“A Spirit that Endures”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

April 16, 2023

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/.

Reading

“Urgency” by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer[1]

Again the urge
to bring gauze
to the broken world—

…to meet what is cracked
with clarity,
to mirror and grow
whatever beauty
we find.

Sermon

Last week, the world watched as two young, Black state representatives were expelled from the Tennessee state house for failure to follow the rules of the chamber. Their expulsion left over one hundred thousand Tennesseans without representation.

What rules did they break?

Rep. Justin Jones and Rep. Justin J. Pearson were not silent.

They were far were silent.

[1] Full poem available here: https://ahundredfallingveils.com/2019/12/04/urgency/

You may share this work for personal, non-commercial purposes with attribution.

They raised their voices along with hundreds of the state's residents - especially young people - calling for Tennessee lawmakers to take action in the wake of a mass shooting in Nashville that took the lives of three children and three school employees. The shooter, who was killed by law enforcement, also lost their life.

Rep. Jones and Rep. Pearson were not the only legislators to lift up their voices in peaceful protest that day.

Their colleague, Rep. Gloria Johnson, a white, sixty year-old woman, also joined them. She avoided expulsion by one vote.

Across the country, and especially in the south, there are growing attempts to stifle the democratically raised voices of the people and to make it more difficult for people of color and young people to participate in democracy at the ballot box.

And, there is also resistance to these attempts to hamper democracy. Everyday people - mamas and papas, grandparents, students, church leaders, union members - continue to show up to exercise and defend their voting rights.

Rep. Jones and Rep. Pearson have since been reinstated and thousands of people from across Tennessee and the country will join in a Moral Monday march tomorrow in Nashville to proclaim that our future depends upon a vital, multiracial democracy that joins love and justice.

The attempts to curtail people's rights and dignity are being felt on many fronts. In state houses across the country, legislators are trying, and in some cases are successfully passing, policies that strip away the rights of nonbinary, gender nonconforming, and trans youth and their parents, and trans people of all ages.

The situation has become so dire that families are fleeing places like Florida and Missouri for communities that are safer and where access to gender-affirming health care is still a possibility.

We have also seen continued attempts to limit access to reproductive health care from state houses to federal courts.

You may share this work for personal, non-commercial purposes with attribution.

At the same time, there are people rising up, resisting these attacks on human dignity and agency. There are places, like Vermont, where stronger protections are being codified for women, trans and nonbinary people, and people of all genders.

This is a time when the voices of the gentle, angry people are oh so needed and when the moral stakes of resistance are high.

At the same time, I know that many of us are just plain weary. Tired of what feels like the constant barrage of threats to our lives, to our values and principles, and to our democracy.

We rightfully resist these threats, but I do not believe that it is the righteousness of this resistance that will keep our spirits going in these challenging and turbulent times.

Yes, we must resist the most egregious harms being inflicted by hateful words and deeds and by violent policies, but we can't stop there.

Indeed, there is a danger to engaging in resistance alone.

In a 2018 opinion piece, the civil rights lawyer and advocate, Michelle Alexander wrote: "Resistance is a reactive state of mind. While it can be necessary for survival and to prevent catastrophic harm, it can also tempt us to set our sights too low and to restrict our field of vision to the next election cycle, leading us to forget our ultimate purpose and place in history."[2]

She describes this ultimate purpose for Americans in relation to the democracy that we aspire to build. She writes: "A new nation is struggling to be born, a multiracial, multiethnic, multifaith, egalitarian democracy in which every life and every voice truly matters."

"In which every life and every voice truly matters."

---

[2] Michelle Alexander, "We Are Not the Resistance," September 21, 2018, New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/opinion/sunday/resistance-kavanaugh-trump-protest.html.

You may share this work for personal, non-commercial purposes with attribution.

When our spirits are weary, it is this kind of vision that I believe can revive us. We can recognize that this is both where we want to go and also the path of history that is unfolding - not without effort - but there is a tide of ever inclusive freedom that churns on.

The late civil rights leader, Vincent Harding spoke of the long and continuous struggle for freedom throughout human history as "a river, sometimes powerful, tumultuous, and roiling with life; at other times meandering and turgid, covered with the ice and snow of seemingly endless winters, all too often streaked and running with blood."

This river flows on. We get to be a part of it. We get to bring life to it. And we get to draw life from it. Sometimes we have to pull life out of it.

But, it is this river that we are a part of.

