

“Repairing the Breach”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.

Readings

selections from “The Third Reconstruction” by William J. Barber II
and from Martin Luther King, Jr. 1966 Ware Lecture “Don’t Sleep Through the Revolution”

Sermon

In July of 1864, Henry David Thoreau, that famous Transcendentalist luminary, left his cabin at Walden Pond for a brief walk into town. He was stopped by the town constable, who was also the tax collector and jailer, and he was asked to pay his back taxes. Thoreau had refused to pay his poll tax for the previous six years to protest the institution of slavery. And, that day he also refused to pay and was put in jail. It is said that his good friend Ralph Waldo Emerson heard what happened and paid him a visit, and upon seeing him exclaimed, “What are you doing in there?” to which Thoreau immediately responded, “What are you doing out there?”

Across the country and around the world, a movement is afoot. Can you feel it?

Many people find themselves more awake than ever to the necessity of engagement in our democracy. More and more people are asking themselves, what am I doing out here?

In this time, we are called to uphold a moral agenda that cuts across party lines and race and religion.

No matter who you voted for in this past election, you are welcome here and I believe you are part of this moral agenda. We are all welcome here in this community that strives to live our values of inclusion, compassion, justice, equity,

peace, and interdependence. No matter whether you voted or who you voted for, we, all of us together, are called to be part of advancing a moral agenda in our public sphere.

It is an agenda that calls on us to welcome the stranger, to feed the hungry, to combat racism, to work towards equal protection under the law, to ensure that all are treated with respect and that all have the opportunities to live into their fullest potential.

This agenda is rooted in the moral traditions of many faiths. It is found in the Jewish call for *tikkun olam* or “repair of the world.” It is found in the Muslim concept of *zakat* or “charity” which binds every Muslim to the other in an obligation of ensuring their well-being. It is found in the Christian call to love thy neighbor as oneself. It is found in the Buddhist understanding of the world as interdependent and in the practice of cultivating compassion through recognizing the inter-relatedness of all things. And, it is found in our Unitarian Universalist principles which uphold the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the goal of a world with peace, liberty and justice for all.

It is an agenda that is rooted in the belief that women’s rights are human rights and human rights are women’s rights, that immigrant rights are human rights and human rights are immigrants rights, that workers rights are human rights and human rights are workers’ rights.

A moral agenda rooted in love is what we as religious progressives are fighting for - and we would have been fighting for it regardless of who had won the presidential election. As I said from this pulpit before the election, living our values is not a matter of partisanship. It is a call to live more deeply into our faith.

With this moral agenda in mind, it is easy with all that is happening on the national stage to have all of our attention drawn towards Washington. As cabinet appointments are made and hearings are underway and congress has begun its work, we are rightly paying attention to all that is happening in Washington and doing our part to make our voices heard there. While we must stay aware of what’s happening in Washington, just as critical is staying aware of the social justice issues

on our front-lines - those issues that most impact the communities we live in right here in Vermont.

Racial justice remains a front-line issue. This past week, a report was released that looks at data from 29 law enforcement agencies across Vermont.¹ Thank to legislation passed in 2014 and refined last year, law enforcement agencies are now required to collect racial data on the traffic stops they make, although not all of them have begun to do so. The study of the existing data found that black drivers in Vermont are twice as likely to be arrested after a traffic stop than white drivers are. As Stephanie Seguino, the lead author of the study said, this finding and other findings of racial disparities shouldn't be surprising. But, hopefully, it is a reminder to all of us that institutional racism exists even in Vermont, and we still have a long way to go to ensure racial justice in all of our institutions in Vermont.

Income inequality is a front-line issue. And, many of our neighbors continue to struggle to make ends meet and to put food on the table. The 2016 year-end report published by the Public Assets Institute helps us to see some of these realities.² In 2015, the incomes of richest Vermonters, those in the top 5%, were 12 times those of the poorest, those in the bottom 20%. In 2015, 60,000 Vermonters, including 15,000 children, lived at or below the poverty level. Vermonters struggle to meet their basic needs: among families with two working adults, more than a third did not earn enough to pay for basic needs. For single parents with two children, that figure is a staggering three-quarters who incomes fall below the basic needs amount.

Last month, we heard from two members of our community who have struggled with homelessness. Too many Vermonters, including children, remain homeless and without secure housing our neighbors end up in a cycle of homelessness, joblessness, and poor health.

¹ UVM Study Finds Racial Disparities In Traffic Stop Data From Vermont Police Departments, Patti Daniels, January 9, 2017, <http://digital.vpr.net/post/uvm-study-finds-racial-disparities-traffic-stop-data-vermont-police-departments#stream/0>

² "State of Working Vermont 2016," Public Assets Institute. <http://publicassets.org/library/publications/reports/state-of-working-vermont-2016/>

The moral agenda that is afoot on the national stage that calls for the care of all people and our planet is one we must also push forward here in our beloved state of Vermont.

