

Worship Transcript for July 4, 2021

The United States of Reparations

Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

On this day, the United States commemorates the Declaration of Independence. However, it is time for this country to create a new declaration - one that involves emotional, spiritual and financial reparations to descendants of slavery, America's Original Sin. The time is now - and accomplishing this will truly make July 4th a day of celebration for all.

Announcement Slides

Music: "Love Is Love" by Abbie Betinis, sung by the entire music program at All Souls (7 ensembles!)

Prelude: Ella's Song by Berniece Johnson Reagon, Sung by Women's 8 Ensemble

We who believe in freedom cannot rest

We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes (repeat)

Until the killing of black men, black mother's sons

Is as important as the killing of white men, white mother's sons

We who believe in freedom cannot rest

We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes

That which touches me most is that I had a chance to work with people

Passing onto others that which was passed onto me

We who believe in freedom cannot rest

We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes

The older I get, the better I know that the secret of my going on

Is when the reins are in the hands of the young who dare to run against the storm

Not needing to clutch for power, not needing light just to shine on me

I need to be one in a number as we stand against tyranny

We who believe in freedom cannot rest

We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes

Struggling myself don't mean a whole lot, I've come to realize

That teaching others to stand up and fight is the only way our struggle survives

I'm a woman who speaks in a voice and I must be heard

At times I can be quite difficult, I'll bow to no man's word

We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes (repeat)

Call To Worship, Rev. Kathleen & Judith

We gather together this Independence Day to declare that not all are free and that we shall not rest until that day comes; Judith: We gather together this Inter-Dependence Day, to recognize how deeply and inextricably our lives and our mutual liberation are dependent upon one another. Come, this day - let us celebrate our inter-dependence. Come - let the light of this day shine upon all of us. Come, let us worship together.

Put your hands now on a chalice, a candle, a flame and join with our chalice lighters, Sunu Chandy, Erika Symmonds, Satya Symmonds Chandy and Erika's Grandmother, Elaine Osourne!

Chalice Lighting

This light we kindle is set in the lamp of our history.

We inherit this free faith from the brave and gentle, fierce and outspoken hearts and minds that have come before us.

May this light illuminate the truth of our past and the hope of our future.

Let us be worthy inheritors of this faith and through the work of our hands, minds and hearts, pass it boldly to a new generation.

HYMN: My Life Flows On In Endless Song

My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation
I hear the real though far-off hymn that hails a new creation
Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing
It sounds an echo in my soul: how can I keep from singing?

What though the tempest 'round me roars, I know the truth, it liveth
What though the darkness 'round me close, songs in the night it giveth
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging
Since love prevails in heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

When tyrants tremble as they hear the bells of freedom ringing
When friends rejoice both far and near, how can I keep from singing?
To prison cell and dungeon vile, our thoughts to them are winging
When friends by shame are undefiled, how can I keep from singing?

Welcome Kathleen Rolenz & Judith Bauer

How can we keep from singing indeed! Welcome to this national and international global congregation! I'm Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, pronouns she-hers and serving as the Interim Senior Minister at All Souls Church Washington DC--located at the intersecting neighborhoods of Columbia Heights, Mt. Pleasant and Adams Morgan neighborhoods in the District of Columbia. However, as many of you have discovered, this platform has allowed us to be a church without walls. So, we welcome you to this time and this space and we encourage you to continue to share your name and where on the planet you are right now in the chat.

This service kicks off a new partnership that the churches of the greater DC area have created. Our sibling congregations of River Road, Cedar Lane, UU Church of Arlington, UU Church of Fairfax and All Souls are collaborating this summer to bring you the best of our music, preaching and worship. We are inviting not only members of our own congregation to attend these services, but anyone is welcome to experience the rich diversity of worship that we'll be offering this summer.

And I'd like to add my own welcome to each one of you. My name is Judith Bauer, (pronouns are she/hers) and All Souls Church DC has been my spiritual home for over 27 Years, and I'm serving as today's Worship Associate. For almost two hundred years, All Souls Church Unitarian has been a diverse, spirit-growing, justice seeking community.

