Trusting Mercy

A Dialogue Sermon with Rev. John Crestwell,

Leika Lewis Cornwell and Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

Introduction to the Sermon

Kathleen: In 2017, Unitarian Universalism had just gone through a crisis of leadership, with the President of the Association and two Senior Level Staff members resigning, leaving the Association without a President and without key leaders. The resignations were prompted by hiring practices which supported a culture of white supremacy, that is a culture dominated by preferential treatment for white people and white ways of thinking, acting, behaving that were hurtful to people of color, allies and actually, all of us in our Association. At the General Assembly in 2017, the co interim presidents, the Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt, the Rev. William G. Sinkford, and Dr. Leon Spencer, all persons of color, sat together on the stage at General Assembly chairs. Instead of each one delivering an address, they responded in a facilitated conversation about what was happening in our Association, what was being done to address it, and where do we go from here.

As a result, the Association was invited to participate in a White Supremacy Teach in, which Rev. Fred Muir led with you that year. It was a continuation of the work UUCA is doing on becoming an anti-racist, anti-oppressive congregation.

As I noted in this week's e-newsletter, I had originally intended to offer you a sermon on White Fragility, based on the insights and inspirations from Robin DiAngelo's book of the same title. However, after talking it over with my colleagues, Rev. John Crestwell and our intern minister, Rev. Leika Lewis Cornwell, and after a conversation with our anti-racist, anti-oppressive group, Building Beloved Community or BBC for short, concerns were shared about my own white expressions of fragility, it didn't feel right for me to do that sermon this morning. Your ministers and BBC have been having some difficult conversations these past couple of weeks about how we handled the consequences of last Fall's theft of our Black Lives Matter sign, and for me, it felt too raw to do the sermon I had originally planned.

This is also the first Sunday of Black History Month; and given the fact that this church has a called minister and a minister in training – both people of color – together, we decided to offer you a tri-logue sermon with reflections on this month's theme of trust, because the work of racial justice is intimately tied to trust; how trust is built, when it's how and broken, and how the church can be a place where we can rebuild trust and create the Beloved Community which we dream about.

John: Our reflections begin not today, but in October 2018, when our Black Lives Matter sign was stolen. It hadn't been the first time. We've put the sign back up at least a half dozen

times. But the last time it was stolen, we got a detective involved and they put up a camera. Through some detective work, they caught the person who stole the sign. There were actually several young men involved, but they were able to identify one of them. For the sake of this sermon, we're going to call him Joe.

I did not know what to expect when I met Joe. I do know I was anxious. I'd been praying for this opportunity to do some restorative justice. As lead facilitator of our prison ministry and as a black man, I have borne witness to mass incarceration and injustice first hand so I wanted to really emphasize my personal experience and see if I could connect with the young man. He came. He apologized to the office staff who are predominately people of color and we sat down in 2 sessions. I had him read the book *What Does it Mean to be White* and report back on his findings. I was pleased with what I saw in his eyes and his demeanor; that this naïve and privileged 18 year old boy was understanding the severity of his crime.

I was also pleased with my many conversations with the Anne Arundel County detectives assigned to this case. I am a relational minister—I lead with my heart—and my heart told me that good was happening. Rev. Kathleen and I met with Joe's parents and found them not defensive, but disappointed in their son. His punishments included being suspended from school, grounded at home, losing friends who did not want to associate with him any longer because he stole our sign. But those were his personal sufferings. What about us – the church – and the suffering he caused US? The main point I wanted Joe and his parents to understand was that stealing our BLM sign was not like stealing a "come to our free spaghetti dinner" sign. NO.

I made it clear that stealing our BLM sign felt like a slap in my face, the face of people of color in this congregation and community as well as insulting to our white allies. I told Joe and his parents that this incident was absolutely connected, in the mind's of members of the larger community, to the story of the noose that was hung at Crofton Middle School, and the stealing of the BLM sign at St. Phillips Church. I made it clear that his excuse that this was a dare on is 18th birthday day was NOT acceptable. The look in his eyes and later his parent's eyes told the story. I did not see arrogance. I say empathy, hurt, and an attempt to be better.

We asked him to make an apology to this congregation and to the NAACP . This is an excerpt from a letter he wrote: *"I was ignorant and oblivious to black racial injustices due to the fact that my family and friends have not gone through injustices, inequalities, or harsh treatment from another race. After learning more about African American culture, I now have a much deeper understanding that the sign I stole isn't just a sign—it's much more than that. It's a movement against violence and injustices, it is a reflection of not just the social injustices African Americans have gone through recently, but it also references the injustices that they went through with slavery, segregation, apartheid, and more. To take this sign was extremely wrong of me and I sincerely apologize. I know I have a lot more to learn and understand and will do this through a different and more compassionate lens."*

You know, Leika, if I would have seen arrogance and indifference that would have changed the tenor of my response and approach. The restorative justice path we chose would

look vastly different—including pressing charges and making this even more public. What's your take?

