

“Building Beloved Community Now”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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This sermon was delivered during a remote worship service held via Zoom. 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 “My House” by Adam Lawrence Dyer

Sermon

Last weekend, when the Philadelphia Eagles took on the Kansas City Chiefs in the Super Bowl, many wondered whether the Chiefs would take home the trophy for the third year in a row. They didn’t, but I think something more significant happened. For the first time in four years, the end zone at the Super Bowl did not feature the words “End Racism.” The league had started stenciling the message onto end zones in 2020. This year, they replaced “End Racism” with “Choose Love” and “It Takes All of Us.” I can’t disagree with those messages, but why change the message now? We clearly haven’t yet ended racism. The change was a small yet significant indicator of where we are in this current moment.

Of course, simply saying or writing the words “End Racism” alone won’t actually achieve what is being called for, but what we say along with what we do matters.

In our country’s attempt to end racism, President Gerald Ford was the first president to recognize February as Black History Month in 1976. This was a half century after the African American historian Carter G. Woodson initiated the first Negro History Week in our country. Woodson’s fraternity worked to expand that commemorative week to a full month after his death.

The history of Blacks in the United States from before the colonies gained independence up to today includes the ongoing struggle for freedom and also the shaping of this country’s cultural heritage through music, dance, story, poetry, mathematics, engineering, the military, politics - basically every aspect of American society. A designated Black History Month is one small part of honoring that history and just one small part of the larger effort to begin to end racism. Yet, removing any reference to the month from calendars, government agencies, and schools is a significant step back. What we say along with what we do matters.

Saying that we seek to end racism and doing something about it matters.
Saying that we believe in justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion and living out those values matters.

In the history of Unitarian Universalism, we have stated our commitments to abolishing slavery and to reversing segregation, to expanding voting rights and to ending mass incarceration. We have taken action towards those ends. And, we have also failed to live up to our stated values and endeavored to try again.

Within our own congregation, our journey has included the adoption of the 8th Principle three years ago. At a special meeting of the congregation, you voted to adopt affirm and promote this principle after a year of a deliberative process led by the Racial Justice Group involving opportunities for education and discussion. We were the 154th congregation to adopt the 8th Principle which states that we “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.”

The values and aims of the 8th Principle have now been integrated into our denomination’s newly adopted statement of shared values. With love at the center, Unitarian Universalists commit to six interrelated values including justice and equity.

Justice: We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all feel welcome and can thrive.

Equity: We declare that every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion.

Saying these things out loud matters.

Declaring that history will not be erased matters.

Continuing to teach our children and to learn as adults the histories of those communities whose stories have long been discounted and buried matters.

Recently, the UCM Racial Justice Group asked the Governing Board to find ways for the church to more consistently and publicly share our commitment to be anti-racist. Their request led to some important conversation. What do we mean by anti-racist? Can we claim to be an anti-racist congregation or is it something we are striving towards? I am grateful for their request and the discussion it has sparked.

I also believe that being and building Beloved Community goes hand in hand with being anti-racist.

Beloved Community is a vision for living in relationship with one another in the fullness of our differences without hierarchies of status and power with equal regard and in the interest of each and everyone one of us living into our full dignity and humanity.

Adam Dyer's words in the reading I shared paint a poetic picture of Beloved Community:

“a home and a place to dine
On the loaves of different hearts and minds
Broken only to be shared by many
Instead of being hoarded by one.”

While Beloved Community has always been aspirational, it is also achievable.

The Black feminist writer and activist bell hooks reflected on her experience forming deep and mutual relationships with white comrades in the freedom struggle in the south saying:

“The small circles of love that we have managed to form in our individual lives represent a concrete realistic reminder that *beloved community* is not a dream, that it already exists for those of us who have done the work of educating ourselves for critical consciousness in ways that enabled a letting go of white supremacist assumptions and values...*beloved community* is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.”¹

What's important in what hooks writes is that Beloved Community can be real. It can happen here and now. It hinges upon our critical consciousness and our letting go of white supremacist assumptions and values. In Beloved Community, we do not negate difference but affirm it. We claim who we are and the cultures that have shaped us.

We began Black History Month here at UCM with an event offered in partnership with Salon Black Walnut. The vision for the Human Family Potluck held now three years in a row has been to experience - that is see, hear, taste, and feel - Beloved Community in the very act of gathering as people in our full diversity of races, ages, genders, classes.

¹ bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (Owl Books, 1995), 264-265.

Coming together to break bread, sing song, and witness powerful truths is an act of Beloved Community.

bell hooks continues in her writing: “To form *beloved community* we do not surrender ties to precious origins. We deepen those bondings by connecting them with an anti-racist struggle which is, at the heart, always a movement to disrupt that clinging to cultural legacies that demands investment in notions of racial purity, authenticity, national fundamentalism.”²

Within an anti-racist struggle, the bonds of Beloved Community are deepened and strengthened. Dismantling racism is a necessary component of building Beloved Community because racial injustice and inequity still exist.

We can celebrate cultural contributions and lift up the stories of freedom fighters that have gone before us, but to be and to build Beloved Community we also have to face head on injustice and inequity. We have to be anti-racist.

The scholar Ibram X. Kendi uses the term anti-racist as a way of asserting that one cannot be neutral in matters of racial equality. Policies either sustain racial inequity or lead to racial equity. The ideas one believes and advances either sustain racial superiority or insist upon racial equality. Someone who is anti-racist, and by extension a community that is anti-racist, is one that upholds policies and ideas that lead to racial equity.

Kendi also says that the labels of “racist” and “anti-racist” aren’t permanent but are situational. He likens them to “peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment.” He writes: “No one becomes a racist or antiracist. We can only strive to be one or the other. Like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination.”³

So, what does this look like in practice?

Within our congregation this might look like ensuring that anyone of any race is free to participate in any and all aspects of church life, that anyone of any race is assumed to be capable of taking on a leadership role, and that barriers that might cause racial inequity are removed.

² hooks, 265.

³ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be An Antiracist* (One World, 2019), 23.

Within our local community this might look like ensuring that essential public services are available in a variety of languages, that people of all races have access to affordable rent and homeownership, that people of color who own businesses are offered the resources to thrive, that our schools actively teach students to understand the origins of racial inequity and give them the skills to create another reality.

At a time when the words racism, diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice have become weaponized, it is important to keep saying them out loud. Not to sow division but to keep alive the values we strive to live by and a vision for the world we want to live in.

Being quiet about these commitments might offer cover in the short term but it allows racism and white supremacy to fester in the long term.

What we say along with what we do matters.

Right now, there are many people taking courageous action. We need to support one another in courageously saying what we believe about the dignity of all people and in courageously acting to defend one another's rights, dignity, and safety.

Over the last few weeks, I've struggled with my own inclinations to be strategically quiet about certain ways I am taking action. While there may be actions that need to be taken quietly for safety's sake, our voices are needed in public spaces to communicate support for those whose lives and livelihoods are being threatened. With our public statements and public actions, we remind one another that Beloved Community is not a dream but can be a reality.

So, I ask you to find the ways that you can be bold in word and in action.

Together let us build that home where we share the loaves of different hearts and minds, a place where in community, all are beloved.