In an effort to acknowledge and support Indigenous communities, it is important to recognize the land on which All Souls Church stands. The closest tribe was Nacotchtank, (Nah-KOTCH-tank) from which the name Anacostia is derived. They were part of the Piscataway (pis-SCAT-a-way) group of tribes. We acknowledge that indigeneous peoples were here before us, are here with us now, and will continue to be with us, as we look forward to the future. Let's take a moment of silence to reflect on whose land we each reside, in our individual and collective locations around the U.S. and our planet Earth.

[Silence]

While our service has been online, we started a new tradition which we call "beholding." While music plays, we invite you to turn on gallery view and scroll through all the faces on the screen. Take a moment to behold one another - celebrating the fact that we are here - as part of an interdependent web of worship. Give thanks for this gathering - for this time - and this day. Come, let us behold one another now.

Beholding Music
Nina Cried Power

Story for All Ages: The Trustworthy Traveler

Dolores Miller: Welcome everyone. I'm Dolores Miller the Director of Religious Education. The All Souls theme for the summer is "Journey". And the theme of today's service is "Reparation". To repair or make something better. So our story is about a journey that sets things right.

A child was born in a small village long ago. She loved watching the other children play but she rarely joined in their games. (videos of playing) Mostly she liked to wonder.

Aedyn:(Looking thoughtful) How many grains of sand are there in the desert? (Pause) How far away is the sun? (Pause) Why do we exist?

Dolores: Her parents brought her to 1 scholar after another in hope that her curiosity might be satisfied. She learned geometry from one (video), calligraphy from another (video), and poetry from yet another (video). Still the child remained curious, and full of longing to learn. If only she could go to the city and study at the university.

But the city was far from home, an expensive carriage ride, and dangerous journey with many thieves along the way. And her family was poor. The girl put her dream aside.

Though her mother was relieved, she didn't feel quite right about this. She thought that if her child could study and learn more, a girl like her daughter would be even more capable of making the world a better place. So, she took on all the extra washing (video) and sewing that she could manage. When there was enough money, she sewed it inside her daughter's coat so that it would be safe. (video) She kissed her loving daughter and said:

Traci: Remember my child, you must always be kind to others, and you must always be honest. Then you will live a good life.

Dolores: Riding in a carriage was a new and exciting adventure! (looking from side to side as if at new sights) She began to wonder:

Aedyn: How many turns of the carriage wheels is it to the city? (Pause) Why does the moon change shape? (Pause) Why are some people mean? (Pause)

Dolores: on the 3rd or 4th day of their journey, a band of thieves ambushed the caravan.

Radley: Give us your jewelry.

Thea: And empty your pockets. (Other travelers hand things over)

Dolores: The people did as they were told. The girl had no jewelry and nothing in her pockets. Before leaving the thieves demanded:

Radley: If you have anything else, speak up!

Dolores: Everyone in the carriage went quiet. But the girl spoke up.

Aedyn: Wait, I have 50 coins.

Dolores: Thieves looked at the girl and laughed.

Thea: You wish!

Dolores: The girl began to rip the stitches from her coat and held up the coins.

Radley: Why did you tell us?

Thea: We wouldn't have known.

Aedyn: I am a girl who keeps her promises. And I promised my mother that I would always be honest.

Dolores: The thieves looked at her in shock. Then they handed back all the things they had taken and walked away. The girl went on to study for many years and became a great scholar and leader for justice.

And as for the thieves, they were inspired by the girl's courage and honesty. They gave up their thieving ways and began to work for the good of all. (Throwing down swords & masks and picking up protest signs.)

Pastoral Prayer.

Hello, I'm Rev. Louise Green, Minister of Congregational Care.

As we move into a time of meditation and prayer, I invite you to take a deep breath. Find your good seat, and the floor beneath your feet.

Bring to mind those people and situations that have been in your heart this week. You may choose to put names into the chat as well. I invite you to pray or keep silence with me...

Holy One of many names, Spirit of Life, we come to this sacred circle with a range of emotions.

