

The Promise & The Practice

Reverend Cyndi Simpson

A Sermon Given at the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, April 15, 2018

Our worship service this morning is uniquely prophetic: it calls to us who identify as white to listen, humbly and perhaps with some discomfort, to the lived reality of black Unitarian Universalists in our religion's midst. This discomfort is both a ***gesture of hospitality*** to voices that have not been heard enough, and a ***sign*** that we're growing in the right direction.

If you're joining us today as a guest, know that you are witnessing this Unitarian Universalist congregation doing sacred work. Collectively, we will wrestle with what it means to be a majority-white faith whose anti-racist intentions have not always been borne out. We invite you to witness this moment of transparency and vision, and to join us on future Sundays for a more traditional or typical Unitarian Universalist worship service.

We who are Unitarian Universalists often choose to make ourselves uncomfortable in the service of our meaning-making. We recognize our discomfort as evidence that we're growing. Today, if you feel discomfort I invite you, myself and all of us to practice being curious, and to allow out discomfort to lead us to new learning.

Every spoken element of our worship service today was written ***for this service*** by members of Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism, also known as BLUU. BLUU is an organization by and for Black Unitarian Universalists and has three goals:

- Expanding the power & capacity of Black UUs within our faith.
- Providing support, information & resources for Black Unitarian Universalists.
- Justice-making and liberation through our faith.

All of our offering plate today, except for those offerings marked as pledges, will be going to Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism.

CALL TO WORSHIP

By Ms. Viola Abbitt

We are Unitarian Universalists.

When we lift up our Seven Principles, some of us think of them as a form of theology — but they are more important to our collective than that:

they do not tell us what we should believe;

they tell us how we should ***be***.

They tell us how we should act in the larger world and with each other.

We are brought here today by the fact that Unitarian Universalism has fallen short of the image that was presented to the world, and to many of those who embraced this religion.

But we are also brought here today by the truth that Unitarian Universalism has shifted course to move toward a place of wholeness:

a place that perhaps never existed for us as a denomination.

It has been a long, and sometimes unforgiving road to today.
But we are here today because we are mindful of that past, and because we have hope for the future.
We want the practice of this faith to be a fulfilling manifestation of its promise.
Open your hearts. Seek new ways of understanding.
Come, let us worship together.

Chalice Lighting

By the Reverend Rebekah Savage

We light our flaming chalice as a beloved people
united in love
and thirsting for restorative justice.

May it melt away the tethers that uphold whiteness in our midst.
May it spark in us a spirit of humility.
May it ignite in us radical love that transforms our energy into purposeful action.

This a chalice of audacious hope.
This chalice shines a light on our shared past,
signaling our intention to listen deeply, reflect wisely,
and move boldly toward our highest ideals.

MEDITATION/PRAYER

By Ms. Connie Simon

Spirit of Life and Love, God of Many Names,
We gather in awareness of the opportunity before us as Unitarian Universalists.

We have been given many chances before today to heal the wounds of the racism and oppression that have beset our faith for many years,
and held us back from realizing the inherent worth and dignity of all Unitarian Universalists.

We have made some progress but we still have a long way to go.
We have an opportunity today to renew our commitment to this work and we embrace it fully and thankfully.

We come together to listen to the voices of those whose contributions to our faith have been neglected for far too long.

We welcome them home into a new Unitarian Universalism – into a faith that embraces and includes all of us.... and brings us closer to the Beloved Community of which we dream.

We know we have much work to do; that everyone has a role to play if we are to live fully into our principles and achieve our highest aspirations.

We pray for healing of the wounds of the past and present.
We pray for open hearts and minds that we may envision what is possible.

We pray for the courage not only to speak up,
but also to listen, even when the words are hard to hear.

We pray for compassion and understanding.

We pray for resilience and determination and for the fearlessness to take risks, to make mistakes and to keep trying.

In gratitude for the opportunities we have been given and the promise of what we can achieve together,
and in the name of all that is holy, we say amen.

