

“The Heartbeat of Democracy”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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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 Excerpt from “Reviving American Democracy: Why We Must Have a Moral Reset and Mass Movement to Shift the Narrative in American Public Life,” 2022 Parks-King Lecture, Rev. Dr. William Barber II¹

“I come here today and I want to follow the model of Mrs. Parks and Dr. King and try to discern what our present moment demands of us. If we discern the signs of the times, what does our moment demand and what might it look like for us to give ourselves to this moment and the movement required. When I re-read the constitution of these United States, and I look at the glaring realities of systemic racism, systemic poverty, ecological devastation, the denial of healthcare, the underfunding of public education, the war economy, and the false and distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism, coupled with notions of white supremacy, it is clear to me that we face a crisis of civilization, a crisis of democracy and a crisis of possibility.

How is it that those things can exist, when our documents that tell us who we are supposed to be, say that as a people we are supposed to establish justice, provide for the common defense, promote the general, let me see, sure this word is in the constitution, welfare, and only then can we ensure domestic tranquility. But we also must ensure equal protection under the law, not for every American, but for all persons, all people. And that nobody has the right to deny or abridge the right to vote. And yet, with all of that, as King once said, high blood pressure of creeds, we still face such an anemia of deeds.”

Sermon

Nearly 150 years ago, and nearly a decade after the end of the Civil War, the chamber of the United States House of Representatives was full of vigorous debate and fiery energy as the nation pushed forward in expanding the reaches of its democratic ideals to more people born on this land. In this climate in April of 1874, an unprecedented event took place in that chamber.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcYx5BBuKT8>

The congress member from Vermont, Rep. Luke Potter Poland, who was in that moment serving as speaker pro tempore, invited Rep. Joseph Rainey, the first African American to serve in Congress, to take the gavel and resume presiding over the chamber.

As a young boy growing up in South Carolina in the 1830s, Joseph Rainey probably never imagined he'd one day hold office in the United States House of Representatives. His whole family was enslaved, but his father was allowed to work as a barber, and over time he had saved enough money to buy the family's freedom.

When the Civil War began, Joseph Rainey was conscripted into the Confederate army but managed to escape to Bermuda, where slavery had ended in 1834. He and his wife remained there, running their own trade shops and engaging in civic life, until the Civil War ended.

Rainey returned to a South Carolina in which democracy was just emerging. He served as a delegate to the statewide constitutional convention and was then elected to the South Carolina state senate.

As a state senator, he voted to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution which declared that all people born in the United States were citizens, including those formerly enslaved, and gave all citizens equal protection under the law.

Rainey continued to ascend in political leadership. When a seat in the U.S. House opened up in the latter part of 1870 due to misconduct by the outgoing representative, the Republican Party nominated Rainey to fill the last few months of the term. He was then elected to a full term in the 42nd Congress that same year and was sworn in as the first African American member of the U.S. Congress in December.

As a congress member, Rainey spoke up for integrated schools throughout the country, not just in the North. He rose in opposition to a bill that would have banned Chinese workers in San Francisco from taking part in a federally funded construction project. And, with encouragement from his friend Sen. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts who you might know was a prominent abolitionist and was beaten at his seat in the chamber of the House by another member, Rainey pushed for the passage of the first Civil Rights Bill, which was signed into law in 1875.

In the first several years of Reconstruction after the Civil War, many African Americans, including Joseph Rainey began to experience what it could be like to live with actual freedom

and rights as fully-counted and equally-treated American citizens. This was not an easy path, and they faced violent opposition.

Yet, Rainey and other Black activists and leaders of the time were critical to bringing forward a democracy that might actually meet the ideals set forth in the preamble of the United States constitution.

Nikole Hannah-Jones writes in *The 1619 Project*: “Black Americans have [also] been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country’s history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: it is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy.”²

With this statement, Hannah-Jones is asserting that Black Americans ought to be recognized for their vital role in shaping the very foundation of this free nation. Some might find these statements challenging. Many of us, especially White Americans, were raised with an unquestioned narrative of America as a nation birthed by former Europeans who resisted tyranny and then founded a union where freedom and liberty reign and where all people are equal.

But, the ideals of our nation have always sparkled brighter than the reality. And, democracy has always been a fragile vessel for our human yearnings for freedom.

The faithful work of bringing to fruition a democracy closer to our ideals has long been taken up by those most left out by this democracy and those who have chosen to come alongside them.

From resistance to their own enslavement, to taking up arms for full emancipation, to crafting the foundational documents and policies enshrining civil rights, to advocating for, and even giving their lives for the full realization and protection of those rights, Black Americans have pushed this nation, its states, and communities further along in the project of a creating a more perfect union.

Hannah-Jones says: “The truth is that as much democracy as this nation has today, it has been borne on the backs of Black resistance and visions for equality...For generations, we have believed in this country with a faith it did not deserve, Black people have seen the worst of America, yet, somehow, we still believe in its best.”³

² Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021), 10.

