

“Reparations and Beloved Community”

Unitarian Church of Montpelier
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
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Reading

“[Belinda’s Petition](#)” by Rita Dove

Sermon

Born in the 1700s, Belinda Sutton lived the first twelve years of her life in near a river amidst a verdant landscape of spices and fruits in what is now known as Ghana in Western Africa. Even as a young child she knew that the tranquility could be broken at any moment by the men with bows and arrows who would come to the village and kidnap neighbors and friends. Around the age of 12, Belinda herself was stolen away from her home and joined hundreds of others aboard a ship that would cross the Atlantic - traversing what we now refer to as the Middle Passage. For the next fifty years or so, Belinda lived in forced servitude for the Royall family of Medford, Massachusetts whose fortunes were being made in the burgeoning sugar and rum industries built upon slave labor.

There is virtually no documentation of most of Belinda’s life except for a petition she submitted to the Massachusetts legislature on February 14, 1783 seeking a pension from the estate of her then deceased former owner, Isaac Royall.¹

In that petition, Belinda describes her early life in Africa as well as colonial Massachusetts and argues that her uncompensated labor helped to build the wealth of the Royall family. At the time of the petition, she was advanced in age and also caring for a sick daughter. She asks to be awarded a portion of her former owner’s estate.

The petition was granted and the legislators determined that Ms. Sutton ought to be provided a sum from her former master’s property.

¹ <https://royallhouse.org/slavery/belinda-sutton-and-her-petitions/>

Some call this the first successful case of reparations in what is now the United States of America.

One could also claim that the granting of Ms. Sutton's petition was not done with an intention to repair the harm of her enslavement but rather in keeping with the norms of the time that estate owners ought to provide for all those under their care, including enslaved persons and those they eventually freed, so that they didn't become a burden to the state.

However you look at it, the petition submitted by Belinda Sutton made an eloquent case for her independence and agency. It spoke to the deprivation of that agency through the institution of slavery, and her right to some degree of restitution for what she lost in her enslavement.

In this small way, Belinda Sutton could have her dignity and worth more fully acknowledged in the community she had been a part of for more than seventy years.

Our worship theme this month of February is "Beloved Community," and we ask ourselves "What does it mean to be a people of 'Beloved Community'?"

In our Congregational Covenant which we shared in speaking together earlier, we covenant to "encourage each other in the brave work of creating a more Beloved Community."

That work of creating a more Beloved Community is work we take up now in our current moment. It is, I believe, one of the most fundamental endeavors in our faith life as Unitarian Universalists.

"Beloved Community" is a term we now associate most with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who preached that "our goal is Beloved Community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls and a qualitative change in our lives." His use of the term was based on theologians before him, including Josiah Royce. In putting forward this language of "Beloved Community," they speak of our ethical obligations to the community at large. Creating a more "Beloved Community" means rooting ourselves in that agape love that the ancient Greeks talked about, a universal love and regard for all.

We also know that we are shaped by history, and so in continuing to build the Beloved Community today and addressing ongoing systemic racism, we know that we are shaped by the enduring legacy of racism all the way back to the institution of slavery as well as the genocide of native peoples that went hand-in-hand with the founding of the colonies and the birth of this nation.

A look back at the 158 years since the Emancipation Proclamation shows that violence and terror against African Americans long endured, that active discrimination throughout all of our institutions was the norm for decades, and that today racism and bias continues to be baked into the ways that Black people are treated in our country and in our communities.

There is a lot of harm to reckon with. Belinda Sutton's story is one of millions like it.

When I think about building a "Beloved Community," a community in which all are valued, we also have to acknowledge and address the devaluing of people and injury - physical or otherwise - that we have done to others.

What do we do to rectify this level of harm?

For centuries, formerly enslaved Africans and their descendants have called for reparations for the harms caused by the institution of slavery and the continued harm of systemic racism on African Americans.

At the most basic level, reparations can be defined as the act or process of making amends for wrongs done.

The National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA) describes reparations as "A process of repairing, healing and restoring a people injured because of their group identity and in violation of their fundamental human rights by governments, corporations, institutions and families."

The United Nations outlines five conditions that must be met for full reparations: restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition.

In our history as a country, we have seen an example of reparations that fulfill these conditions made to those harmed by the policies of our government with the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 which addressed the internment of Japanese Americans in concentration camps during World War II.