Some are celebrating 4th of July reunions with those not seen for many months. Some of us are mourning the loss of loved ones no longer present. Some are feeling fortunate in good health, while others of us are actively facing challenges of body and spirit. Much in our daily life rattles us, and we worry about the future for ourselves, and coming generations.

On this 4th of July, we share a poignant sense of the harm that has occurred and the need for restoration. We honor and remember the best of what this country can be, and those ideals that are powerful in their yearning for freedom. We lament the many ways that we have fallen short of those national aspirations and worked actively against them. In particular, we name the painful legacy of enslaving African peoples and the many violations of First Nations and indigenous peoples.

We hold this worship time together as a way to remember our highest values and our best selves. In the power of community, we find sustenance and inspiration, and a way to take collective action in the world. May we seek the common good that truly brings justice to all. Blessed Be and Amen.

Spirit of Life (performed live by All Souls Choir)

Fuente de amor, ven hacia mi
Y al corazon cantale tu compasion
Sopla al volar, sube en la mar
Hasta moldear la justicia de la vida
Arraigame, liberame
Fuente de amor, ven a mi, ven a mi

Spirit of life, come unto me
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea,
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice
Roots hold me close, wings set me free,
Spirit of life, come to me, come to me.

Moment of Silence + Chalice Viewing

READING: Declaration of Inter-Dependence, by Richard Blanco

Such has been the patient sufferance...

We're a mother's bread, instant potatoes, milk at a checkout line.

We're her three children, pleading for bubble gum and their father.

We're the three minutes she steals to page through a tabloid needing to believe even star's lives are joyful and bruised.

Our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury...

We're her second job serving an executive absorbed in his Wall Street Journal at a sidewalk café shadowed by skyscrapers.

We're the shadows of the fortune he won and the family he lost.

We're his loss and the lost.

We're a father in a coal town who can't mine a life anymore because too much and too little has happened, for too long.

A history of repeated injuries and usurpations...

We're the grit of his main street's blacked-out windows and graffitied truth.

We're a street in another town lined with royal palms, at home with a Peace Corps couple who collect African art.

We're their dinner party talk of wines, wielded picket signs and burned draft cards.

We're what they know: it's time to do more than read the New York Times, buy fair-trade coffee and organic corn.

We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor...

We're the dead, we're the living amid the flicker of vigil candlelight.

We're in a dim cell with an inmate reading Dostoevsky.

We're his crime, his sentence, his amends, we're the mending of ourselves and others.

We're a Buddhist serving soup at a shelter alongside a stockbroker.

We're each other's shelter and hope: a widow's fifty cents in a collection plate and a golfer's ten-thousand-dollar pledge for a cure.

We hold these truths to be self-evident...

We're the cure for hatred caused by despair. We're the good morning of a bus driver who remembers our name, the tattooed man who gives up his seat on the subway.

We're every door held open with a smile when we look into each other's eyes the way we behold the moon.

We're the moon.

We're the promise of one people, one breath declaring to one another.

I see you. I need you. I am you.

Sermon: The United States of Reparations Rev. Rolenz

I am honored today to speak you today as one of the ministers of All Souls Church, Unitarian – the UU congregation located just three miles from the nation's Capital and the National Mall where America comes to celebrate our Declaration of Independence each 4th of July. You heard lines from the Declaration of Independence in Richard Blanco's Poem "Declaration of Inter-Dependence" those stirring words which so many of us learned in school, such as: "We hold these truths to be self-evident" penned by that most famous progenitor of liberty and unrepentant slave owner – Thomas Jefferson. This paradox that today permeates our celebration of America's birthday makes this a complicated occasion for preaching a sermon. For as much as I want to celebrate this day with you, I must look first at the stories we're told about America and the ones that are not – those stories which are ever unfolding, relentlessly, in our collective American consciousness.

So this 4th of July, let's begin by remembering a speech that that should also be heard every 4th of July by another American statesman –Frederick Douglass. When asked to make a speech on July 4th, Douglass said this: [quote] " Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn."

