

The Speed of Justice

**A Sermon by Rev. Rob Keithan
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Delivered at All Souls Church on July 3, 2022**

CALL TO WORSHIP

For the promise of equality and freedom,
For principles articulated but not yet realized,
For grounding and solidarity in the face of oppression,
For love
And for the liberation of our world, our nation, and ourselves:
Come, let us worship together.

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light our chalice today as a symbol of connection with the past, the present, and the potential of Unitarian Universalism.

READING

Today's reading is from the Preamble to the Constitution. At a time when it seems so easily disregarded, let us remind ourselves of the promise, and potential, that it holds.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

SERMON

Well, friends. Tomorrow is Independence Day, but this is not a "Happy 4th of July" kind of time. This is more of a "WHAT THE HECK IS WRONG WITH OUR COUNTRY" kind of time. In just the last few weeks alone, the United States Supreme Court has done enormous damage to the cause of equality, freedom, and public safety in the United States. Although we knew that many, if not all, of those terrible decisions were coming, it still hurts. It's still cause for grief and lament and frustration and anger.

And, of course, it's also cause for organizing. As when Trump was elected in 2016, the question is not IF we will respond, but HOW we will respond.

Massive action is needed, yes. But what we do needs to be strategic, and it needs to be sustainable. We're in this mess because the far right has been very successfully organizing for decades, and we're not going to fix that with short-term, rapid response tactics. The

only way we can fix it is with long-term movement building that transforms our culture. Policy change and judicial change are important, yes, but ultimately anything that's won quickly or easily can also be lost quickly or easily. That's why culture change, achieved through movement-building, is necessary.

Take reproductive justice as an example. There's an immediate need to work for abortion access, given that it was just eliminated, or soon will be, in half the country. There's an urgency there, and there's much that UUs and UU congregations can do to help. But abortion access isn't the overall problem. First, the Roe v. Wade decision never guaranteed access to abortion; it just places limits on the restrictions states could impose. The reality is that many black and brown people, and people with low-incomes, have never had genuine access to abortion. Second, the conflict over abortion has always been about much more. The overall problem is that the far right has enough power to impose their ideology on everyone using the resources of the state.

The overall problem, I would argue, is a system of belief coupled with effective organizing that privileges whiteness, maleness, and extremist Christianity over everything else. In other words, it's colonialism. It's an insidious combination of racism, sexism, and religion, and though we wish it wasn't so, it pervades how liberal and progressive people of faith see the world and behave in the world as well. And so that's what I want to focus on today. How do we ensure that the work we do for justice doesn't unconsciously replicate the oppressive mindsets and practices that we're trying to eliminate?

And as Rev. Rebecca Parker, former President of Starr King UU Seminary once said, "challenging white supremacy is not something you check off your to do list." It's life-long work. It's hard work. It's soul work.

And here's a hard truth that I've come to firmly believe, after a lifetime of being a Unitarian Universalist and nearly 30 years of anti-racist organizing:

There is an inverse relationship between the speed at which we're moving and our ability to do the deep work of internal transformation. When we're going too fast, when we're trying to do too many things, and too quickly, we simply do not pay enough attention to how WE need to be changed by our work. When we're not intentional enough about acting differently, we're more likely to replicate the mindsets and practices of the oppressive dominant culture.

We've all heard the saying, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." It's often mis-attributed to Gandhi, but it's more accurate to say that it's derived from something he said.¹ Anyway, I think it's a good perspective, and it's easy for us to say yes! What would it really look like to do that, however?

¹ <https://medium.com/illumination-curated/gandhi-didnt-actually-ever-say-be-the-change-you-want-to-see-in-the-world-d65b92cf5db>

Here's another hard truth. I believe, as I think you do, that Unitarian Universalism's theology is inspiring and liberating. We have a faith based on love and inclusion, on curiosity and science, on reason, and justice. It's never been perfect, it'll never be perfect, but our beliefs and aspirations are amazing! And they appeal to a broad range of people with diverse identities!

However. However. While our theology is amazing and inclusive, the actual culture and practices in our congregations lag far beyond our ideals. Far too often, the atmosphere and feel of our congregations reflect too much of the oppressive dominant culture and not enough of our liberating theology. There are countless stories of people of color, transgender people, people with disabilities, and others trying out or congregations only to find that kinds of exclusion and bias that they are actively trying to escape.

If we are to become truly multicultural, multiracial, welcoming congregations then we have to do things differently. We have to. We're not being the change we want to see unless we are actively and consistently trying to change. It's not enough to have liberation as an end goal; liberation must inform how we do the work as well.

Here's a final truth: justice work is always, ALWAYS going to be both a sprint and a marathon simultaneously. There's always going to be urgent need, and there's always going to be larger, longer-term problems that we need to keep in mind as we do the urgent work.

It may be tempting, or perhaps unconscious, to focus only on one of these, as if only one matters. It's often easier to focus on the immediate need, and there are reasons for that. But we need to know this as well: sense of urgency and either/or thinking are both characteristics of white supremacy culture, according to the guidance given by Kenneth R. Jones and Tema Okun, which I commend to everyone ([Click here for a summary and link to the full article](#)).

