

**“Extremists for Love”**  
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
January 19, 2025

*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** Excerpts from Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>1</sup>

“Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained...

So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? ...

Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.”

**Sermon**

Preachers, scholars, and people seeking inspiration have returned to the words that the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. penned in this letter written in the Birmingham jail for decades now. As a member of the clergy, I especially find significance in the events that prompted King to write the letter in the first place.

King and dozens of other protestors and civil rights leaders were arrested in Birmingham, Alabama after a week of protesting the city’s segregationist policies through direct action on local businesses. King had come to town to support and enliven the local movement. In response to these tactics, local clergy issued an open letter denouncing these acts of protest and calling for a moderate approach to desegregation.

The statement disappointed and infuriated King, and his impassioned response defended the campaign’s strategy of nonviolent protest and chastised local religious leaders for their failure to stand with the civil rights movement.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/letter-birmingham-jail>

Towards the end of the letter, King asks: “Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?”

King wasn’t the first religious leader to ask this question. The role of religion, and Christianity specifically, in bringing about social and political change has been disputed probably since its inception.

In the United States, the theological debates gave rise to the social gospel movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Black clergy and theologians like the Reverdy C. Ransom, Richard R. Wright, Jr. and Ida Wells-Barnett made the assertion that Christianity compelled them and all Christians to actively work towards freedom and equality. In the wake of a failed project of reconstruction, early proponents of a Black social gospel asked what a new abolition would look like and demanded that the nation live up to it. They stood in opposition to calls of moderation and accommodation led in large part by Booker T. Washington.

For the proponents of the Black social gospel, protesting an unjust system was a mandate of their faith.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. built on the foundation of these Black social gospel thinkers and leaders calling for the active role of the church in addressing the structural evils of his day, first and foremost the racism that kept segregation in place and that kept African Americans disenfranchised.

This view of the church’s role in transforming social and political systems was not embraced by most of the Black churches during the time of the early Black social gospel thinkers nor during King’s time, nor was it viewed positively by most white churches and clergy.

Christianity is not a monolith, and instead Christian tenets have been used to enact and defend engagement in the public square in disparate ways.

During King’s time and today, we witness the banner of Christianity being used to confront injustices of racism, poverty, and militarism and also being used to discredit public officials, justify violence, and protect the privileges of some rather than the rights of all. There is a long history of religiously-based supremacist beliefs fueling unjust and unconstitutional policies and also racial terrorism.

The Baptist scholar of religion Robert P. Jones makes the connection between religiously grounded supremacist beliefs and acts of terror against Blacks in the years following reconstruction. He writes:

“The theologically backed assertion of the superiority of both ‘the white race’ and Protestant Christianity undergirded a century of religiously sanctioned terrorism in the form of ritualized lynchings and other forms of public violence and intimidation. Both the informal conduits of white power, such as the White Citizens’ Councils of the 1950s and 1960s, and the state and local government offices, were populated by pastors, deacons, Sunday school teachers, and other upstanding members of prominent white churches.”<sup>2</sup>

These beliefs and actions were the antecedents to the White Christian nationalism we see today.

White Christian nationalism puts forward the belief that the white race and the Christian religion are inherently good and superior to other races and religions. Because of this superiority, our nation ought to be controlled by those who are white and Christian.

These beliefs are stated explicitly in public hate speech and also communicated implicitly through coded language.

According to the evangelical Christian sociologist Andrew L. Whitehead, “White Christian nationalism is a cultural framework that idealizes and advocates for a fusion of a particular expression of Christianity with American civil life. It holds that this version of Christianity should be the principal and undisputed framework in the United States and that the government should vigorously preserve that cultural framework.”<sup>3</sup> Essential to White Christian Nationalism is the fusion of the White Christian identity particularly within the evangelical branch of Christianity.

The fusion of religious and political identity among Evangelicals has taken place over decades fueled by reaction against the securing of basic rights for women, people of color, and the LGBTQ community. The support of this cultural framework and political allegiance has grown strong with close to two-thirds of white American Christians, and over seventy-five percent of white evangelical Christians, viewing Christian nationalism favorably.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2020), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Whitehead.

