

## **Embracing Inherent Worth**

**By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, June 21, 2020**

Six decades ago, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke the following words: “Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.” These words resonate with me today, as the world reacts in grief and anger to the injustices presented every day. Six decades after these words were spoken, Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of Black Lives Matter, wrote, “Generations of black women have anxiously watched as our children walk out into a world set against them. We teach them how to respond to police and how to react to racist comments, knowing that these lessons are not guaranteed to protect our children.” Six decades later black mothers still have to teach their children how to speak to police. It is painstakingly obvious that human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable, and yet the country is exploding in a revolution.

Let’s frame this in our faith. Our faith proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Every person. We don’t pick and choose – our holy does not pick and choose. Everyone, every race, ethnicity, gender, any sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, sober or not, any mental state, any political party – everyone has inherent worth and dignity. To me, this Principle guides my faith – guides my life. This Principle guides my actions each and every day. As a faith community, we need to respond and act with this ideology ringing in our ears – always present, always hovering around our very being. We promote in our 2<sup>nd</sup> Principle justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. In all of the violent acts displayed on our screens, I see no justice. I see no equity. I see no compassion. And yet, the responses? Those folks in the streets? Those folks working for police reform? I see all three. Let us always keep this in our hearts and in our souls. Finally, I lift up our Principle for the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Let us, as a faith community, respond. We just heard

the words of Unitarian Universalist leader Jonipher Kwong, “I still believe faith without works is dead. But works without faith is just as lifeless.”<sup>1</sup>

Let our faith guide us towards actions of justice, actions of love, actions assuring inherent worth of every being. And let this love, let this justice, let this action be guided firmly by our faith; guided by our Principles.

Today as we frame our conversation in inherent worth we talk about two groups that have faced discrimination: Black lives and the LGBTQIA+ community. I am reminded of the words of Yvonne Seon, the first African-American woman ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister, words rooted in her own, personal, Unitarian Universalist faith: “Each of us comes from a different place, yet we are all one. We carve for ourselves our own unique space, yet all we are one.”<sup>2</sup> – we are each other, we are sacredly interconnected.

What we’re talking about here are human rights – not rights to be afforded certain groups of people at pivotal points in our nation’s history, rights that every person – with the inherent worth and dignity that they are afforded – should have. Human rights. Not black rights, LGBTQ rights. Human rights

This past week we saw another black life lost at the hands of police. I lift up in prayer Rayshard Brooks and his grieving family. Crimes are being brought to our attention that have for so long been ignored – ignored because those suffering were dehumanized. For example, in Greenwood, a town in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a massacre occurred. 99 years ago, on the same Memorial Day weekend as the death of George Floyd, one of the worst race massacres in human history occurred. And yet, we don’t hear

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<sup>1</sup> *Voices from the Margins*

<sup>2</sup> *Voices from the Margins*

about it. And yet, students educated in that state do not hear about it. These lives lost in a race massacre – forgotten.<sup>3</sup>

We can't see folks in these circumstances as "others." Again, "each of us comes from a different place, yet we are all one. We carve for ourselves our own unique space, yet all we are one."<sup>4</sup>

Throughout our history we have seen horrible things happen to people of color and to the LGBTQIA+ community, and so many other marginalized groups. And these past weeks, we have seen many of these rights – these human rights – finally being advanced for our black and LGBTQIA+ siblings.

What would this world look like if we acknowledge that we are all one? What would this world look like if everyone was granted that basic human right of inherent worth and dignity? What would the world look like if rights for minority groups were looked at as simply being human rights?

This month – we celebrate Pride! This month celebrates lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary and queer folks. Traditionally, marches and events are celebrated across the nation. This lifts up achievements within the community and LGBTQ pride. And, this month coincides with the anniversary of the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub, a gay nightclub where 49 people were killed and 53 others were wounded. People massacred simply for being who they are. For being who they are – and dancing. In our grieving, let us remember, "we are all one." In our grieving, let us remember the inherent worth and dignity of each and every person – every person who was murdered that day.

I add another layer to this saga. On Monday, the Supreme Court ruled that the civil rights law now also protects gay and transgender folks. Folks will now be granted basic human rights. Folks who are discriminated against in the workplace based on sexual orientation or gender identity can file lawsuits.

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<sup>3</sup> CBS News *Greenwood, 1921: One of the Worst Race Massacres in American History*, Scott Pelley

<sup>4</sup> *Voices from the Margins*

Until this decision was made, LGBTQ folks could be fired simply for being who they are. LGBTQ rights are human rights.<sup>5</sup> This is Inherent worth being realized.