Leika – Lately I've been thinking about this young man and what I'm calling "the smirk." Some of you may have seen the videos of the conflict that occurred at the March for Life rally between a group of teens from Covington Catholic, a group of Black Israelites, and a Native American elder. There are lots of different ideas and opinions going around on what happened and what didn't. But the one that stood out was a comment from a friend of mine, a queer woman of color. She said that the details, the context, didn't really even matter. Every person of color, she said, has seen the look that was on that young man's face. Every person with a marginalized identity of any kind, especially intersectional or layered ones, has had the experience of seeing that expression, seen the arrogance of being untouchable.

Now, this kid says he wasn't being aggressive, that he was just an awkward moment, and perhaps he believes that. But the impact of that smirk on every marginalized person who saw it is unavoidable.

But anyone who has ever seen that look knows it, and knows the weight it carries of centuries of privilege and power. And I also know another look. I know the look of dawning horror of someone who is realizing that they've messed up, and messed up badly. I've seen that look too, many times, on white people who are trying to learn, trying to do better now that they know the impact of their actions. And I've seen that look more recently, too. [hand off to John]

John – Robin DiAngelo, the author of White Fragility and What Does it Mean to Be White has had a big impact on our work here at UUCA. The three of us wondered if she would be willing to talk to us about the difference between calling people out and calling people in. It's good to have experts on speed dial. Amen. She didn't give her opinion on this issue but she did say that with white folks who are really trying--that we (POCs) must give them space to grow as they learn about the water they swim in (Whiteness). She said that we must certainly call them out but also BACK IN with compassion and love. That aligns with the great teachers to me—Gandhi, King, Mother Teresa, and Jesus, and others, who taught that mercy and compassion are just as important as truth-telling. It's a balancing act—a dance, if you will, that white allies and POC folks must do, calling-out and calling-in—always forgiving and leading with love. That is the only way we will get through this very hard work.

Kathleen. One of the learnings that we, in this church talk about is the difference between intent and impact. It's an important distinction. The young man with the MAGA hat in the video says he didn't intend to be disrespectful, and yes, you can argue, any one of us can get caught in an off moment and have our "intent" misunderstood. But what the insight calls us and challenges us to do is to think beyond the original "intent." What I've learned from engaging in anti-racism and anti-oppression work is how important it is to think beyond the initial intent.

In this case, we believe that this young man did not intend to hurt us. He wasn't thinking about us. He wasn't thinking about the impact of stealing our black lives matter sign as a series of hurts and slights and wounds and micro and macro aggressions that multiply every time the

sign is stolen. It's another expression of white privilege; that you don't think about the impact of your actions unless you're called to account.

As the only white person up here, I can say that it's hard to be publicly called to account for the blinders that I and we have as white people. I've been grateful to Rev. John and some of the insights expressed by members of BBC who have asked me to look at my own tendency towards white solidarity; which is defending the actions of other white people because you believe you know their intent was not racist. However, as I said earlier, it's not really about intent; it is about impact. So, as a white leader, I have to pay attention to that.

It's hard, but if I think it's hard, I can only imagine what it's like for a person of color to have to confront the impenetrable wall of white solidarity and privilege every day. But, because I've begun to build a relationship with Rev. John and with Leika – because we have begun to build trust with one another, being called out on white fragility, white solidarity and white supremacy within a relationship of trust is more likely to happen. Leika – what do you think?

Leika– Let's be honest, supremacy truly is in the water. The water we swim, yes--you've heard that many times. But it's also in the water we drink. It's not simply around us, we ingest it too, and we have different ways that we respond to it. There's a lot of talk in the circles we travel about calling out and calling in. There often seems to be a pendulum effect--for a long time, we focused on calling in, and helping people to learn. In more recent days, a number of people have begun to call, instead, for us to return to calling people out--punching Nazis literally and metaphorically. This is not a new tension, it goes back a long time, including during the Civil Rights era. The Rev. Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X had very different approaches to dealing with racial injustice.