Robert P. Jones sums up the influence of the White Christian nationalist framework this way: “White Christian churches have not just been complacent; they have not only been complicit; rather, as the dominant cultural power in America, they have been responsible for constructing and sustaining a project to protect white supremacy and resist black equality. This project has framed the entire American story.”<sup>5</sup>

This is the project that leaders of the Black social gospel were and still are fighting against. They are re-framing the American story to wrestle with our past, call us to live up to the country’s founding ideals and the teachings of Jesus, and reshape cultural and political power.

King lived this gospel through his prophetic work against the extremism of white supremacy and for racial equality, but he also spoke out against the extremism of nationalism.

Preaching in 1953, he said, “We are all familiar with the creed of this new religion. It affirms that each nation is an absolute sovereign unit acknowledging no control save its own independent will. The watchword of this new religion is: ‘My country right or wrong.’ This new religion has its familiar prophets and preachers. In Germany it was preached by Hitler. In Italy it was preached by Mussolini. And in America it is being preached by the McCarthy’s and the Jenners, the advocates of white supremacy, and the America first movements... The preachers of this new religion are so convinced of its supremacy that they are determined to persecute anyone who does not accept its tenets. And so today many sincere lovers of democracy and believers of the christian principle are being scorned and persecuted because they will not worship the god of nationalism. We live in an age when it is almost heresy to affirm the brotherhood of man. And so the new god marches on.”<sup>6</sup>

We witness this new god, this false god marching on today in the form of false patriotism, American exceptionalism, and land-hungry imperialism.

In that same sermon, King preached: “We must choose whom we will serve. Will we continue to serve the false god that places absolute national sovereignty first or will we serve the God in whom there is no east nor west? Will we continue to serve the false god of imperialistic greed or will we serve the God who makes love the key which unlocks the door of peace and security.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>6</sup> “The False God of Nationalism,” <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/false-gods-we-worship>

Will we continue to serve the false god of racial prejudice or will we serve the God who made of one blood all men to dwell upon the face of the earth.”<sup>7</sup>

As we witness the rising power of White Christian nationalists, we need to both understand the parts of our nation’s history that led us here and also recommit to a vision of a multiracial, multi-religious, pluralistic democracy that regards all people equally and takes seriously a commitment to freedom and justice for all people.

During King’s time and today, there have been churches who position themselves as neutral parties in matters of the public square. Those who equate peace with silence and goodwill with inaction.

Whether we like it or not, religion has been thrust into the public square. As a living, practicing religious community, we cannot stay neutral. And, each of us as people guided by moral and religious values cannot stay neutral.

In letting go of neutrality, we must instead claim our prophetic voices insisting on the equality of all people, the necessity of multi-religious wisdom, and the cooperation and sovereignty of all nations.

Churches of all stripes today must take an active stance against White Christian nationalism. Not a stance of othering or demonizing, but a strong stance rooted in our values and vision for our communities, nation, and world. It is within and from our communities of faith that we can confront the structural evils of our day while we nurture and build a vision of a world where all belong and are valued and cared for, where power is shared rather than hoarded, and where democracy flourishes.

It would be easy to allow all the destructive rhetoric and policies to embitter one’s soul, but that bitterness does not lead to liberation.

Speaking to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967, King said: “I’ve seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to want to hate myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love.”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Excerpt from “Where Do We Go From Here?” <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/where-do-we-go-here>

In a world of growing extremism, the only kind of extremism needed is the kind that is unabashedly committed to love. The banner of love must be bolder than fear and hate. The voices proclaiming our shared humanity and belonging to one another must be louder than the voices of exclusion and bigotry.

Right here in our community, we can let love's extremism guide us to join migrant workers in their struggle for dignified working conditions and housing.

We can let love's extremism guide us to resist inhumane immigration laws and executive orders.

We can let love's extremism guide us to proclaim that trans lives are sacred and ensure protection against trans discrimination.

We can let love's extremism guide us to extend radical hospitality to our unhoused neighbors.

We can let love's extremism guide us to organize for economic justice and closing the racial wealth gap.

We can let love's extremism guide us to demand that our tax dollars not be used for military expansion but to build thriving and resilient communities.

When it comes to building the Beloved Community, we cannot be neutral. Let us be creative extremists for the extension of justice, extremists for love.