Later this month, Japanese Americans will commemorate the February 19th Day of Remembrance marking the day in 1942 that President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. This Executive Order led to the forced removal and incarceration of roughly 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent living on the West Coast of the United States.

Forty-six years later, the United States Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 which offered a formal, presidential apology to those Japanese Americans who were forced into concentration camps along with \$20,000 to each survivor. Eventually, 82,000 Japanese Americans received a presidential apology and a \$20,000 check.²

Some institutions across the country - like universities and churches - have started to move towards instituting these kinds of reparations to address the involvement of those organizations in the slave trade.

In the aftermath of Georgetown University revealing that it had profited from the sale of 272 enslaved people in 1838, students voted in 2019 to impose a tuition fee that would be used to benefit descendants of those enslaved Africans.³

Just recently, the Memorial Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Maryland, which was founded by slaveholders voted to create a reparations fund of \$500,000. The fund aims to address race-based inequalities that took root during slavery and proliferated for generations in the church and in the community at large. \$100,000 will be directed this year to organizations in their neighborhood working on issues of housing, education, environmental justice or civic engagement.⁴

² You can learn more about this history here: <https://densho.org/>.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/12/us/georgetown-reparations.html>

⁴ <https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-church-reparations-20210129-jmiroxmrc37a54ykonanoc2y-story.html>

In our Unitarian Universalist community, the First Parish in Needham, Massachusetts has recently uncovered its own connections to slave ownership and is working to begin a reparative process to address this history.

Japanese Americans who speak of the act of reparations that was enacted through the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 say that one of the most significant impacts was the acknowledgement that these events had in fact happened, events that were not spoken about for many years even within the Japanese American community. Japanese American who fought for the passage of this legislation wanted to ensure that this kind of racially motivated brutality never happened again.⁵

In every session of the United State Congress from 1989 to 2017, Rep. John Conyers of Michigan had introduced H.R. 40 — Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act.

Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas has since taken up this mantle and re-introduced the bill on January 4th of this year, just two days before the attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Speaking of this legislation, she says, “While it might be convenient to assume that we can address the current divisive racial and political climate in our nation through race-neutral means, experience shows that we have not escaped our history. Though the civil rights movement challenged many of the most racist practices and structures that subjugated the African-American community, it was not followed by a commitment to truth and reconciliation. For that reason, the legacy of racial inequality has persisted and left the nation vulnerable to a range of problems that continue to yield division, racial disparities, and injustice.”⁶

Reparations is not simply material payback in the form of restitution for harm done. It actually points to a deeper, spiritual imperative.

In his 2014 article, “The Case for Reparations,” writer Ta-Nehisi Coates speaks to this spiritual imperative and possibility. He says: “What I’m talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2020/03/24/820181127/the-unlikely-story-behind-japanese-americans-campaign-for-reparations>

⁶ <https://www.aclu.org/news/racial-justice/h-r-40-is-not-a-symbolic-act-its-a-path-to-restorative-justice/>
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a reluctant bribe. What I'm talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal. Reparations would mean the end of scarfing hot dogs on the Fourth of July while denying the facts of our heritage. Reparations would mean the end of yelling "patriotism" while waving a Confederate flag. Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history."⁷

Supporting reparations is soul work, and I believe that it is the work of a spiritual community like ours that takes seriously the building of a Beloved Community.

Achieving full reparations for the harm caused to enslaved people and their descendants in this country is a big undertaking and certainly requires a major commitment across all institutions and across the nation.

So, what role does this church community and any of you have in this?

First, I believe that we must support the efforts of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in our community who are asking for and working towards reparations.

Some of you may know that a bill was introduced to the Vermont State Legislature in 2019 to establish a task force to study and consider a State apology and a proposal for reparations for the institution of slavery. Members of the Vermont Racial Justice Alliance are now seeking to re-introduce this legislation.

What role can we play in supporting this legislative effort?

I think we can also be curious about the history of any of the institutions we are part of, including this church. We can be open to difficult truths knowing that honest reckoning is an act of love.

Within our Unitarian Universalist movement, leaders like Paula Cole Jones and Bruce Pollack-Johnson have put forward an 8th Principle for consideration to add to the seven we have already adopted as an association.

⁷ Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," The Atlantic, June 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

It would read: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

Building Beloved Community with accountability includes telling the truth and making amends.

So, let us be open to the truth.

Let us seek ways to make amends for the wrongs we have done or that we have benefited from in our lives.

And in doing so, let us build a Beloved Community rooted in Love and committed to Liberation.

So may it be.