

Racial Justice Is Faith Formation
Sermon 9.27.20
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It's really hard to talk about race, isn't it? Back in 2015 I was part of a small group of folks who were forming a chapter of showing up for racial justice in Buffalo, NY. We didn't quite know how we would do this work of getting more folks involved in anti-racism in our city but we figured we'd just start by trying to make connections. So we came up with this scheme: we printed up a bunch of Black Lives Matter yard signs and we'd each take a bunch and head out to a mostly white neighborhood in Buffalo. And we'd go from door to door and our approach was really simple: we'd knock on the door, and if someone answered, I'd say "Hi, I'm Bob, I'm with Showing Up For Racial Justice and I wondered if you have a few moments to talk about race in Buffalo."

Those poor, unsuspecting people. The looks on their faces, like a deer in the headlights. I really think that some of them would have been happier if I'd been a Jehovah's Witness. Now to be fair a lot of them stayed in the door and had the conversation. But I appreciate the bind that we put them in. It's hard to talk about race.

I'm here today to say that even though talking about race is hard anti-racism is a fundamental part of our faith formation, our spiritual practice. Anti-racism work and spiritual practices are part of the same thing. We either do both well, or neither well. [Repeat] Let me explain.

A good place to start is to ask why is anti-racism part of the work of this Unitarian Universalist church? Our principles set this out pretty well. There's:

- The affirming of justice, equity, and compassion in human relations
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all
- And eventually, we'll have an 8th principle: working to build a diverse multicultural beloved community by accountably dismantling racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.

Among our sources we draw on the “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love.” So this is us. As Unitarian Universalists, we are explicitly called to this work.

But what makes anti-racism a spiritual practice instead of just another kind of advocacy? Let’s talk about spiritual practices, or what I like to call faith formation. Faith formation is the life-long pursuit of deeper knowledge and connection that helps us grow our sense of meaning and purpose and consolation and resilience. In our UU tradition, individually we can practice a wide variety of ways to foster that, and that’s reflected beautifully in the life of this congregation. For example, our covenant of UU pagans held a lovely Mabon ritual last night to mark the fall equinox. And like I mentioned last week, many folks in this congregation meditate in one form or another. Folks study texts that have value to them and many, many people in this congregation do their spiritual practices in the form of service and advocacy that protect the most vulnerable among us. As the saying goes: We are unitarian Universalists. Love is our theology, and service is our prayer.

Let’s get specific though. What in anti-racism is spiritual? Well to start, community and connection are spiritual activities. My personal theology is that we conjure the holy through our relationships. When our relationships are right, we bring something extra into existence, a greater presence of the divine. Racism is fundamentally about relationships, bad ones, so practicing anti-racism gets to the heart of a core spiritual practice for me. Looking around us, where do we see the holy being cultivated or destroyed in our civic institutions? I see plenty that is unholy in our system of mass incarceration. I see

Anti-racism also requires self-examination and self-awareness. A good spiritual practice will help us better understand ourselves and also help us to become more comfortable with our authentic being. As shown by our shared reading of the book *White Fragility*, folks in this church are fairly sophisticated about racism. We’ve come to realize that racism is less about white hoods and the klan and more about the existence of racism not just in our institutions, but also within ourselves.

This isn’t an attempt to make anyone feel guilty. We all have been marinating in this racist society and of course we’re going to internalize all those messages. It’s

not a failure of character, it's just what comes with growing up here. But we also understand that some of the work we need to do is within ourselves, and sitting with our discomfort. Good spiritual practices that foster our faith formation sometimes push us into uncomfortable territory. Ideally, we have the benefit of a supportive community to journey with us through our discomfort about that. Starting in October, 40 folks from this congregation will join with more than a thousand other UUs in the Beloved Conversations program. My prayer is that we'll be both uncomfortable, and together, as we foster our self-awareness. And I'm expecting that we'll also develop a healthy humility around the topic.

There are a lot more spiritual practices embedded in anti-racism but I want to focus on one more: our first principle calls us to see the inherent worth and dignity in every person. Another way to put that would be to see everyone as divinely created. To see everyone as containing the spark of life and possibility and the holy. And it's especially true when we consider those who are struggling with the empire. By the empire I mean the racist and sexist and transphobic and capitalist systems that use and dehumanize people. When we see the divinity in everyone, we're allowing the divine to show up. I believe that ours is a faith that intentionally subverts hierarchies. I believe that ours is a faith that reverses hierarchies. We saw that in the civil rights movement and our response to Selma. We saw that in the battle for equal marriage and how UUs showed up for that.

And let me go back to why this is the work of this church. We are in covenant. And the purpose of our covenant is to build beloved community. Paula Cole Jones says that we can't build beloved community without eliminating racism and oppression. She says that in renewing our commitment to anti-racism, we're building a new understanding of what faith formation requires of us now. Anti-racism is aligning ourselves with the world as it should be and will be.

I wanna tell you a story about spiritual practices. I have a friend who was a Buddhist monk. She took vows, shaved her head, and lived in a monastery. While she was there, a group of researchers from a nearby university came to study the effects of meditation on the brains of the people meditating. So they'd come to the zendo every month or so and hook people's brains up to the machines and see what was happening during meditation practice. And as part of it, they'd also ask the monks at the end of the sitting period how they experienced that sitting

practice. And there was one old monk who'd been at it for decades. Year after year of this spiritual practice. You'd think he was an expert, right? Well every time the researchers asked this monk about his experience after an hour of meditation, he'd pause and say "well, I took a few honest breaths in there."

A few honest breaths. Here is a person who understands how hard our spiritual practices can be. Spiritual practices are just that: practice. We need to do them over and over and here's a sexy selling point: we're gonna fail as much as we succeed. And that's OK. It's the trying that matters. Anyone who's tried to learn a language or to ride a bike knows that it's consistent effort that's rewarded. Spiritual practices, faith formation, requires a consistent effort but the rewards are wonderful.

When we consider our anti-racism work as a spiritual practice, we build our ability to bring the holy into our relationships. When we consider our anti-racism work as a spiritual practice, we cultivate our self-awareness and ability to be our authentic selves. And when we consider our anti-racism as a spiritual practice, we develop the habit of seeing the divine in everyone around us.

I'm so happy to be in this covenant with you, working together to create the beloved community. May we align ourselves with the world as it should be, and will be. Amen.