³ Ibid, 34.

Now, some of you might be wondering, why are we talking about democracy in church? What does any of this have to do with religion or spirituality?

For us as Unitarian Universalists, democratic process is at the heart of how we do church together meaning how we make decisions and live into our shared purpose collectively. As stated in our principles, we covenant to affirm and promote “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” Together, we hold an ethical charge to utilize and advance democracy within our own religious institution and in our greater society as well as to address the injustices and inequities that stand in the way of democracy.

And, I believe there is a theological core to choosing to uplift democratic process. Inherent in a belief in democracy is a belief in human agency and the human capacity for discernment and self-determination. The democratic process itself can become sacred when the dignity of the human spirit is recognized and people are empowered to act and vote on behalf of themselves and for the common good.

Two years ago when legislation to strengthen the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was under debate, the Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, who also serves as a U.S. senator, spoke to the spiritual importance of voting and democracy this way: “I have often said that democracy in a real sense is the political enactment of a spiritual idea. This notion that each of us is a child of God, and therefore we ought to have a vote and a voice in the direction of our country and our destiny within it. And so when we defend voting rights, this is much larger than a political exercise for me. It's really about the dignity of everybody's humanity and our ability to build a future that embraces all of us.”⁴

Today, we can recognize that while our democratic ideals and aspirations still beat strong, democracy is in a fragile state. Democracy's fragility, not just in this country but across the globe, is apparent as political figures shaped in the mold of authoritarian regimes rise to power and as the fascist playbook of normalizing lies, targeting marginalized groups, and pushing narratives of fear, continues to spread.

^{4 4} <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/06/1071060677/sen-warnock-says-voting-rights-legislation-is-a-moral-issue>

When we recognize that the health of our democracy is threatened, that democracy is on a life line, there is, I believe, a spiritual calling to take part in its defense. To be part of reviving the heart of democracy.

In 2016, the Rev. Dr. William Barber delivered a speech at one of the conventions of a major political party. And, in that speech he said this, “There have always been forces that wanted to harden, even stop, the heart of our democracy, but there have also always been people who stood together to stir, what sister Dorothy Day called, a revolution of the heart, and what Dr. King called a radical revolution of values... We need to embrace our deepest moral values and push for a revival of the heart of our democracy.”⁵

To push for this revival we must be honest with ourselves that our democracy has never been perfect, and yet its possibility is still worth striving for. This has been exemplified through the lives of Joseph Rainey, Frederick Douglass, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Rosa Parks, and Linda Blackmon, who, through multiple eras of reconstructions, have worked to expand democracy for all of us.

To revive the heart of democracy, we must be clear-eyed about the threats that are present today. The rise of charismatic leaders who go unquestioned by their followers. The creation of an “unreality” in which lies are normalized and the general trust in any truth is undermined. The targeting of marginalized groups as “other” through propaganda. The continual cutting back of voter access and the seeding of distrust in electoral integrity. These are all threats that we must recognize.

Knowing that these threats exist can be overwhelming, yet taking action is one of the ways we can counteract any feelings of powerlessness. We can join with others in taking action to keep the heartbeat of democracy going strong.

We must broaden our vision of democracy to include the multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-class, multi-generational, and multi-gendered plurality that makes up the people of our nation, our state, and our communities. This is something that the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, co-chaired by Rev. Barber and Rev. Liz Theoharis, continues to do in its work of building a moral fusion movement and for a Third Reconstruction.

And if there was ever a time to go all in for democracy, it is now. In 2024, over half of the world’s population - in more than 70 countries - will go to the polls in national elections. Many

⁵ Rev. Dr. William Barber II, excerpt from remarks at the 2016 Democratic National Convention <https://youtu.be/aw3PUghqlAA?feature=shared>.

people will be watching closely to see how these elections unfold, taking note not just of the results, but of whether and how free and fair elections will take place.

To be part of the revival of the heart of democracy that Rev. Barber talks about, we must be willing not just to watch but to join with the freedom fighters and democracy defenders of the past and present.

What was it the choir sang earlier? To the enemy who would conquer us from without, We say, No! To the enemy who would divide and conquer us from within, We say, No!

America!

Land created in common,

Dream nourished in common,

Keep your hand on the plow! Hold on!

If the house is not yet finished,

Don't be discouraged, builder!

If the fight is not yet won, Don't be weary, soldier!

The plan and the pattern is here,

Woven from the beginning Into the warp and woof of America:

ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.

NO MAN IS GOOD ENOUGH

TO GOVERN ANOTHER MAN

WITHOUT HIS CONSENT.

BETTER DIE FREE,

THAN TO LIVE SLAVES.

Who said those things? Americans!

Who owns those words? America!

Who is America? You, me!

We are America!⁶

So may it be.

⁶ Excerpt from *Freedom's Plow* by Langston Hughes: <https://images.shulcloud.com/4182/uploads/Archives/FreedomsPlowHughes.pdf>