

***“A People So Bold”***  
***First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto***  
***A Sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon***  
***on 22 May 2016***

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.

Imagine 15 days camped out in a public space in the cold, rain, and snow. Without heat, electricity, or privacy.

But imagine creativity and ingenuity in this tent city too: protestors creating almost a little village of sorts—with people preparing meals, playing a variety of different kinds of music, arranging for transportation, and coordinating programming. Clearly they had learned a thing or two from the Occupy Movement from a few years back.

On the night of day two of the encampment the police tried to shut it down using force. The peaceful protestors continued resisting non-violently, and the police backed down.

For 15 days beginning on March 20<sup>th</sup> of this year Black Lives Matter Toronto members occupied the courtyard of police headquarters on College Street waiting for Toronto Police Chief Mark Saunders to come out and speak with them. He refused. The group was seeking to have the police identify the officers involved in the shooting last summer of 45-year-old Sudanese immigrant Andrew Loku, who was shot dead when he refused to drop a hammer, and to have a provincial review of the Special Investigations Unit (SIU), the civilian agency that investigates interactions between police and the public.

Black Lives Matter Toronto did get a surprise public audience with Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, however, after breaking their sit-in by organizing a “funeral march” to her office on Queen’s Park. Wynne acknowledged that, “we still have systemic racism in our society,” an

admission that appeased the crowd. Only a few days before, on March 31<sup>st</sup>, a group of protestors had set up a vigil for Loku outside Wynne's home and had invited her to join them in their tent for cheese and crackers!

It took 15 days of trying to get noticed like this for Black Lives Matter Toronto to have some of their demands met. It wasn't easy. Young people of colour standing up for justice, saying they've had enough. They want to have the same rights as everyone else. They want cops who kill black people to be prosecuted. They want thorough investigations of these crimes and an end to racial profiling and carding. They want an end to systemic violence against black lives. *They want justice, and they want it now.*

After they dismantled their tent city, the protestors left a sign behind saying: "You are on notice. Your anti-blackness has been exposed. We are not finished." Their presence outside police headquarters may be gone, but their force as a movement will persevere.

Because black people make up only three percent of the population of Canada, and it can be hard to organize across such a large country, the movement really needs non-black allies. As Janaya Khan, one of the co-founders of Black Lives Matter Toronto, says, the movement should be "'one where we recognize black liberation as an integral pillar to liberation as a whole.'"<sup>1</sup> The protestors at police headquarters were joined variously by indigenous youth and some white supporters, but their actions got little coverage overall in the media. Were you aware of their actions??

*Do black lives matter? I want you to sit with this question this morning. Why should black lives matter to you?*

Most Canadians think that anti-black racism is more of an American issue. After all, shootings of black men and women by police in the US seem much more commonplace, and the Black Lives Matter movement got started in America and is the strongest and most visible there. Racism exists in Canada too, of course, even if it's more subtle in nature. As Black Lives Matter

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<sup>1</sup> Tarama Khandaker, "This Is What Sets Toronto's BLM Movement Apart from America's," *Vice News*, April 6, 2016: <https://news.vice.com/article/this-is-what-sets-torontos-black-lives-matter-movement-apart-from-americas>.

Toronto co-founder Rodney Diverlus claims: “‘It’s under the surface and so covert that often, we brush it off as reality, but really it ends up taking the form of micro-aggressions and more subtle forms of oppression.’”<sup>2</sup> In mid-April a Forum Research poll was released showing that a majority of Torontonians (55%) support the Black Lives Matter Toronto movement.<sup>3</sup> The poll’s results are certainly encouraging, but what does “support” mean? Is that just passive affirmation of the group’s cause? What are we as people of faith called *to do*?

As Unitarians we stand in a long tradition of social reformers and radical freethinkers—people who worked to end injustice and inequality in society and to bring about change. We are rightfully proud of this heritage that includes abolitionists, advocates for women’s rights, and those demanding prison and educational reform. However, our history around anti-racism has been flawed to say the least.

In his book *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, UU minister Paul Rasor points out how white silence has often prevailed, even among white theologians and religious liberals. Professor James Cone has identified white guilt and the issue of accountability as major reasons why white liberal theologians avoid talk of racism. They want to think of themselves as inherently good and resent being called racists; at the same time they are also reluctant to confront black rage.<sup>4</sup>

Another major factor Rasor cites as affecting our ability to do anti-racist work is our not having a theology of evil. As he writes, “[T]o approach [racism] as a human construct and nothing more misses its profound power over us. We are tempted to think it can be dismantled with the right motivation, proper analysis, and good programs. It will take all of these and more; but by themselves, they are not enough.”<sup>5</sup> We need to constantly examine our white privilege and to grasp the fact that *none of us are exempt from absorbing the evil of white supremacy. It’s the water we swim in, the air we all breathe.*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Joyce-Battersby, “Majority of Torontonians support Black Lives Matter: poll,” *Toronto Star*, April 14, 2016: <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2016/04/14/majority-of-torontonians-support-black-lives-matter-poll.html>

<sup>4</sup> Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2005) 174.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 176.

This work demands that we engage in *soul work* that can lead to spiritual transformation. Our liberal tradition, though, with its emphasis on rationality, causes us to resist going too deep spiritually.<sup>6</sup> But it's essential that we do this difficult work if we want to dismantle systemic racism.