READING

By the Reverend Carol Thomas Cissel

Diverse. Multicultural. Inclusive. Welcoming.

If I made a list of every single Unitarian Universalist congregation I have served, visited or worshipped at, they would have a few things in common—including the use of these words.

Perhaps on the front of the Order of Service? Or scrolling across the home page of their website? Maybe they've been emblazoned on a rainbow-colored banner hanging in the sanctuary? Wherever they are, more often than not, the words are proudly combined with another expression that has been embraced in everyday UU vernacular: *"All Are Welcome Here!"* The congregations, churches, and fellowships on my list, all have one or more of these words proudly on display.

I know why they are used so freely. Initially, I feel embraced by them. There's a warmth of recognition when my eyes first catch and capture their sight. A sense of being acknowledged and valued moves from heart to head, and then a smile settles on my lips. My heart blooms. I feel like the Welcome Table has been set for me, and I am eager to pull up a chair.

All of this takes place in an unmeasurable instant. In the next moment, it is tempered. I remember past experiences and unconsciously recalculate and measure my response. The petals of my heart close a bit, protecting the delicate stigma and stamen that lie within. Fear of disappointment rises within me like the sun.

I love those words. I want what they promise. But I have been repeatedly disappointed. It is simply not enough to print them on an Order of Service or in a newsletter; they must have meaning and intention at their core. A desire for multicultural worship is wonderful, but it will not flower if that seed of yearning is not nurtured by a commitment and a plan.

I believe that we can transform first ourselves and then the world. I am injured repeatedly when we do not. When we use words just for the sake of using them I am hurt. Without true resolve, planning and measurable goals behind the things I see, my trust and hope are broken anew.

Words matter. If you and your congregation are not ready to meet the promises you craft, and then share with the world—stop publishing them. Please don't invite me to sit at your table unless you have a warm, satisfying meal to serve. It doesn't have to be a gourmet feast; a potluck is fine. The soufflé may only have

risen halfway. The cookies might be burned on the edges. The pasta can be overcooked. That's okay. I'm starving. What it must be is full-filling, real, made with love and ready to be eaten.

Remember: I believe what you say and write. Words matter.

HOMILY

By the Reverend Rebekah Savage

I play this moment over and over again in my head: the day I heard of the Thomas Jefferson Ball, hosted by Unitarian Universalists in 1993 at our General Assembly in North Carolina. As a person of color, raised in a UU congregation, I felt a shiver down my spine as I learned something new and unsettling about the faith that I call home.

You may be wondering why this gathering of UUs in 1993 struck me as a profoundly memorable and painful moment. Beloveds, this is why: attendees were encouraged to wear period clothes to the Ball to celebrate Thomas Jefferson, who attended Unitarian churches. In the spirit of welcome, those who conceived of this social gathering did not take into account the centering of whiteness in asking people to attend in period dress. The organizers didn't get or forgot or ignored the fact that in Jefferson's time, in North Carolina, we black and brown UUs would have been slaves: property to traded and sold, brutalized and subjected.

The matter was taken up at General Assembly when delegates challenged the appropriateness of holding this event. During a plenary session, delegates voiced their concerns by reading a statement of protest. In response, the organizers and other leaders gathered to consider how to proceed and came to a decision: the Thomas Jefferson Ball would proceed ahead as planned.

I asked myself: What would I wear? Would I be a house slave, favored for my lighter skin and "good hair"? My skin is a light brown that my daughter refers to as cinnamon, a product of a beautiful multi-racial family history. Would I catch the eye of a white man who could leverage any opportunity to take my body as his property?

What would I wear? Would I have had shoes on my work worn feet? Would I have stretch marks across my belly from babies that were taken from me to sell to other plantations? Would I sing to myself faithful, mournful songs of liberation, dreaming for the day when I can taste freedom for myself and my family?

Would I be allowed to come through the front entrance or be directed to the back, to enter through the kitchen with the other slaves and servants? Would I be allowed to drink from the same punch bowl, eat from the same platters as the white UUs? Would I sit with the other people of color, in a separate room or at the back of the gathering? Would I be permitted to look a white person in the eye or even speak their name?

