

“Good and Necessary Trouble”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Reading

Excerpt from “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation,” a letter written by John Lewis and published in The New York Times, July 30, 2020¹

Sermon

Last month, the world lost a hero when Congressman John Lewis of Georgia died from pancreatic cancer at the age of 80. For many of you, I know John Lewis was a lifelong leader and guiding force. A contemporary whose leadership from his young adulthood until his final days inspired your own commitments to equality and justice during the course of your life. For others, John Lewis has been an elder whose wisdom, gained through his decades of nonviolent activism and leadership, has shaped your more recent involvement in contemporary movements towards liberation today.

John Lewis dedicated his life to getting into “good trouble, necessary trouble,” as he liked to say.

In many speeches, usually with a twinkle in his eye, he would encourage those listening to get into good trouble.

I was interested to learn that after John Lewis was arrested for the first time after one of those sit-ins at a lunch counter in Nashville that Liza told us about in the story for all ages, after ending up in jail, John Lewis’ mother wrote to him. She was afraid of the shame that might come upon their family name with his arrest. He wrote her back to say that he was doing what he thought was right.²

For many of us, getting into any kind of trouble - breaking societal norms, getting on the “wrong” side of the law or law enforcement - feels like something to be avoided. What John Lewis was learning in those early days of his activism and organizing was that it was

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html>

² JOHN LEWIS - GET IN THE WAY | The Nashville Sit-Ins | PBS <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5HISnAjz7U>

sometimes necessary to trouble the waters for a greater good - to create ripples of discomfort both in society at large and in one's own life.

He carried this belief into the rest of his life as he protested segregation and marched for greater voting rights and was beaten down at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama and as he continued on eventually into the U.S. Congress always pushing for greater equality and justice for those being discriminated against and for greater inclusion of all people in our society.

John Lewis' life's work was inspired by his life of faith. He was drawn into the Civil Rights Movement by the preaching of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Many of the formative teachers of the principles of nonviolence in those early days of the movement were Black clergy. The principles at the heart of nonviolence for Lewis were grounded in his Christian upbringing and the notion of love taught to him in that religious tradition.

He speaks to this in an interview with Krista Tippett from 2013 when he said, "The movement created what I like to call a nonviolent revolution. It was love at its best. It's one of the highest form[s] of love. That you beat me, you arrest me, you take me to jail, you almost kill me, but in spite of that, I'm going to still love you."³

By placing love at the center, John Lewis and other leaders of the Civil Rights movement showed us that this ever-striving towards greater freedom and equity and justice is not simply a political struggle. It is a spiritual struggle. It is a struggle over who we are at our core and the kind of community and society we want to live in and create together. There is a spiritually and theologically-grounded ethical mandate to make the kind of trouble Lewis talked about and advocated for.

It isn't trouble for trouble's sake. But, it's a troubling of the ways things are motivated by a deep and abiding Love that we then put into action.

In that 2013 interview with Krista Tippett, Lewis put it this way: "It's a way of being...It's a way of action. It's not necessarily passive. It has the capacity. It has the ability to bring peace out of conflict. It has the capacity to stir up things in order to make things right. When we were sitting in, it was love in action..."

When we went on the freedom ride, it was love in action. The march from Selma to Montgomery was love in action. We do it not simply because it's the right thing to do, but

³ <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-lewis-love-in-action/#transcript>

it's love in action. That we love our country, we love a democratic society, and so we have to move our feet."⁴

The stakes are beyond high right now in this country with less than 80 days remaining before the general election. And, moving our feet, moving forward in whatever ways we are able is love in action.

Watching John Lewis' funeral a few weeks ago, I was struck by how many people said that one of the best things we can do now to honor John Lewis' legacy is to vote in November.

Voting may seem like such a small thing to do when the challenges and crises before us loom so large. And, it can be easy to take for granted the simple act of voting. But, we also know that voting was a hard-won fight for most people living in this country today.

August 6th marked the 55th anniversary of the enactment of the Voting Rights Act. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th amendment which prohibited states from denying the right to vote on the basis of sex.

As a brown-skinned woman, daughter of Filipino immigrants, I have been thinking a lot lately about the ancestors who made it possible for me to simply have the right to vote, like John Lewis, and how indebted I feel to those ancestors and their hard work, their sometimes life-threatening work. It's a privilege that I try not to take for granted. And, as we are seeing play out now, the right to vote continues to be attacked and tactics of voter suppression are still in our midst.

Elections aren't the be all, end all of transformative social change. However, they are necessary and in our representative democracy can lead to very tangible outcomes for our lives. With the coronavirus pandemic, the continuing pandemic of racism, the climate crisis, and continuing poverty and economic injustice, the outcomes of our elections and the policies our elected leaders do or do not enact can mean life or death.

I believe that our Love is being called into action now as members of this democratic society that is still trying to live up to its ideals.

Unitarian Universalists, among others, are making trouble together this year bringing our values to bear in this election season through the UU the Vote campaign. Values that are

⁴ <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-lewis-love-in-action/#transcript>

core to Unitarian Universalism - of interdependence with one another and the planet, human worth and dignity, pluralism, democracy, self-determination and agency - these values are on the line and are worth bringing to the forefront of our engagement in this moment.

A group of us from the church have started meeting over Zoom and taking small steps to engage the whole congregation in voter education and mobilization, and I invite you to join us. I know many of you have also taking actions on your own or with others you know to be part of mobilization efforts locally and around the country. Whatever action you can take is valuable and adds to the collective efforts being made.

For my part, I have made a personal commitment of dedicating at least two hours a week from now until the election on phone banking, writing letters, and anything else I can do to inform and mobilize fellow voters this fall. We will each discern for ourselves what we can do, and I hope you will choose and commit to whatever it is that is in your own capacity to do and what you feel most called to.

The Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray writes, "Voter mobilization is not just political. For Unitarian Universalists, this is faithful, moral action because democracy and the right of all people to have a voice and a vote are at the very heart of our Seven Principles. This work is about the inherent worth and dignity of every person; it is about restoring right relationship with the planet; it is about our commitment to justice and equity for all people. We are called to courageously embody the deepest values of our faith with our hearts, bodies, and spirits while building toward an abundant future in which all are free and flourishing."⁵

Let us build towards this abundant future, making good and necessary trouble and putting our love into action.

So may it be.

⁵ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/pres-winter-2019>