These again are the words of Michelle Alexander: "If we pause long enough and consider where we stand in relationship to the centuries-long quest to create a truly equitable democracy, we may be able to see that the revolutionary river that brought us this far just might be the only thing that could possibly carry us to a place where we all belong."

To hold fast to the vision and the dream of creating a truly Beloved Community, a place where we all belong, we must resist not only policies and politics that cause harm and strip away human dignity and human rights. We must also resist the cynicism and spiritual hardening that makes it impossible to keep flowing with that river.

We need spiritual endurance to keep up with this revolutionary river and to imagine where we can go together and dream of what is possible.

Our spirits will endure first in recognizing that we don't do this alone. Today's new member ceremony reminds us that we need community and that we can actively claim our part in it.

Numbers are powerful when we are organizing for justice and freedom. Companionship is crucial to nurturing our spirits. And, relationships of accountability keep us moving forward with honesty and integrity.

You may share this work for personal, non-commercial purposes with attribution.

Over the last few weeks, we have seen multi-racial, multi-faith, multi-gendered, egalitarian community and democracy in action with trans and non-binary youth making their presence felt and voices heard on the state house steps, with poor and low-wealth Vermonters sharing stories of struggle and of fighting for their lives, with youth pressing us forward to take swift action to address the climate crisis.

Community and solidarity give us spiritual endurance.

Our spirits also endure with the pursuit of love and justice intertwined - loving justice and justice-seeking love. Neither on their own is quite enough, but together they create a spiritual resistance that is prophetic.

These principles are at the heart of a book published by the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III called, *Dancing in the Darkness: Spiritual Lessons for Thriving in Turbulent Times*. Moss is the senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.

In this book, he writes: "…the danger of love without justice is that it becomes sentimental, even appeasing…But justice without love can become ruthless. Justice without love destroys."

In order to be part of the flowing river of freedom and liberation, we need both love and justice. Justice that seeks to right the wrongs of inequality and bigotry, and love that seeks to make a greater whole of our seemingly divided pieces.

With love and justice intertwined, we can act with moral clarity and also face those moments of moral ambiguity and complexity. Love and justice together draw us out of an either-or, us vs them mentality and towards a vision of community in which all of us belong.

This justice-seeking love also makes whole what is broken inside ourselves. What is broken by injustice and oppression and by fear.

Dr. Moss insists: "To practice spiritual resistance in the face of fear, we must remain connected, even in times of fearful threat, to what we love, those activities and people that bring us joy and feed our souls."

You may share this work for personal, non-commercial purposes with attribution.

He shares the story of a particular night some years ago when fear gripped him tight. His church, Trinity United, on the the south side of Chicago, had come under scrutiny and threat of attack because of the strong words of their senior pastor at the time, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Rev. Wright's words were rolling on repeat across cables news stations in order to implicate the integrity of then Senator Barack Obama, one of the church's members who happened to be running for president of the United States.

Dr. Moss recalls that in this period of intense scrutiny and threats, he was fearful for his own safety and that of his family. It was during this period that one night he woke in the middle of the night to a loud sound. He got out of bed to investigate, tiptoeing around his house with a baseball bat in his hand, and discovered that the sound was coming from his young daughter's room.

The worst possibilities flashed through his head as he opened the door. He saw that his daughter was out of bed. There were no lights on. And, she was dancing. His daughter had been taking ballet lessons, and there she was at 3 o'clock in the morning, practicing her moves.

His first instinct was to reprimand her and ask what in the world she was doing out of bed. She insisted that he watch as she danced. He did and then carried the six year-old to bed and then went back to sleep himself.

Later, he reflected on the profound message his daughter's middle of the night antics conveyed. We must dance in the darkness.

How do we endure, how do we persist?

We continue to dance.
We continue to sing.
We continue to dream.

We continue to seek justice with love in our hearts, in our hands, and in our feet.

It is with this loving justice and justice-seeking love that we will bring an end to the gun violence that claims our young.

You may share this work for personal, non-commercial purposes with attribution.

It is with this loving justice and justice-seeking love that we will expand and not curtail rights and dignity for people of all genders.
It is with this loving justice and justice-seeking love that we will ensure that more Black men make it safely home and to their mother's doors.

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer writes:

…Again the chance
to do the work,
which is to look in,
to touch the pain
but not become it,
to see the world
exactly as it is
and still write it
a love letter,
to meet what is cracked
with clarity,
to mirror and grow
whatever beauty
we find.

Let us continue to do the work, to see the world exactly as it is, and to mirror and grow the beauty we find.

So may it be.

You may share this work for personal, non-commercial purposes with attribution.