

“Imagining Our Way to Beloved Community”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

October 18, 2015

Reading

Rev. Joan provided a reading from [Between the World and Me](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/) by Ta-Nehisi Coates. The reading is not included here to respect copyright restrictions, but a longer selection from the book can be found online at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>.

Part 1

At the end of my first official week as your minister, about 40 of us along with members of the broader community gathered on the front steps of the church. We gathered to stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement on the one year anniversary of the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO.

I have to admit that I was nervous about calling for such a vigil and unsure of how many people would actually show up on a beautiful Sunday afternoon in August.

Yet, there many of you were with your bright yellow Standing on the Side of Love t-shirts and signs. Ready to give silent witness, to learn from others, and to sing songs of justice.

I was truly heartened by the turnout and participation in that expression of solidarity and witness.

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Since the killing of Michael Brown in August of 2014, we as a nation have also grappled with the shooting death of 12 year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, the death of Freddie Gray while in police custody in Baltimore, the non-indictment of the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown, the non-indictment of the officer who held Eric Garner in a choke hold until he breathed his last breath, the death of Sandra Bland in a Texas jail cell three days after being pulled over for a traffic stop, and the shooting death of nine members of a historically black church in Charleston, SC by a white supremacist.

These are just some of the most well known examples of black lives lost to structural and cultural racism in that timeframe.

Also, since Michael Brown's death in August of 2014, many Unitarian Universalists across the country have joined ranks with the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement emerged over two years ago in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of 17 year-old Trayvon Martin. The movement found new life and energy after Michael Brown's death last year.

UUs have marched and held vigils and participated in die-ins in support of Black Lives Matter. Dozens of UU congregations have put Black Lives Matter banners on their buildings or church property. And many have replaced or repaired these banners after they have been vandalized or removed.

Unitarian Universalists have also taken action at the denominational level. Back in June, the 2015 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association adopted an Action of Immediate Witness¹ encouraging UU

¹ <http://www.uua.org/statements/support-black-lives-matter-movement>

congregations to take action within their communities to support the Black Lives Matter movement.

There is indeed a movement for change and a conversation about race and racial justice happening on the national level that is so significant that presidential candidates are being forced to create policy platforms and to meet with young activists to stay relevant.

As people of faith and morality, I believe we are called to be a part of this conversation as well, and to have our hearts and lives changed in the process.

The challenge can be determining where to begin.

For me, as someone who is not black living in this country, it's important to begin with attempting to understand that experience. In our reading this morning, Ta-Nehisi Coates shares a life experience and perspective that is vastly different than the majority of us in this sanctuary today. But, like all good writing, his book asks us to imagine what life is like from his perspective. For those of us who aren't black, we are invited to engage with curiosity, openness, and empathy with the realities and opinions that Coates expresses to his son.

I've entitled my sermon today "imagining our way to beloved community." First, we engage that part of the imagination that is the bridge to empathy. In order to engage with difference, we must cultivate that capacity for empathy. We must be able to hear and listen to the voices and stories of those who are different from us even when, and perhaps *especially* when, those voices and stories challenge deeply held beliefs about ourselves.

As we hear the stories of others, we are able to reflect on what rings true inside of us and how our own story intersects with another's story. This is especially true in the work for racial justice and building the Beloved

Community. We must start with examining the stories that have shaped our own racial identities and biases and assumptions.

In the second part of the sermon, I will share with you some of my own questions and the ways these issues affect me most deeply. I will invite you to make use of the power of your imaginations to share in those reflections with me.

Of course, we can't build Beloved Community through imaginative empathy alone.

I hope that together in the days and months to come we can stretch our moral imaginations so that we can both see and understand the real challenges of racial inequality and injustice and also envision a way forward as individuals and as a community that may not yet exist. A way forward that calls us into action for justice for all black lives.

Part 2

My dear son, Liam,

One thing I'm learning about being a parent is that it can bring out a lot of your fears. It has been said that having a child is like having your heart walk around outside your body. And that sure is what it feels like.