And, this movement is not new. We are tied to centuries old movements that have preceded us. In this moment, I believe we need to remind ourselves of that historically and religiously grounded moral agenda while staying attuned to how the nuances of that agenda have changed as have the ways we organize to carry this agenda forward.

Rev. William Barber, whose words I shared earlier, writes, "...the battle for the soul of America is being fought at the state level, and nothing short of a moral movement converging in every state capital will make possible the reconstruction we need to fulfill our nation's promise."³

Rev. William Barber's story, the story of the Moral Mondays movement shows us that local organizing is key. The Moral Monday movement began grabbing national media headlines in 2013 as hundreds of people week after week flooded the state house of North Carolina to risk arrest speaking out against a legislative agenda that would have suppressed the votes of students and older African-Americans, that would have cut funding to public education, that would have eliminated the earned-income tax credit necessary to nearly a million working families.

But, every Monday, week after week, people of different religious backgrounds and races and ages and income levels would gather. They would sing together and pray together and flood into the state house. Over the course of a dozen weeks of civil disobedience, nearly a thousand people had gone to jail. As William Barber tells it, this movement didn't just spring up in 2013. It was built through intentional and ongoing locally-based organizing for many years before that with the idea that a broad and diverse coalition - a fusion coalition - needed to come together around a shared moral agenda for the state.

Acting locally is key. It is also important to see the intersectionality of this broad movement.

³ Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Third Reconstruction: Moral Mondays, Fusion Politics, and the Rise of the New Justice Movement*, p. 109, Beacon Press: 2016.

The moral agenda that is represented in North Carolina's Moral Monday movement and that is taking shape in the 370 women's marches being organized for next Saturday, January 21st is broad-based, inclusive, and intersectional.

Today's inclusive and intersectional moral agenda is exemplified in the "Unity Principles"⁴ of the Women's March. The unity principles articulate the interconnection of ending violence, reproductive rights, LGBTQIA rights, workers' rights, civil rights, rights for people with disabilities, immigrant rights, and environmental justice.

It may seem like it is a laundry list of issues, but, instead I believe it is a reflection of our profound inter-connection with one another and with the earth.

Today's moral agenda pushes us to see how my need to walk the streets as a woman free from harassment is connected to your need to express your gender identity freely and openly. To see how the young black child's need for access to quality, public education is tied young adults graduating from high school in Vermont having access to affordable higher education. Today's inclusive and intersectional agenda helps us to see how the struggle of an older person living in rural Vermont to get adequate health care is connected to the pain a single mother feels when she has to choose between staying home sick and going to work to bring home a paycheck for her family.

As Dr. King once said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

I see these intersections alive here in this community as we worship together as people of all ages and stages of life, with older, able-bodied people alongside younger people with disabilities - visible and invisible, as women with full-time jobs, and men who are retired, with young people working two or three jobs, and older people who are unemployed or underemployed, as people of different genders and sexual orientations, as people whose families go back generations and as people who just moved here.

⁴ <https://www.womensmarch.com/principles/>

As we strive to build the Beloved Community within these walls, we, too, must work towards that Beloved Community in which all are cared for and all are regarded equally, and we never grow to be well-adjusted to the inequities in our institutions of power.

I recognize that this might feel like a tall task take on moving this agenda forward.

But, we can start with what we can each do.

Big demonstrations have their place and so does the less glamorous work of relationship-building across divides and of grassroots organizing.

Some of us are natural activists, and are ready and willing at a moment's notice to hit the streets and to hold signs and to chant chants.

Others are less inclined this way but can do the quiet work of calling or writing to legislators.

Others might bring food and coffee to those on the front lines of protests and demonstrations, like you did for those protesting in solidarity with Standing Rock in early December.

The key is to stay engaged and to do what you can do.

Let us remain clear and resolute that our Unitarian Universalist values call on us to heed the call of Love as justice-seekers and justice-makers.

In 1965, after marching 54 miles with 8,000 people from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, Martin Luther King began his speech with the story of a 70 year-old black woman who had participated in the bus boycotts. One day while walking someone asked her if she wanted a ride. And when she said no, the person asked, "well, aren't you tired?" and she replied, "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested."

Those who walked and marched and boycotted knew a physical weariness that gave their consciences rest doing all they could to halt and turn back the wave of racism.

Today, we are called to put our feet to the ground, to put our hands into action knowing that our souls will find rest in the weariness of our continued commitment to the common good.

Neighbor, we are on the long march toward justice
I may grow tired
You may grow tired
But we are in this together
Trust in me
As I trust in you
May our love guide us on the way.

So, may it be.