, these are the words of Unitarian Universalist minister, Qiyamah Rahman.

“Now is the time to call on the memories of the ancestors who thought they could not walk another step toward freedom—and yet they did.

It is that time and place to call on the memories of the ancestors who, when the darkness of their lives threatened to take away the hope and light, reached a little deeper and prayed yet another prayer.

It is that time and place to remember those who came through the long night to witness another sunrise.

It is that time and place to remember the oceans of tears shed to deliver us to this time, to remember the bent knees and bowed backs, to remember the fervent voices asking, begging and beseeching for loved ones sold off.

Time to remember their laughter and joy, though they had far less, and little reason for optimism, yet they stayed on the path toward a better day.

Time to hold to the steadfast hands and hearts and prayers of the ancestors that have brought us this far.

Time to make them proud and show them, and ourselves, what we are made of.

Time to show them that their prayers and sacrifices and lives were not in vain and did not go unnoticed, nor have they been forgotten...

It is that time and that place.

We are the ones we've been waiting for!

For that, let us be eternally grateful.

Amen and Blessed Be."