This weekend is also the weekend of Juneteenth! Let us celebrate! This day commemorates African American freedom; and as such is a time for reflection and rejoicing. Juneteenth, short for “June Nineteenth” is the anniversary of the day that federal troops arrived in Texas to ensure that all enslaved people were free – though note that was over two and a half years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. This day marks the end of slavery in the United States. The end of slavery – freedom – an Independence Day.<sup>6,7</sup>

Slavery began the systemic racism that is still very prevalent in our country today – the land of the free had slaves as soon as the colonies were established. The history of our country begins with this ownership of black bodies and this is the basis for systemic racism that still exists today – black bodies that were property, not entirely human. White bodies from the onset were legally the “Superior race” – this is white supremacy culture that is still alive today. This is seen in schools, in incarceration rates, in healthcare discrepancies, in policing. This is engrained in our history – engrained in our culture – and black bodies are crying out for justice – Black lives matter.<sup>8</sup> When will we truly be one? When will everyone’s inherent worth truly be realized?

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/us/gay-transgender-workers-supreme-court.html?smid=em-share>

<sup>6</sup> Juneteenth.com

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/what-is-juneteenth>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-long-reach-of-racism-in-the-u-s-11591372542?shareToken=st14f3f9f6b4434be38943fd89be9df38b&reflink=article\\_email\\_share](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-long-reach-of-racism-in-the-u-s-11591372542?shareToken=st14f3f9f6b4434be38943fd89be9df38b&reflink=article_email_share)

Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi cofounded Black Lives Matter in 2013. Cullors wrote, “Black Lives Matter was born out of our unwavering love for black people and our undeniable rage over a system that has historically dehumanized black people.” Today, the organization is seeing more support than ever before. People are waking up. People are acting. People are donating to support the cause. Last week we talked about flowers peaking through the rocky soil, and this is one of them. The nation responding to Black Lives Matter.

Today we lifted up LGBTQIA+ rights – human rights. Today we lifted up Black lives. Today let’s honor and lift up the oneness of humanity. Today let’s honor and lift up justice, equity, and compassion. Our theme this month is compassion. Andrew Boyd writes, “Compassion hurts. When you feel connected to everything, you also feel responsible for everything. And you cannot turn away. Your destiny is bound with the destiny of others.”<sup>9</sup> We are all bound together. We are all part of this interdependent web. What does this look like at Channing Memorial Church?

Our mission as a church is to:

*Invite* seekers into spiritual community,

*Connect* souls in mystery and wonder, and

*Ignite* compassion into action.<sup>10</sup>

How can we ignite compassion into action? Compassion requires action. Many of us are asking, “what can we do?” and the church is responding – we are considering a couple concrete action steps. One thing we can do is to consider, as a congregation, the 8<sup>th</sup> Principle. Unitarian Universalism currently has 7 Principles, and yet our faith is crying out for an 8<sup>th</sup>. This Principle proclaims: “We, the member

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<sup>9</sup> *Soul Matters Worship Guide*

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.channingmc.org/wp/>

congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”<sup>11</sup>

Work for a Beloved Community. Hold ourselves accountable. Dismantle racism and other oppressions. This is a tangible way we can affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This is something we can explore in greater detail beginning in the fall; this can further our faith. I look forward to the potential of grappling with this with all of you. What else can we, as a Unitarian Universalist faith community do? For more powerful external work, we need to do internal work; we need to engage with our own assumptions and beliefs, whether implicit or explicit. What can we, as Channing Memorial Church, do? We are considering engaging in the program “Beloved Conversations,” a series of workshops that enables participants to deeply engage with race, ethnicity, grounded in Unitarian Universalist faith.<sup>12</sup> I continue to urge people to do that independent work as well – showing up, donating, educating ourselves, listening to marginalized voices, responding to asks, engaging in politics, engaging in voting and helping others to vote.

We need always act in alignment with our values – when navigating the rights of any human. Within the faith of Unitarian Universalism, all are welcome. All are whole, good, and loved. And this may sound easy – but often it’s not. Often it takes work. It takes compassion in the form of action. This is long-term work. This is work even when things get hard. But it’s what our faith demands of us. Let us work everyday to promote Beloved Community. Jonipher Kwong wrote, “I still believe faith without works is dead. But works without faith is just as lifeless.”<sup>13</sup> We need both – we need to integrate our faith with our works of love and justice. They feed each other – they depend on each other – they give us

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.8thprincipleuu.org/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.meadville.edu/fahs-collaborative/fahs-curriculum-catalogue/beloved-conversations/>

<sup>13</sup> *Voices from the Margins*

sustenance as we work for each and every person's inherent worth to be realized. Faith, and works of love. Let us enter this space of love, faith, and justice, and may we never leave. Today and every day, we need one another.

May it be so, and Amen