What then might make this 4th of July holiday one that is worthy of our celebration? Truth-telling is part of it. The United States must publicly acknowledge two facts – first, that the United States came into being as colonial expansion of European powers that overpowered and displaced the indigenous Americans and second, that the wealth of the country was built on the backs of enslaved Africans. I submit that when the United States of America fully embraces the need for – and makes good on - Moral, Emotional, Spiritual and Financial Reparations to the descendants and communities of those enslaved and displaced – then – and only then may all Americans truly deserve this holiday.

What could this mean? In his 2014 ground-breaking essay for the Atlantic “The Case for Reparations,” Ta-Neheshi Coates said it this way: [quote] “Reparations would mean the end of scarfing hot dogs on the Fourth of July while denying the facts of our heritage. To celebrate freedom and democracy while forgetting America’s origins in a slavery economy is patriotism a la carte. Reparations would mean the end of yelling “Patriotism” while waving a Confederate flag. Reparations would mean a revolution of American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.” 1 [endquote]

The story that many of us are taught and told is one of American exceptionalism and frankly, perfectionism. The current legislation making the rounds of red states that would forbid the teaching of Critical Race Theory is founded on a lie, a lie best summarized in a tweet by former Vice President Mike Pence on June 3 of this year. He wrote: [quote]“America is not a racist Nation – America is the most just, righteous, noble and inclusive Nation that ever existed on the face of the earth.” [endquote] This tweet represents part of the reason for America’s failure to grapple with not only racism as one of the central existential crisis of our time, but it also represents a narrative that must be confronted NOW; personally, locally institutionally and nationally. And when Americans can embrace emotional, spiritual, political and financial reparations for “America’s Original Sin,” slavery –only then-- can we as a nation truly embrace this holiday fully and without reservation. Come on, demands the poet Sekou Sundiata, and Bring on the Reparations.”

Before I continue, I want to acknowledge that there’s more than one American original sin: the impact of colonization on the Native Americans, the stealing of their land and the intentional genocide of indigenous peoples is another reparation owed by this nation. This sermon today is informed by the Reparations Movement for African descendants of the enslaved, but the same truths must be stated about what is owed to indigenous people

When Ta-Nehesi Coates wrote “The Case for Reparations” he said that his original intention was to stop people from laughing about the topic of reparations. The United States’ sense of exceptionalism, the persistent amnesia and denial about the effects of generational trauma on this country have enabled white America to scoff at the very idea that descendants of American slaves are due reparations.

Most of us are probably familiar with the arguments against reparations. They can be encapsulated by this quote by Senator Mitch McConnell when he said : “I don’t think reparations for something that happened 150 years ago, when none of us currently living are responsible, is a good idea. We’ve tried to deal with our original sin of slavery by fighting a civil war, by passing landmark civil rights legislation. We elected an African American president.”

In his memoir, the Senator describes his own ancestry as descending from a long line of “hard working and often colorful McConnell’s.” What he doesn’t yet acknowledge is that a recent deep dive into ancestry and census records revealed that two of McConnells great-great grandfathers enslaved at least 14 human beings in Limestone County, Alabama, aging in range from two years old to twenty? . How is it that Senator McConnell doesn’t know about this colorful part of his history?

Ah, perhaps I shouldn’t be so hard on Senator McConnell, because if I am going to tell the truth here today, I’ve got to tell the truth about myself too. The truth is that before Coates’ article was published, I too was skeptical about the practical reality of making reparations. I’m a progressive pragmatist, which means that I want to translate the lofty ideals of liberal religion and make them real through policies,

programs, legislation and practices. My white supremacist indoctrinated mind asked the same questions that I heard so many others say: how exactly would reparations work? Would simply writing a check to individual descendants of the enslaved be effective? And how would you determine who is eligible? If you get a chance to listen to the podcast that I recommended called Reparations, the Big Payback, Episode Nine, entitled “Are You Black Enough for Reparations,” addresses this question directly and I think successfully. But my doubts about how this could work is an example of what white supremacy culture does to the mind and to the heart – it limits the very same imagination that Stacy Abrams identified in her General Assembly Ware lecture this past week as an essential ingredient for changing the status quo.

