

Igniting the Spirit  
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MFC Sermon  
September 15, 2017

### Chalice Lighting:

Let this be a day when love as we have only glimpsed unfolds the corners of our hearts to hold all the world has to offer... beauty, challenges, celebrations, insights, strengths and short comings. Let this time engage our attention, offering moments of sustaining faith and hope; inviting us to stretch beyond the easy, voicing hard truths... ours and the worlds. May the light of our faith ground us in this moment together and all it has to offer. ~ Donna Dolham

## Igniting the Spirit

I was in Texas when I heard an inspiring word, a spirit engaging word from the Reverend Dr. William Barber, the architect of the Forward Together Moral Monday movement. There he was right before my very eyes, just a few feet away. The message he shared woke me up to the immediate need to put down my business as usual ways. The hall was packed for the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference whose mission it is “to nurture, sustain and mobilize the African American faith community to address critical needs of human and social justice within local, national, and global communities.”<sup>1</sup> Hundreds of people were present over the week to witness testimony, to learn... to commit ourselves to justice. I, along with a few other European American white skinned folks was a guest at this table of hope and action.

Can you remember a time when your heart was unveiled and you woke up to a reality so true that your previous business as usual was changed forever? Where were you and who were you with? How were you changed?

I was jet lagged, tired and excited to be present at opening worship, the worship stage about 4 feet away, the energy electrifying as the Rev. Barber leaned into the microphone saying... “Let us bow our heads together, there are a lot of questions here;” he continued on, “God we thank you today, for your goodness, mercy, and love,” inviting all of us into the loving power of community... one scripture after another rolling off his lips; both Jewish and Christian describing stories of conviction, stories of inclusion, stories of action and hope. From the Hebrew Scripture, Ezekiel chapter 36, verse 26: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.” (NRSV)

Now earlier in this scripture we learn that Ezekiel has been called by God to speak out, to prophesy, and to speak truth to power. He’s a priest from Jerusalem exiled to Babylonia in 597 CE. Things are pretty much a mess, so the story goes and its Ezekiel’s job to name the problems, and offer some way forward while warning of the realities of continuing on with business as usual....

Dr. Barber continuing on in his fiery way references the Christian Gospel Scripture of Luke, talking about Herod and Herod’s group of political opportunists who didn’t care about the people and didn’t care what the consequences of their actions were. During this time, one of Herod’s stewards, a guy in charge of jobs who controlled the invitation list for the palace, was married to a woman named Joanna. Joanna did not buy into this system of privilege and decided to break away to join a rather radical group of apostles caring for the vulnerable and oppressed. It occurs to me that Herod had what Allan Johnson calls the luxury of obliviousness; the sense of entitlement that entrenches some of us so deeply into privilege that we forgo the understanding of its impact on others.<sup>2</sup> I wonder what it took for Joanna to break away from the familiar, from business as usual risking her privilege, safety, comfort and possibly her life for a cause she believed in.

Listening to these passages reinterpreted through the lens of liberation requires us to lean in and see the intersection of our own faith with these stories. Their challenging, engaging,

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<sup>1</sup> SDPC. *The Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference*. n.d. <http://sdpconference.info/about-us/> (accessed August 5, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Allan G. *Privilege, Power, and Difference, second edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies Inc., 2006, 117.

frustrating and liberating messages calls us out of our business as usual toward justice creating communities.

I recognize that I am both the community member gone astray that Ezekiel is trying to warn and I am at times the hesitant and not so hesitant prophet. I am both Joanna, looking to live into my faith and beliefs ... and I am Herod, engaged in systems of white supremacy. It's not as though I've moved to one way never to return to the old. I seem to run into these varied parts of myself as I continue along in life and ministry. Just last weekend I attended the Changing Maine for Racial Justice event. It was here that I stepped away from my business as usual, the tasks of house management, attending to the usual draws on my attention. And it was here that I lived out my ever entrenched white privilege. I had stepped away from the workshop for a moment and upon my return, the group of 60 something people had just started another activity. I stayed on the side lines (in my mind, I didn't want to interrupt ~ it sounded like a good excuse in my own mind). It was following the debrief of this exercise that Sha'an Mouliert, community organizer and consultant for the morning decentering whiteness exercises pointed out that she wanted to clarify that choosing not to engage is a privilege.

My business as usual entitlement had created a cozy out and she was calling me back in to relationship.

These ancient stories are not hard to imagine when we pause a moment and reflect on the environmental racism leading to the deaths of the least empowered, precarious health care for the most vulnerable of our citizens, immigration and customs enforcement-actions separating families, banishing people from their homes, Black and Brown men murdered and more Black and Brown men under correctional control today than were enslaved in 1850.<sup>3</sup> Even in our own beloved Unitarian Universalist Association we are acknowledging the continued systems of domination and white supremacy.

This work of dismantling systems of oppression and this work of living our faith is not for the faint of heart and it is not business as usual. It requires continued engagement with others, systems of accountability and faith communities that can sustain us as we work toward a truly beloved community.

That warm February day in Texas the call for justice and love kindled my desire to say yes... to say yes to this justice embodied love! It seemed like seconds and Reverend Barber stepped away from the microphone.

Dr. Barber's message is not about some hope that justice will someday arrive if we wait long enough, or wait for a time beyond this world or even believe that someone else more qualified will solve the problem for us. There have been times in my life when I was half asleep, practicing my UU piety of showing up to a talk or rally but not engaging, REALLY engaging in the dynamics of community change. I had only partially exercised that muscle of justice making. When I show up with an open vulnerable heart even when I'm not prepared and when I show up knowing I don't have the answers and will make mistakes then I am really showing up.

We UUs like to take time to read, take time to think and take time to talk things over and there is a place for such things. Yet, those living in the tide of oppression have no more time. Time is a place for the privileged. Our UU faith calls to us to be present, awake and connected. Let us connect with the breath of fire that ignites our spirits and invites us to keep showing up.

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander, Michelle, Amy Johnson Frykholm. "Criminal injustice: Michelle Alexander on racism and incarceration." *Christian Century* 129, no.10 (May 16, 2012), 2012: 22-25. ALTA Religion Database with ALTASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed 3/9/15), 8.

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