Finally, Rasor highlights our liberal ambivalence around community as another thing that's held us back from doing meaningful anti-racist work. We long for community, and yet don't want to give anything up for it. Liberalism tends to stress ideals like autonomy and self-reliance at the expense of a more "love-based understanding of community [that] would extend the individual and expand the self outward *toward* the Other."<sup>7</sup>

To matter is to have value and meaning. We claim to believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, regardless of the colour of their skin, their age, their able-bodiedness, or whom they love. Are there moments when we don't manage to live up to the idealism of our first principle? Are there aspects of discussions of race that make you uncomfortable? Is it that they force us to look more closely at our own positions of relative power and privilege? Seattle-based anti-racism trainer Robin DiAngelo has coined the term "white fragility" to describe "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves"<sup>8</sup> such as argumentation, silence, or running away from the situation. You may have these reactions at times. The important thing is to bring awareness to them.

What I want to insist on this morning is that our faith demands that we build lasting relationships with communities of colour. Following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, which was the catalyst for the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, polls revealed that black and white Americans had very different experiences of policing and racism. Moreover, what pollsters discovered was that white people had few, if any, friends of colour. As Robert P. Jones writes in the *Atlantic Monthly*: "[T]he chief obstacle to having an intelligent, or even intelligible, conversation across

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 179.

<sup>8</sup> Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3:3 (2011) 57.

the racial divide is that on average white Americans live in communities that face far fewer problems and talk mostly to other white people.”<sup>9</sup>

PRRI’s 2013 American Values Survey showed that white social networks were an astonishing 91 percent white. On average, white social networks are only one percent black, and nearly three-quarters of whites have entirely white social networks with no minority presence. Now I realize that these are American statistics and that Canadian society is organized differently along racial lines, but for those of you who are white, I would ask you to reflect on how diverse your network is and how that may affect how you view Black Lives Matter and its concerns. Now I’m not talking about friending a few token “fill in the blank” people different than us on Facebook. Rather I’m talking about forming and maintaining close relationships.

We can look back to nineteenth-century Unitarian history for an inspiring example of an unusual, transformative friendship across racial lines forged by one of our ancestors just across the lake in Rochester, New York. There’s a lovely statue of Frederick Douglass and Unitarian Susan B. Anthony in a park there called “Let’s Have Tea.” Douglass, a self-educated ex-slave and journalist who went on to become one of the greatest abolitionists and orators of the century, and Anthony, the most strident advocate for women’s suffrage in America, were close friends for nearly 50 years. Imagine! From the start of their friendship Douglass became an active supporter of women’s rights. Anthony organized women in the abolitionist cause and supported the Underground Railroad, one of whose stops was Douglass’ Rochester home.

Not surprisingly for two such powerful leaders, their relationship was not without conflict and suffered a rift when Douglass insisted at the end of the Civil War that black men should be given the right to vote before women. The Fifteenth Amendment was passed in 1870 guaranteeing all citizens the right to vote, regardless of race, but women were still denied suffrage. In a bold act of civil disobedience, Anthony voted illegally in the election of 1872 and was arrested and brought to trial. Richard S. Gilbert argues in his book *The*

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<sup>9</sup> Robert P. Jones, “Self-Segregation: Why It’s So Hard for Whites to Understand Ferguson,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 21, 2014: <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/self-segregation-why-its-hard-for-whites-to-understand-ferguson/378928/>.

*Prophetic Imperative* that Anthony understood “perhaps more than any other reformer of the nineteenth century”<sup>10</sup> the nature of systemic change, whether she was working as a pacifist, seeking an end to capital punishment, or organizing women workers. Arguably, it was through her friendship with Douglass that she did some of her deepest soul work around racial justice. Their friendship endured some 20 years after their disagreement over the Fifteenth Amendment. In fact, Douglass appeared at a National Council of Women meeting the day he died, where he sat next to Anthony, who was one of their leaders. Consonant with Carter Heyward’s feminist relational theology summed up in today’s reading, their friendship was based in an active, committed justice-seeking form of love steeped in possibilities for mutual growth. We could all use more of this kind of love in our lives!

Have you made space in your life for cultivating such relationships? How would you accomplish this? What, if anything, is preventing you from doing this kind of soul work? Of course it’s most helpful if it’s a peer-to-peer relationship like that between Douglass and Anthony—one in which there’s no major power differential.

Now I’m not some sort of saint when it comes to racism. I have to do this work constantly too. It’s never-ending. One of my most meaningful experiences in seminary was taking Dr. James Cone’s class on James Baldwin during my final semester. For the first time in my life (and I have a lot of education!) I found myself in a classroom in which I was in the minority. I learned so much from and was repeatedly challenged by my brilliant black colleagues, who shared their stories of oppression and struggle but also of resilience and hope. We read together the work of, in my view, America’s greatest critic of racism, whose work, sadly, is still all too relevant today.

The class changed my life because it forced me to deal with truths I had long dodged. I looked hard at the explicit racism I was taught by my parents on the Eastern Shore of Maryland and the tragic loss of relationships with people of colour that resulted. For decades I never questioned my own segregated life. I identified as an upper middle class white liberal but had virtually no relationship to the black community or to my own white

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<sup>10</sup> Richard S. Gilbert, *The Prophetic Imperative* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2000) 48.

supremacy. (And yes, I discussed this in a presentation I gave while Dr. Cornel West was present!) It wasn't until I joined a Unitarian Universalist congregation some 14 years ago that I began to do some of this hard soul work. I'm grateful for having started to wake up then, but in the words of Black Lives Matter activists, we must "stay woke."

Let's be bold enough to work on long-term relationships that keep us accountable to our own racism. The anti-racist work we engage in must be spiritually-grounded and relational. Let us humble ourselves and be real. Let's not be afraid of stumbling and failing. Let's look closely at our (white) guilt and shame and not be afraid of sitting with those harder feelings in relationship. This will be challenging life-long work but entirely worth it because it'll be further proof that ours is a living tradition uniting head and heart through justice-making love. To paraphrase some of the words of our closing hymn, let's build a land where *all* of us are free.

Blessed be and amen.