

## **“Brave Space”**

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
October 1, 2017

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### **Reading**

“An Invitation to Brave Space” by Micky ScottBey Jones

### **Sermon, Part 1**

Notes (to be delivered extemporaneously)

- story from colleague Rev. Kimberly Hampton
  - Native of St. Louis, Missouri. on her father’s side the family is from Mississippi but her father never set foot in the state until he was 40
  - her grandmother had been planning to send her five oldest children, including her father, to Mississippi for a week before school started but the trip never happened
  - because on August 28, 1955, just days before the Hampton children were supposed to go to Mississippi, 14 yr-old Emmett Till was murdered in Money, Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman in a grocery store
  - Till’s murder horrified and shocked many in this nation and was a key event in igniting the Civil Rights Movement and the fight to end Jim Crow laws in the South
- on August 28th of this year, many hundreds of miles away from Money, Mississippi, an 8 yr-old biracial boy was playing down the street from his house along with his 11 yr-old sister and some teenagers from the neighborhood.
- according to the child’s family, the teenagers called the boy racially disparaging names and threw rocks and sticks at his legs. at one point, they started to play with a rope hanging from a tree. how exactly it came to be that the 8 yr old was standing on top of a picnic table with a rope around his neck is disputed. whether he was pushed or an “accident” of some kind occurred, the boy hung from that rope and swung a few times before being able to free himself. He was taken to the local

hospital and then airlifted to Dartmouth Hitchcock to be treated for the rope burns around his neck. The boy has recovered physically, but we can all imagine the enduring emotional and psychological trauma for this boy and for all those involved.

- As I said earlier, the exact events of that summer afternoon are disputed. And, the events are still being investigated by law enforcement. It took one week for officials in Claremont to release any kind of public statement about the event and in an early statement the police chief said of the alleged perpetrators of the assault, "Mistakes they make as a young child should not have to follow them for the rest of their life."
- Whatever the details of that afternoon may be, what continues to follow all of us are the ways that white supremacy and systemic racism are foundational to this country's history and evident in our present day. It is something none of us can escape. Not even here in these northern reaches of New England.
- The violence that Emmett Till and the young boy in Claremont faced 62 years apart, though quite different in the extent of physical harm done, still begs of us that we summon the courage not to turn away.
- We must summon the courage to continue to face the harm caused by white supremacy and racism, to sit with the pain of it, and to ask ourselves how do we respond.

**Interlude**    Boy on a Swing    Heather Moz

## **Sermon, Part 2**

To fully grapple with what happened in Claremont, New Hampshire on August 28th, I think we have to take into consideration events in our broader nation.

Just two weeks prior in Charlottesville, Virginia, white nationalist, neo-Nazi groups gathered to publicly give voice to their hate-filled, anti-Semitic, bigoted views and to terrorize a community.

These views have been part of the fabric of our country for a long time, and for some, felt like a thing of the past. Yet, it is the new normal that such groups can literally unmask themselves, take to the streets, and expect state sanctioning, both implicit and explicit, of their actions and their views.

As people of conscience who seek to live by our morals, we must ask ourselves: what do we say and what do we do now?

Our theme this month is courage. The word courage comes from the Latin *cor*, which means heart. According to the poet Mark Nepo, the original use of the word courage meant to stand by one's core.

It would be an understatement to say that this is not always an easy thing to do. In the face of our own fears, at the risk of being "wrong" or of being unpopular, it can be easier to stray from our core. To ignore our most deeply held beliefs when the costs feel too high or it is simply inconvenient to do so.

And, even when the stakes are high and the difference between right and wrong seems so clear, it might not be obvious in what ways our courage calls us to act.

Going back to the events in Charlottesville. A former professor of mine joined the faculty of the University of Virginia a few years ago. He was on campus the evening of Friday, August 11th - the night that armed, torch bearing white supremacists descended upon the University of Virginia. A few hours before an interfaith service was to begin, with leaders like Rev. Traci Blackmon and Cornel West in attendance, local police suddenly pulled back officers that had been promised to the church for the gathering. And so, he and about nine others were called upon to stand guard, unarmed, at the doors of the church, as threats had been made over social media to some of those gathered for the service.

