

“Listening to the Voices at the Margins”

Sermon delivered by Verdis L. Robinson

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

October 11, 2020

Readings

“Redskin” by Rev. Susan Manker-Seale¹

“I, too” by Langston Hughes²

Sermon

Today is national coming out day. In fact, thirty-two years ago, National Coming Out Day was first observed as a reminder that one of the most basic tools of activism for LGBTQ+ rights is the power of coming out. Coming out **STILL MATTERS** as full equality under the law has yet to be achieved and their voices are still in the margins and their rights are at risk right now.

Tomorrow is Indigenous Peoples Day. This is the second year that Vermont has officially changed it from Columbus Day which is still celebrated across the country signifying that indigenous voices are in the margins. Until full acceptance is achieved, until full equality under the law is achieved, indigenous voices are no longer treated as insignificant or powerless, they remain in the Margins as well.

I can give an hour-long sermon on marginalization, how we can listen deeply to the voices of the marginalized, trust me. I am sure that you do not want me to do that.

But just one aspect that deep listening requires of us is that in truly hearing voices at the margins we must do so without judgement. Without judgement. Without playing devil advocate. Without gaslighting- you know, when we make a marginalized person question their own reality or see things from a different perspective. Consciously or unconsciously, we gain more power when we do that. When we minimize a marginalized experience- supporting the side of power rather than believing and supporting the powerless we gaslight. We do this often- “there’s also two sides to a story.” Right? There’s good and bad on both sides. Right?

Suspending our own judgments, can be a very powerful way to listen deeply- especially for those who are sharing their stories and supporting the vulnerability of those doing so ...it is powerful.

Voices at the margins want to be heard, they desire it, yearn for it, but most times are not heard- not really, and if heard, not really believed. Protesting helps, marching does this, organizing does this, but it takes bravery to accomplish this when all spaces and all places are not free or safe. And historically, this speaking truth to power is not welcomed or appreciated especially for those IN power. Those in the dominate group, those who are not in the margins. That is why

¹ “Redskin” by Rev. Susan Manker-Seale from *Voices from the Margins* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2012).

² <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47558/i-too>

National Coming Out Day and Indigenous Peoples Day and our observance of them is essential in creating a more just and equitable world.

You know when I was Volunteering in Roxbury, MA, for the UU urban ministry and I became fascinated with the history of the First Church of Roxbury. Peter Thoms, our church historian, knows it well as he was ordained there many years ago.

Roxbury, MA, is one of Boston's oldest communities. The First Church of Roxbury was the sixth church in the area to be gathered by the early English colonizers in 1631. Yes, the congregation dates back to 1631. From the early Puritans, to the Patriots of the Revolution, to the abolitionist movement, and to the world wars, the congregation witnessed and was a part of American history.

Reverend John Eliot immigrated from England to Boston in 1631 and was ordained as the Teacher of what was called then the Church of Christ in Roxbury the following year. But he was known for his errand into the wilderness. He learned the language of the Massachusetts peoples through a captive native who was enslaved in Dorchester. Together, they translated many sacred texts into the Algonquin language, and he preached to them in their own language.

For many years, he made a missionary tour every two weeks, planting a number of "Praying Towns" among the tribes. For efforts in creating "Praying Indians," he was given the title of "Apostle to the Indians" posthumously. The square where the church is located is named after John Eliot- John Eliot Square- as well as a portrait of him is still hanging in a prominent place in the sanctuary. The city even put up a small monument in honor of the Rev. John Eliot, Apostle to the Indians. It's a source of pride, because he did not commit genocide, but attempted to civilize them in a civilized way. And he "civilized" hundreds of them. He converted them to puritanical Christianity saving them from their savagery. Are we listening? Because what is revealed if we listen deeply is that the idea behind the praying towns was that Natives would convert to Christianity and give up their old way of life. Being hunter-gatherers, their connection to the earth, their ancient rituals- even their clothing and anything else that was seen as "uncivilized."

These praying towns did not work. No matter how "civilized" they became they were seen as second-rate citizens and never gained the degree of trust or respect that they had hoped their conversion would grant them. If only our Puritan Ancestors would not have immediately judged the way of life of indigenous people, they could have learned a great deal from them as their culture was built on relationships and reciprocity among themselves and the earth. The errand in the wilderness gave way to wars, land grabs, and genocide. Nevertheless, we venerate the Rev. John Eliot, for at least he tried. How do we demonstrate that we are listening to the voices at the margins?

You see, Rev. Eliot did not listen to the voices of the indigenous without judgment, he judged them as uncivilized, as savage, and in desperate need of salvation from their heathen ways. I was reading a thesis on this and came across the story of an unnamed native woman who died due to complications in childbirth. She had been converted, was described as adopting English ways,

but her life was overshadowed by her death and the words she uttered as a final testament to her conversion.