What would I wear, dear beloved UUs? Tell me: what I would have worn to attend this ball? What period clothes would represent who I would have been in Thomas Jefferson's time?

OUCH.

When we feel something deeply and are still finding the words: OUCH.

Seriously, OUCH.

Why do I raise this deeply wounding moment in our shared UU history?

Because this isn't just a reflection about my lived experience as a person of color in a majority-white denomination. This is also part of the story of how people of color experience sharing worship and community within our faith. It's a chapter in the story of who we are as a people, living in this country, swimming in the waters of white supremacy and centering whiteness, supported by centuries of indoctrinations and institutional structures.

I grieve for the hurts that this time in our history caused. I grieve for those who left our UU communities because of how this event was handled, which broke their trust in finding spacious rest in our congregations from the pervasive, violent racism in our country. I grieve for those who, at the time, were unable to traverse the gaps in their spiritual understanding of justice and belonging. I grieve that it has taken this long to have this level of conversation about centering people of color.

This Ball was conceived by well-meaning people, beloved kin of mine and yours, who were able to identify welcome only through the eyes of white privilege. That is the insidious nature of centering whiteness: it denies personhood and the God given right for all to be fully accounted.

To put primacy on whiteness as the default setting in how we see and experience our world means that we are being theologically inconsistent. We covenant to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, and yet we have devalued the full inclusion of too many.

In small ways, this trend emerges when music and readings for worship draw primarily from Anglo-European composers and writers and the paintings that hang in our congregations disproportionately represent our white foremothers and forefathers. We see this trend when congregational leadership is cultivated without honoring the diversity in our midst as a rich source of inspiration and prophetic messaging. We see this in considering that people of color have been a part of our living tradition for centuries — but our voices have been overlooked, silenced, or outright rejected with hostility.

I ignite my flame of justice and shine a light on this scar because the healing is not done. The healing is not done because we are still called to do the work of dismantling white supremacy culture and decentering whiteness from our bones: from our congregations, from the ways in which we interact and support each other. We are called to fulfill the promises once made in the name of faith and proclaiming Beloved Community. We are called to match our words with our actions, to bring the holy into our midst by truly and without fear honoring the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

This is a beautiful time of opportunity, Beloveds, born of truly listening to people of color and beginning to repair the fabric of community that has been torn. Ripped asunder by years of broken and empty promises: words of good intention, unmatched by purposeful action.

I love being a Unitarian Universalist. I was birthed into this world with the calling of service on my heart; I was shaped and molded in our congregations. I also know that, as Dr. Cornell West shared with us in his 2015 Ware Lecture at General Assembly, if I have white supremacy in my heart because I was raised in this country, so do we all.

While I grieve, I also have much reason to claim hope. I celebrate where we are as a people of faith because we are bravely facing the devastation and illness of "othering" people. We are looking at ourselves in the mirror and seeking a new way. I celebrate that we have the moral and spiritual courage to listen deeply to voices that have been marginalized. I celebrate that beloveds are choosing to move back humbly, to make space for an evolution in leadership and consciousness. The spark of working towards the greatest good is seen in every moment of insight as so many are waking up to our participation in centering whiteness.

Beloveds, now is our time to lead with love and make right the ways our denomination has fallen short of our shared principles. We are a powerful, aspirational, covenanted people and we are being called to account for our historic moral and spiritual failings, in order to move into authentic Beloved Community.

Now is our time to harness our ability to reflect inward in order to reemerge with a power greater than ourselves that gives rise to a new day. Beloveds, with love and peace in our hearts, may it be so.

BENEDICTION

By the Reverend Kimberly Quinn Johnson

We are the ones we have been waiting for.
We are not perfect, but we are perfectly fitted for this day.
We are not without fault,
but we can be honest to face our past as we chart a new future.
We are the ones we have been waiting for.
May we be bold and courageous to chart that new future
May we have faith in a future that is not known
We are the ones we have been waiting for.