The organizers of the interfaith service knew that a torchlit rally was planned to happen at the Rotunda of the university, directly across the street from the church. As the torches came into view, someone sprinted up with an urgent message: students who were protesting the white supremacists were down by a statue of Thomas Jefferson and needed protection. The lead organizer said no. There were hundreds of people inside the church and there were no police in sight. They couldn't leave. As it turned out, the torch-bearing crowd of mostly young men stopped at the Jefferson statue and encircled the students who were threatened and then beaten. Police arrived many minutes later.

I share this story because I can imagine myself in any number of roles in that story. I can picture myself apprehensively seated inside the church knowing the risks involved in being there but finding hope and strength in those gathered. I can picture myself outside the church watchfully standing guard. If I stretch my imagination, I can even imagine myself as one of the students, determined to stand up against white nationalism on my campus.

And, I ask myself, what would I have done? How easy or obvious would it have been to put my courage into action?

The next day, as many of us watched or read about from afar, the city was filled with white nationalist groups carrying confederate flags and flags with swastikas, many of them armed, along with protestors, among them the president of our Unitarian Universalist Association and other UU faith leaders. Many people courageously confronted the white nationalists marching and chanting together to declare that hate wasn't welcome in their city. One of the images that will stick with me is of religious leaders standing arm in arm in silence at the edge of a park inches from white supremacist rally-ers armed with heavy artillery.

One person lost her life as a car was driven into a crowd of counter protestors and about a dozen others were injured.

Our courage is being summoned in this time. We are being called to return to our core. This is a time in which Love needs to be given voice and demonstrated to one another more urgently than ever.

So, the question for us is: Where do we fit in? How can each of us be a voice for Love in the face of such hate?

I think of the response of the mother of the young man from Ohio who drove into the crowd in Charlottesville. She said that all she knew was that her son was going to a political rally. She told him to be safe. And, she never really talked with him about his views.

The parents of one of the teens involved with the incident in Claremont, New Hampshire say that they questioned their son about his use of racial slurs, and that he had no idea what they were talking about.

Bigotry, white supremacy, and systemic racism are allowed to live on by silence and by the denial that events like the one in Claremont have anything to do with race.

So, what do we "fair-faced Vermonters say now"? Please, say something. Talk to one another, to your children, to family, to friends and neighbors, about the realities of racism in our community. Don't let the silence continue.

Since learning about what happened in Claremont, I have been thinking about the courage of that eight year-old boy. The physical courage he must have had to struggle to get free and to face the physical trauma of that painful event. The emotional courage to face the distress and pain of the event and to attempt to return to a sense of normalcy.

What if I had just an ounce of the courage of that little boy?

I think, too, of the courage of a community that has started to unpack the ways racism is alive. The courage to reach out to one another to claim a space for Love and to reach deeper understanding together.

And, I think of the courage of this community where we strive to *encourage* one another. Where we strive to help one another to stand by our core, to live from the heart.

Micky ScottBey Jones writes, “Together we will create brave space. In this space, we amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere. We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know. We will not be perfect. This space will not be perfect. It will not always be what we wish it to be, but it will be our brave space together, and we will work on it side by side.”

So often courage and bravery are illustrated by exemplary individuals and individual actions. What I know is that courage is inspired and fortified by others. Even when our own courage is waning, we can turn to those around us and know that we are not alone. And, we can choose to act courageously together.

August 28th is a significant date for another reason. On that date in 1963, eight years after the murder of Emmett Till and fifty-four years before the near lynching of a biracial boy in Claremont, New Hampshire, Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and delivered his, “I Have a Dream,” speech. He had been up well into the hours of the early morning writing and rewriting his remarks. And, he delivered most of what he had prepared and written out for the event. But, as he was nearing the end, he sensed that his words were falling a bit flat and the crowd was beginning to grow a bit restless. And, then a voice from behind him, the voice of his friend and confidant Mahalia Jackson, called out, “Tell them about the dream, Martin.”

In that moment, the person we've come to know as the great Civil Rights leader, needed the encouragement of his friend. And, with that encouragement, he found the heart of his message, a message that has continued to inspire generation after generation.

May each of us listen for that voice - of courage and encouragement - from one another, so that we can live into this brave space of witness and action to build our Beloved Community.