

International Women's Day

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reflection: “Our Shared Liberation”

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine,
then let us work together.”

These words are often attributed to Lilla Watson,
an Indigenous artist and activist from Australia.

And while she famously said these words in 1985 at the United Nation's
Decade of Women Conference in Nairobi, she is quick to ensure that credit
goes to an Aboriginal Activists Group that developed them collectively in
Queensland, in the 1970s.

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine,
then let us work together.”

These are challenging words, meant to call us beyond charity to mutuality.

Powerful words about the need to recognize
the interdependent web of life, to which we all belong.

Compelling words that call us to see that we are all in this together,
even though we sometimes mightily resist that most basic fact of our lives.

Now, this does not, of course, mean that we all start out
on the same footing in life, or that we each have the same opportunities.

By most any measure, it would be difficult to describe the reality of our lived
human experience on this planet as being truly equal.

Yet, the sacred value of every life is the very same.

At the core of our faith as Unitarians is a deep commitment to uphold the worth and dignity of all people.

That commitment calls us together, and it calls us to action.

It calls us to moments when we rise to say that the violation or the degradation of another's worth and dignity cannot and will not stand.

Such moments occur in lecture halls and around the dinner table. They happen in locker rooms and in board rooms. In letters to the editor and through petitions to our government. On the streets and in voting booths.

They happen when we speak up and speak out for genuine justice.

They happen when we show up, to take our place in solidarity.

They unfold in a moment of human connection when we affirm that our destinies on this good green earth are forever bound together.

Moments when we put to flight the dangerous notion of "us versus them," and overcome the destructive denial that our lives, our well-being, and ultimately our liberation are irrevocably tied together.

This weekend, hundreds of Unitarian Universalists have gathered with people from across the United States and around the world in the tiny town of Selma, Alabama.

They have come to mark the 50th anniversary of events that would become a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1965, after Jimmie Lee Jackson, a church deacon and civil rights activist, was beaten by police, and then shot by an officer during a peaceful protest, a dramatic march was called to move from Selma to the state capital.

At that first march, on March 7th, hundreds of peaceful protesters were turned back and beaten bloody on the now iconic Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Two days later, a vastly larger crowd arrived and tried to march again.

Martin Luther King, Jr. had put out a call to clergy across the US to join them. A disproportionately large number of UU ministers heeded that call.

On short notice, they travelled to Alabama from across the country.

Blessedly, this congregation paid the way for my predecessor John Morgan to go down, as well, ensuring that First Unitarian Toronto was there in common cause, too.

On the night of the second march, James Reeb, one of the Unitarian Universalist ministers who had made the trip was walking through the town with two colleagues after dinner, when they were attacked by segregationists.

Reeb, only 38, was struck unconscious and never recovered, dying in hospital a few days later.

Another Unitarian Universalist, Viola Luizzo, a lay person from Detroit, had also answered the call to march in solidarity.

The 39-year-old mother of five spent weeks shuttling activists around the state, from one protest to another and then back to the airport or bus station, on to their homes or universities.

While transporting a young black man in her car, she was shot and killed by the Ku Klux Klan.

Countless lives were lost in the quest for full civil rights.

And, of course, white lives or Unitarian Universalist lives are no more valuable than any other.

But the deaths of James Reeb and Viola Luizzo did help galvanizing President Johnson and the US Congress to take swift action on voting rights.

I share this timely story today as a reminder of our history.

Moments when the people who've gone before us in this tradition learned in a profound way that solidarity comes sometimes at a terrible cost.

Yet moments when our forebears affirmed the bedrock truth that the liberation of one people is the liberation of all people.

It might be tempting to dismiss these stories as belonging to an entirely different time.

But what causes us to really believe we live in less crucial or less tumultuous times?

The healing of the world is nowhere near complete, and justice remains a far-too-distant goal.

There is still so much work to be done to build the Eden, of which the poet spoke.

It involves recognizing that a day like this, when we celebrate International Women's Day, isn't only about women, but about us all.

It involves realizing that murdered and missing Native women aren't simply an "Aboriginal issue," but an issue of vital concern to each and every one of us in this country.

It involves giving serious thought to the kind of world we want to live in, and then doing what is within our power to bring that world into being.

We who quest for a just and peace world can be "idle no more" when a call for solidarity is sounded.

Let us then look for ways in our every day to affirm the worth and dignity of every person.

In the face of violence and inequality, let us find our voice and take up the chant of recent months, affirming that black lives matter.

And let us add to the chorus that Native lives matter.
And South Asian lives.
And Syrian lives, and Nigerian lives.
Ukrainian lives and Russian lives.
Israeli lives, and Palestinian lives.

Let us sing out that women's lives matter,
And the lives of girls.
And the lives of boys and men.
And people who are genderqueer.

That single lives, and married lives, and divorced lives matter.

Let us make clear that queer lives matter,
and the lives of straight people, too!

Let us say that young lives matter, and old lives, and lives in middle-age.

Let us cry out that lives lived in poverty matter.
And the lives of the dispossessed, and the incarcerated.
And the lives of refugees of all types.

That homeless lives and housed lives both matter.

That differently-abled lives matter.

Let us state that immigrant lives matter,
And the lives of stalwart citizens, as well.

Let us affirm that Muslim lives matter as much as Christian lives,
or Atheist, or Pagan, or Buddhist lives.

With all of our being, let us declare that all lives matter,
with absolutely no exceptions.

Because, my friends, the ultimate liberation of us all,
depends on the freedom of every single person on this earth.

Working together, then, may we strive on to make it so.

Amen.