John Eliot recorded this speech as motivation to continue his errand into the wilderness as she advised her older children to live amongst the English in the newly established praying town rather than return back to their family and tribe, which would undoubtedly try to turn them back to their “heathen ways.” Her pleading with her children that “the word of God is taught, sins are suppressed, and punished by laws; and therefore, I charge you live here all your days.” This was everything that Rev. Eliot wanted to hear and proof of their success, right?

Not only had this native woman converted, but it gave encouragement to separate indigenoussness children from their families- a process which was believed to help ease the transition to English culture and make their education stronger with less fear of backsliding. But this was her voice, right? Were they listening deeply? Now mind you, this narrative was written by John Eliot, who was not even present at the time of her death. Were they only hearing what they wanted to hear? What was she really saying? Where is her authentic voice?

You know, this remains me of the first time I walked into a UU Church 12 years ago.

I grew up in an African American Holiness Pentecostal church. I loved the church, the spirit of it, the cathartic nature of its services, the emotions I felt, the release, the experience was healing and empowering. I was a minister, Rev. Robinson, but I was gay. Which was an abomination and as a minister in that tradition, if discovered, I would been silenced and made to repent and turn from my wicked ways.

So, at thirty years old, I left and found myself turning my back on my call and not knowing where to go and what to do. I had decided that I’d rather live my truth and go to hell than to live a lie and still go to hell...you see, I felt I was destined for hell no matter what for being who I born to be. I was in a very dark place.

Until one of my colleagues at the college that I taught at said to me, I think you would like my church. I was skeptical, but I had nothing to lose, so I attended a service at the First Universalist Church of Rochester, and wait, y’all don’t believe in hell? Okay...what do you believe ya’ll in then? I was intrigued and felt free. after the service- instead of escaping through the back door, I really needed some coffee and decided to join them for coffee hour.

So, there was this elderly gentleman name Tim, he was in his late 70s early 80s and he just came out and asked me, “Hey, are you gay?”

I look at him, and then said to myself, “What the hell,” you know I have nothing to lose, I turned to him and said, “yes, sir.” Then he said, well that’s great, and then he said do you have bf. And I said nope, not yet. I didn’t know where this was going, but then he said, “well, when you do, make sure to bring him with you too.”

Wow, this is odd. Am I still in church? Really?

So there were some church ladies at standing chatting, I joined them. By this time, I was brave and jokingly said to them, “Heehee, you know my old church thinks that I have an evil spirit in me and that’s why I gay?” I smiled and they did not. Their faces drop and they heard me, but they listened to me deeply and believed me. They didn’t judge or played devil advocate or try to gaslight me, they just took turns and embraced me one by one and said things in my ear like, there I nothing wrong with you, you are loved, God loves you, you are safe here. And they held me.

I was moved to tears, because before that moment, I was so lost. I had almost given up on who I was and didn’t know where to turn.

Needless to say, I came back. Needless to say, that Marti, Connie, Patti, Elizabeth, Eileen and others breath life back into me that day and continued to love me here even now. You see I learned what the first principle looked like in action- belief in The inherent worth and dignity of every human being. I experienced full acceptance and was a part of interdependent web and was no longer alone. I was free to be me. I was free to search for my truth and meaning. A year later, I delivered my first sermon the Sunday of Pride Weekend in Rochester, it was entitled, This Church Saves Lives. This Church Saves Lives. Because it saved mine.

It is no secret that Unitarian Universalism and its congregations have struggled with and I quote “issues of race and culture, implicit bias, and sometimes life-destroying exclusion practices.”³ ignoring marginalized voices. But we are building a new way.

This work is not new per se, but attention to it with the intention towards a renewed determination is. It depends on **Listening to Voices at the Margins**. It depends on lifting up the histories, the stories, and the lives of those who have been pushed into the dark corners of meeting houses, congregations, and sacred spaces.

It urges congregations to embrace the full diversity of their spiritual community that stretches across race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and many more.

Listening to Voices at the Margins can transform us “into active participants in creating something new... who we are as Unitarian Universalists now- for this time and this age and for the age to come.” We can LIVE up to the liberal, progressive, welcoming church that we proclaim to be when we LIFT up the lives, the experiences, and missed opportunities in regard to those of us in the margins and to listen deeply to our voices.

Come Out of the Margins, Come out of the places of fear, of powerlessness, of judgement. Listen deeply to our voices

Because we have more lives to save. This Church Saves Lives. Be encouraged, continue the work, and let us build that new way together.

³ Nancy Palmer Jones, and Karin Lin. *Mistakes and Miracles: Congregations on the Road to Multiculturalism*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2019, xvii

May it be so, ashe, and amen and blessed be.