From the moment you were born, I have felt a fierce love and a desire to protect you from all harm.

The summer before you were born the man who shot and killed an unarmed 17 year old black teenager as he was walking home in the dark was acquitted of murder.

I think about all the mothers and parents of black children who feel the same fierce love for their children and are trying to protect them. I feel lucky that I will never have to warn you about what clothes to wear or how to change your tone of voice when talking to certain people or how to avoid getting pulled over...for fear that you might be physically harmed or unimaginably killed.

I said I feel lucky. But, really, it isn't luck at all. I know that it's privilege.

That is a hard word to accept. And, it is a hard word to understand. It has taken me some time to understand and accept the complex ways that I can both have privilege in relation to others and can also be in a position of less privilege and power.

I have the privilege of being able to enter any building and not worry whether I can make it to the second floor.

I have the privilege of being able to watch movies that depict romantic relationships similar to mine.

I have the privilege of being able to make doctor and dentist appointments without thinking about money.

But, there are also times when my gender, my age, and other aspects of my identity put me in a position of less privilege and power.

Being able to live in relative safety and not needing to protect you because of the color of your skin, however, is one way that I must acknowledge I do have privilege.

When we're talking about matters of race, you usually hear people talk about "white privilege."

So, if we're talking about race, where does my privilege come from?

The reality is that you and me and papa, we live in a place where most people don't have to think about the color of their skin when going about their daily lives. And, for the most part, this is true for me as well. The fact that I'm Asian and of Filipino descent has little to no impact on my ability to live where I want to live, to work where I want to work, to buy and eat the food I want to eat.

This doesn't mean that I don't face challenges living as someone of a different racial background than most everyone around me. And, you will have your own challenges in life that stem from your multi-racial identity. You might struggle with questions of who you really are and how you fit in with your peers. People might ask you where you're from, and then where are you REALLY from.

My own process of grappling with my identity is what has opened me up to trying to understand the way racism affects the lives of black people in our country. I know that this experience is completely different from mine. I know I have a lot to learn.

And, this can be difficult work when the realities affecting black people today can feel so distant. The horrendous murders and deaths are happening in places like Texas and Maryland and South Carolina. Not in places like Vermont. There is a distance from these events that makes it easy for me to cry and mourn and shake my fists in anger when I hear about yet another black life lost at the hands of law enforcement or because of a hate crime and then when my mourning is over to go back to life as normal.

Yet, even here, racism still exists. There are still inequalities in the educational system and in law enforcement that affect people of color living in our state. But, it is a more subtle kind of racism than you might encounter in other parts of the country and it is not as widely felt.

In many ways, this makes the broader issues of racism in our country feel more distant, and it is difficult to know just how I ought to respond to the racism that plagues people of color and most specifically black people in this country.

I can read books and articles that help me to understand the truth of racism. I can be in dialogue with friends and family who may hold their own racist views that may need to be questioned.

I can show up to vigils and marches and show my public support for the Black Lives Matter movement and other movements for racial justice and equality.

And, perhaps in trying to figure out my place in all of this, I can help you, too.

I can help you to embrace the inherent worth and dignity of every person and instill in you a desire to bring justice into the world.

I can help you to know your own story, to form your own identity, to understand where in your story there has been suffering, and where in your story there has been hope.

Over time, I have come to learn that the dream of America that ignited the imagination of your grandparents while they were just children living many thousands of miles away is a dream that has yet to be made into a reality for so many people. And, the pursuit of that dream can obscure the hard truths about how racism is built right into the founding of our country and the social, economic, and political structures that sustain it.

We have to have another dream for who we can be. Martin Luther King, Jr. articulated this dream so beautifully. It is a dream of a Beloved Community

where we understand that we are interconnected and that our individual well-being is inextricably linked to the well-being of others.

You are a part of this dream.

And, one day soon your own imagination will shape how you take part in living this dream and making it a reality.

May you know your own story.

May your heart be broken open by the suffering of the world.

And, may your heart be mended by your capacity to love.

Yours forever,

Mama