Here’s another truth - reparations are limited only by our imaginations - because there are many ways in which reparations can be implemented. There are rehabilitative reparations, that focuses on uplifting entire communities. There is the atonement model of reparations, linked to transformative justice, which makes apology and repair as central to the act of reparations. And, listen to this call for action, again by Ta-Nehesi Coates:: Reparations — by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences — is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely. ... What I’m talking about is more than recompense for past injustices — more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I’m talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.”

Come on, and Bring on the Reparations.

2020-2021 has been described as a year of “Racial Reckoning” as we witnessed the trauma of George Floyd’s death, the protests, the grief and the rage on the streets and the trial and sentencing of his murderer. But this reckoning has to be rooted in knowledge and history. It must include the full acceptance of our collective biography. And now, I am now speaking particularly to those among us who identify as Unitarian Universalists and to those of us who believe ourselves to be white.

The uncomfortable truth is that as a historically Euro-centric Association of congregations --Unitarian Universalism must reckon with our own history. Members of All Souls DC likely already know that our church was a spiritual home for John C. Calhoun, enslaver of human beings, ardent defender of slavery and chief architect of the political system that allowed slavery to exist.

In an as-yet unpublished manuscript, authored by Rev. Dr. Fred Muir, Muir cites three Unitarian leaders of international renown who actively promoted and furthered the belief in eugenics, the so-called scientific research effort to prove white supremacy, including the recommendation of forced human sterilization, [quote] “to prevent the birth and reproduction of these imperfect creatures...” [unquote] It is a devastating critique of how rationalism, racism and fake science furthered the belief in the superiority of the Unitarian faith.

Unitarian Universalists’ earliest attempt at reparations, which I call the White Controversy over Black Empowerment, resulted in the denomination seeking to re-negotiate and re-litigate a promise made by the General Assembly of 1 million dollars to the Black Affairs Council in 1968. This attempt at reparations was handled so badly that the wounds of that controversy reverberate in Unitarian Universalism today.

This past May, Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd offered a sermon built upon a yearlong research project by members of the River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation which investigated the history of the very ground upon which their congregation was founded. First, I just want to say to the members of that team who may be watching today – this area owes you a debt of gratitude for your extraordinary research. Although the details are not my story to tell, I can tell you that they uncovered irrefutable evidence that the very land where their beloved institution rests was in fact, owned by one of our region's most morally bankrupt and corrupt slaveholders.

The work done at River Road is an example of the kind of moral and spiritual undertaking that represents the first step in healing the wounds of America's racial past. It is what the beginning of a local and national conversation about reparations looks like, and it is starting to happen in many institutions and jurisdictions – in Evanston, IL, Amherst, MA, Asheville, NC. It is happening here in Washington DC, with the establishment of a task force to study the economic impact of slavery combined with a proposal to help Black Washingtonians. HB 40, championed for over 30 years by Representative John Conyers and now led by Sheila Jackson Lee of Houston, TX, with 173 Democratic co-sponsors. It has happened at Georgetown University – as undergraduate students voted to tax themselves to pay descendants of enslaved people.

All Souls Tulsa sponsored an Action of Immediate Witness in 2001 for reparations for their forebears involvement in the 1921 Race Massacre and has been on the frontlines of change in that community.

And in Unitarian Universalism's Commission on Institutional Change's Report – entitled "Widening the Circle of Concern" an entire chapter is dedicated to what Reparations would look like in our own Denomination. I have no doubt that in the year and years ahead, our local churches and national association of churches will engage in conversations about how we make institutional reparations. No one is laughing now so come on and bring on the reparations.

This is the spiritual renewal we – as a faith and we as a nation need now. I now believe that a national conversation must also be accompanied by plans for investment in black communities, in historically black education institutions, and in black leaders.