The system wants us to focus only on the immediate because that's less of a threat to the system. The far right is thrilled to have us focused narrowly on abortion access, because it keeps us distracted from the fact that there's also waging a war against comprehensive sexuality education, birth control, childcare, health care, racial justice, and democracy in general.

So what do we need to do to carry out this deep internal change? There are many answers, of course, but I want to focus on just two. The first, as you've probably already gathered, is to SLOW DOWN. But for what, you may ask? The answer is simple: to build relationships. Because ultimately it's the relationships that are going to make the difference in the end.

Let me give you an example of what I mean.

In 2014, while working for the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, I was involved in two different state battles where conservatives were trying to amend their state constitutions to limit access to abortion. In Florida, where we expected to win, we had a nice website to engage clergy and people of faith in the campaign, we did sign-on letters,

and were an active part of a coalition. However, the work was fast and superficial. It was focused only on the amendment itself. We won the vote, but I literally can't remember the full names of anyone I worked with there, and I never worked with them again. The work achieved a short-term goal, but it didn't build lasting capacity.

Contrast that to the work in Tennessee, done in partnership with a woman of color founded and led reproductive justice group called SisterReach. We knew going in that we were going to lose. We didn't have a website. Part of our work was on the amendment, yes. But we also did multiple training events in different parts of the state that brought faith activists together to learn about reproductive justice and connect with each other.

And you know what? We lost. As we expected. But the relationships I built in that work continued after the campaign, and many of them continue to this day. Even though we lost, that work in Tennessee was exponentially more satisfying because it was grounded in authentic relationship and a common recognition that our work transcended that one campaign. We lost but we built capacity.

But you don't have to take it just from me. I was in Portland, OR, last week for a gathering of UU ministers and then the UUA General Assembly. Relationship was a central theme of nearly all the programming at both events.

Dandy Prinsloo, a young black woman featured in a General Assembly program about our values, principles, and covenant, said it clearly: "The only way to do this faith is in relationship with one another."

The preacher for Sunday morning worship (which you can watch online, and I highly recommend, <https://www.uua.org/ga/off-site/2022/sunday-worship>) Rev. Gretchen Haley put it this way. "There are plenty of places right now to get great content." Referring to books, podcasts, etc. "What we provide," she said "is a place of great belonging."

All this said, slowing down doesn't mean we can ignore the urgent work. It just means we need to do it differently. One way is to make sure that we're making time for relationships. Related to that, but not exactly the same, is to do the work collaboratively. Working in partnership isn't always a walk in the park; in my experience, collaboration always takes significant more time, and it can be frustrating and confusing because we're human and disagree and we have to work through it.

However. However, collaboration is almost always (1) more effective, (2) more fun, (3) more rewarding, and (4), for all of these previous reasons, it's more sustainable.

And of course, there is work that we, Unitarian Universalists, are called to do right now. The people and communities we care about it, the issues and causes we care about, they are all under attack. There are critical state elections happening in many places this year, as well as an important mid-term Congressional election this fall. And the far right's voter suppression efforts are in full force.

So, in the spirit of collaboration, which today's service of 11 different congregations embodies, I am very pleased to announce that FIVE different UU groups have come together in order to hire a Voting Campaign Organizer and carry out a joint voter mobilization campaign. This voting campaign will rally Unitarian Universalists in DC, Maryland, and Virginia to conduct non-partisan voter registration, engagement and turnout actions, particularly in communities negatively affected by voter suppression. The sponsoring organizations are All Souls Church Unitarian in Washington, DC, UUs for Social Justice, the UU Legislative Ministry of Maryland, the UU Legislative Ministry of Virginia, and the national UU the Vote campaign. Our effort is the regional hub of UU the Vote, which started in 2020 with a goal of contacting 1 million voters and ended up contacting more than 3 million.

For those in-person here at All Souls, you can take action today by writing some post-cards or picking up a pack of postcards to fill out later at our Reeb Project for Voting Rights table in Pierce Hall after the service. These cards are to voters in Florida. We'll also be showing, at noon, in the Reeb Lobby, the Brave New Films documentary [Suppressed and Sabotaged: the Fight to Vote](#). It's a powerful movie that will get you even more informed and committed.

Also, there is great work going on reproductive justice, and I'm proud to help co—chair a new national interfaith organization dedicated to building a faith movement for reproductive justice called SACReD, the Spiritual Alliance of Communities for Reproductive Dignity. One of our centerpieces is building a congregational designation program that is like the Welcoming Congregation program but is broadly interfaith and about reproductive justice. Learn more at <https://www.sacreddignity.org/>.

Friends, Unitarian Universalists, we have enormous potential to learn, and to change. We have enormous potential to transform our congregations in to places of love and liberation that are accessible to all people, and we have enormous potential to be part of the massive effort needed to transform our society.

My message today, my prayer for us today, is that we make Rev. Gretchen Haley's words true. In everything we do, from reproductive justice and voting rights in our social justice endeavors to religious education to pastoral care to membership and welcome. Yes, we can, and must, have a concrete impact on social justice. But let us also be a place of great belonging as well.

In doing so, may we do our part to promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.

Amen.

BENEDICTION

Go forth knowing that our work is not either/or, but both/and. It's a sprint and it's a marathon. Through our intention, through our relationships, and through our collaboration, may we transform ourselves and our world. Go in peace, and work for justice.