The spirit that speaks most to me as a minister is that of Dr King. He was not a pushover by any means. He was not afraid to call white America on their sins. And yet, in the face of unspeakable acts of violence, he still insisted that there was a path forward through love, not hatred. But he did not act alone, in our country. There is a place for anger, also. People who are part of an oppressive group need to see the pain that supremacy inflicts. White people need to see the pain of people of color. Cis men need to see the pain of women, trans and genderqueer and non-binary folx. And I am convinced they and we also need to see mercy, to show that there is a way back. We need both ways. This fight needs all of us. [hand off to John]

John – This brings me back to my soapbox… I've been preaching about emotional literacy (or EL for short) for a long time. I define it as the ability to articulate your underlying feelings and needs in ways that lift of your and others' worth and dignity." In nonviolent communications this means I never lose sight that I am looking at a creation of the cosmos; that we are all God's children and therefore I am seeking ways, if possible, to reconcile and find harmony with others. I mentioned in my last sermon the power of "othering" and how toxic it is in society. EL helps us not to other but to create sisters and brothers. EL teaches "right relationship" and forgiveness. To me it is humanity's hope for salvation as a species on this planet. Don't get me wrong…racism needs to be named out loud. The pain that is caused by racism must also be honored and acknowledged.

I also ask myself: if the goal is to change hearts and minds, how is that best accomplished? By calling people racist and then dismissing them, banishing them to the outer reaches of the internet, where they sit behind their computers and seethe? Dr. King once said "love without justice is anemic and sentimental; justice without love is harsh and abusive." Minds and hearts cannot change when people are "othered" and defensive and scared. As King said: "We must not replace one tyranny with another form of tyranny." Love is the only way.

Kathleen: In the midst of this conversation about balancing the need for love and for justice; I wondered about the role of mercy. Before Moses brought the law to the people of Israel, tribal law allowed for an aggrieved party to take vengeance on not only the person who wronged him, but their entire family. If an enemy killed your son, then you were permitted to slaughter not only their son, but their daughters, their children their livestock and destroy their home. The law "an eye for an eye a tooth for tooth" was intended to limit the bloodshed, meting out justice in exact amounts. And yet, as human understanding of justice evolved, we began to think about the role of mercy, not taking a life for a life; not repaying harm with harm. This is not to say that a perpetrator gets a pass, or a smack on the hand; but what it does mean is that to insist on the perpetrator to suffer as much as the victim only creates more suffering.

Anti-death penalty advocates ask the question: "Why do we kill people who kill people to say that killing people is wrong?" Bryan Stephenson's book "Just Mercy" recounts his work as a young lawyer working on death row and his struggle to balance justice with mercy and compassion, acknowledging the humanity of even death row inmates and why he believes – because he's seen it with his own eyes – in the ability for people to be redeemed – to turn their lives around – to change.

But that doesn't occur by harsh treatment or abuse; it happened because someone showed that individual mercy – even in the midst of their incarceration.

The Universalist part of our faith rejected the belief that a loving and compassionate God would condemn sinners to an infinity of suffering. They instead, believed that a process of atonement, of making restoration for one's wrong-doing, but that you could be saved and redeemed by your character – by learning and growing; by making mistakes, by sinning, and by acknowledging your sin be saved. We no longer believe in eternal damnation, in hell as a real place, or for many UU's, even in a God who keeps score of who is naughty and who is nice. But the belief that we can change – that revelation is not sealed as we like to say – that the process of growing a soul by deepening our wisdom and understanding AND our capacity for forgiveness and mercy IS part of our heritage, our spiritual legacy and our current practice.

Leika : I think it's so incredibly powerful that we're talking about mercy on the first day of our trust theme, on the first Sunday of Black History Month. Because I see trust and mercy as inextricably linked. Mercy is trust. It's saying "Yes, I know you hurt me, and I know it could happen again." And yet, I still choose to open my arms, my heart to you. I believe in us. I trust us, even when we keep falling down.

I've shared with some of you in personal conversation that as a person with multiple intersecting identities of marginalization, I have had a keen awareness of intersectional oppression thrust on me. And for me, this is the place of my stand--my ability to offer mercy, to trust in our ability to become better, this is something that cannot be taken from me.

Mercy tempered with reason, with justice, absolutely. But in the end, I trust us and our mercy, our ability to keep our arms and hearts open as we learn better and do better. I choose us and our vision of a new way we can build. And like Heather Millar, I love us too.

John – One last thing: I'm taken back to the marvelous words in the hymn we sang this morning: "there's a wideness in your mercy?" Listen to this:

"There's a wideness in your mercy like the wideness of the sea;

there's a kindness in your justice which is more than liberty.

But we make your love too narrow by false limits of our own, and we magnify your strictness with a zeal you will not own.

For the love of God is broader than the measures of our minds
and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind." Glory be. Amen.