So instead of hot dogs and a la cart patriotism, what if the 4th of July was understood as a day of Moral Reckoning and Spiritual Renewal? Just as Martin Luther King's Birthday has been re-cast as a Day of Public Service – what if the 4th of July was re-imagined as a Day of Truth and Reparations? Notice I didn't say "Truth and Reconciliation" because without truth and moral, spiritual and financial reparations -- without repair, redress and reassurance of no further harm - there can be no full reconciliation between the American sin that created the economic apartheid which is America today and those harmed by that sin.

Let's not keep talking about the American Dream – but the American REALITY – because the way to heal is to reveal what's real – and that is what this Nation has not done yet. White America has for too long been like an alcoholic in denial about the devastating consequences of its actions. This country needs an intervention that begins with a full acknowledgement of damage done and a firm commitment to make amends.

With such a long history of denial, it may seem impossible – but , as they say in recovery circles, it works if you work it! But you have to work at it! Just like when you love someone – really love them – you see

them as perfectly imperfect. A work in progress. I love this country – and I agree with James Baldwin who said: “ I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”

This is how we take the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and make them templates for truth telling.

This is how, as Richard Blanco reminds us you love a country – acknowledging those aspirational statements of the world as it should be – AND the grit of the graffitied truths on construction site walls.

This is how you love a country – when we can look at each other and say “I see you, I am you, and I need you to survive.” Then and only then, may we look each other right in the eye, smile and say “Happy Fourth of July.”

ANTHEM: I Need You To Survive by Hezekiah Walker

I need you, you need me, we’re all a part of God’s body
Stand with me, agree with me, we’re all a part of God’s body
It is God’s will that every need be supplied
You are important to me, I need you to survive
You are important to me, I need you to survive

(repeat)

I pray for you, you pray for me
I love you, I need you to survive
I won’t harm you with words from my mouth
I love you, I need you to survive

(repeat)

It is God’s will that every need be supplied
You are important to me, I need you to survive

Offering Judith Bauer

We live in a state of independence and interdependence. We need one another. We know this. And even more - we need this faith of ours - this Unitarian Universalist tradition, which, in its current form has stood against tyranny and oppression of all kinds. We know this faith - like our democracy is imperfect and a work in progress - yet it continues to support and sustain the values which we hold dear; justice, equity, compassion; Freedom, liberty and liberation.

Today we invite you to give generously to your own congregation; or, if you wish, to give to All Souls Church Unitarian, whose ministry extends beyond the walls of any one congregation. To do this, you may click on the link in the chat or may text to give directly. We’ll take a minute for you to do that, and then, let’s join together, with our closing hymn “there is more love somewhere.” Please remain on mute.

HYMN: There is More Love Somewhere

There is more love somewhere,
There is more love somewhere
I'm gonna keep on till I find it
There is more love somewhere

There is more hope...

There is more peace...

There is more joy...

Benediction Kathleen Rolenz

Our closing words are given to us by the Rev. Dr. Bill Sinkford, who will be joining All Souls this fall once a month as our Minister in Residence:

We are a gentle and generous people, but let us not forget our anger.

May it fuel not only our commitment to compassion

but also our commitment to make fundamental changes.

Our vision of the Beloved Community must stand against a vision that would allow the privilege of the few to be accepted as just and even holy.

Our religious vision must again and again ask "who is my neighbor?" and strive always to include more and more of us.

As we intone the words that gave birth to this nation, "We the people..." we are, and we should be, both a gentle and an angry people. "Amen, Blessed Be - May it Be So!

Benediction in Music: I Remember, I Believe, by Bernice Johnson Reagon

I don't know how my mother walked her trouble down
I don't know how my father stood his ground
I don't know how my people survived slavery

I do remember, that's why I believe

I don't know how the rivers overflow their banks
I don't know how the snow falls and covers the ground
I don't know how the hurricane sweeps through the land every now and then
Standing in a rainstorm, I believe

I don't know how the angels woke me up this morning
I don't know how the blood still runs through my veins
I don't know how I rate to run for another day
Standing in a rainstorm, I believe

My God calls to me in the morning dew
The power of the universe knows my name
Gave me a song to sing, and sent me on my way
I raise my voice for justice, I believe