

Beloved Conversations: justice, discomfort, and joy

**Sermon Text:**

What does it mean to live into our Unitarian Universalist values? There are a lot of ways to do that but this past fall, 35 members of this congregation tried to do just that. They signed up to participate in the Beloved Conversations program. Folks have probably heard me talk about that program, how it lasted several months and how it used a combination of self-study, small group discussion, and worship services to lead participants to a deeper understanding of their own racial identities and the dynamics that play out within and between racial groups. The program is explicitly UU and is deeply rooted in the best of our principles and values.

People participated in that program in racial caucuses. That is, white folks were with white folks, and people of color were with people of color. This is because the needs of BIOPOC are different from white participants.

To help convey the experience of the participants, I recorded a conversation with two of them, Sheryl Guterl and Arne Gullerud. They don't speak for everyone who did the program but I think their testimony is powerful and indicative of some common themes. I want to thank them very much for being willing to put themselves out there to share their thoughts.

I only interviewed white participants. Why did I do that? Congregants of color from First U participated in the program but frankly they are weary of having to educate their white peers. I'll share some messages on their behalf and at their request, later in the sermon.

The first question I asked Arne and Sheryl was "what surprised you?"

*[Clip 1]*

Many folks from First U talked about having a sense of frustration because every time that they get to thinking deeply about racism, they feel like they are starting all over again. It speaks to how challenging it is to reexamine our beliefs as our understanding deepens.

I then asked "did the experience challenge your sense of identity?"

*[Clip 2]*

This is a really important lesson to consider as we strive to become a more diverse church. We need to consider if there are requirements of whiteness that this church imposes on our members of color? Are there unspoken expectations about dress, about speech, about clapping during services, about how kids should behave, about what is considered important? Every church has a culture and we need to consider whether our culture is truly welcoming or not.

I then asked Arne and Sheryl what they think they need next?

*[Clip 3]*

Arne is referring to an interview between Resma Manekem, the author of *My Grandmother's Hands* and Robin DeAngelo. When a white person approaches a person of color and leads with "let's talk about race", that white person is saying to that person of color that they only see their skin color, or that their skin color defines who they are. It flattens them into one specific part of their identity.

Let's go back to the conversation.

*[Clip 4]*

It's important here to consider the needs of everyone involved. To be very honest, POC don't need more practice being around white folks. As minorities, they get that all the time. And as I've mentioned before it's not their job to make white folks feel comfortable.

Being an anti-racist church isn't about being a diverse church. Being anti-racist church means understanding our own identities and recognizing the ways that we have internalized white supremacy, and how we act that out. Arne articulates this well in the next clip.

*[Clip 5]*

Well put, Arne. I then asked Sheryl and Arne how they think we should proceed as a congregation.

*[Clip 6]*

Arne's comment reminds me of the UU hymn, *Bring Many Names*. There's a line in one of the stanzas that goes "Young, growing God, eager still to know, willing to be changed by what you've started." It's a question we all need to ask ourselves as we move deeper into racial justice work. Are we willing to be changed by what we started?

I've been charged by our POC caucus to convey an important message. I've been asked by them to carry this message, because the congregants of color in this congregation correctly see white racism as a white problem. So I'm speaking now as a white person to the white members of this congregation.

It's hard to be a person of color in this congregation. It's a lot better than it was twenty years ago but to enter our spaces as non-white person is to encounter microaggression after microaggression. Congregants of color sometimes feel like their identities are minimized on the one hand, while on the other hand sometimes they are asked to speak for the entire Black or Latino community. They are tired and sometimes angry. In church, we invite people to bring

their whole selves, their most vulnerable selves to this sacred space and when someone carelessly says “I don’t see you as Latino” it hurts to the very core. Our congregants of color love the UU life-affirming theology, but the experience of being in church is challenging. White folks, I love you, but we need to do better.

The measure of our antiracist stance in this church isn’t how many POC belong to First U. I hope that we can create such a welcoming, culturally competent church that POC come visit and stay, but that’s beside the point. To paraphrase Rev. Mark Morrison Reed, if white congregations want to be diverse because it makes them feel better about themselves, then they are just continuing to center the experience and feelings of white people

My prayer for this congregation is that we can center the experience and feelings of POC for a change and acknowledge that what really matters is how comfortable POC are when they sit in First U’s worship services, and meetings, and social gatherings. It’s the experience of POC that this congregation needs to focus on, not on the comfort of white folks like me.

I imagine that this is painful to hear. I’m not saying that we white folks in this congregation have a flaw in character or are selfish. I’m saying that because we have marinated in white supremacy all our lives, regardless of where we grew up, we have blind spots.

Our congregants of color tell me that they are encouraged by the work that people in this congregation are doing. They say that things are getting better. But we are far from there yet, and it’s not up to them to lead the effort to change. It’s up to us white folks.

I promised joy in this sermon but the best that I can offer is hope. And I asked Arne and Sheryl where they find hope.

*[Clip 7]*

I want to repeat my thanks to Sheryl and Arne who put themselves out there so we could all learn from their experiences. They took a huge risk jumping into this messy and fraught subject and I’m grateful for their courage and candor. Thank you Sheryl and Arne.

In our reading today, we’re reminded of questions that have no right to go away. This is where we find ourselves now. It’s hard but there is so much beauty and grace in this work. May we continue to answer the questions that are asked of us.

Amen and blessed be.

*[Spotlight to Casey]*

SEND TO POC CAUCUS