

## **“When the World is Broken”**

**By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, October 13, 2019**

**Our first reading today is entitled “Everybody Else” by Jabari S. Jones:**

On a spring day in Farmington, Maine, as I was walking downtown, I made my way through a line of cars that were waiting for the light. In front of me was a large Confederate flag flying from the back of a white pick-up. I crossed the street, not looking at who was driving the truck, and went into the store. As I went about my business, I felt stunned; my mind stirred with thoughts and feelings, memories and speculations. I felt fear, and anger, and curiosity; worry, and defiance, and humiliation.

As I stood at the register, I chatted with the older white woman behind the counter. “Hi, how are you today?”

“I’m good, how are you?,” she replied. I paused, and then I told her about the truck with the flag.

She said something like, “Oh, yes, we have some of that around here, but don’t let it upset you. Don’t let it get to you.”

I appreciated her gesture, her attempt to comfort me. At the same time, her gesture made me more uncomfortable. She was asking me to respect that person’s right to fly that flag and shrug it off like everybody else. What she failed to see, or perhaps ignore in a gesture of "colorblindness" wrapped in the First Amendment, is that I am not like everybody else who walks in the shadow of that flag. I am from "away;" my hair is coarse; my skin is dark brown. I

am a black man in Maine. In so many ways, I am not like everybody else around here. But I want to belong here. In so many ways, that flag represents the denial of my rights, my belonging.

It is impossible for me to blend in, to hide my black body, to "not let it get to me." I don't have the privilege of hiding from history. Because I am conscious, I know what it is; I know its name. It rides in the back of a pick-up truck, it proudly stalks around town like an alpha predator. It clings to me like a nightmare, while it seems like everyone else is walking through a dream. I point at the thing and say "Look!," and the crowd replies, "Yes, but..."

When I hear "Yes," I feel heard. When I hear "but," I become invisible; my life doesn't matter. It's this "but—," this disbelief in the truth of black bodies, this tolerance for something that is ugly and intolerant, that is the terror that "everybody else" allows to walk in their midst: a casual terror that I cannot escape any more than I can escape my own body, my own consciousness. A terror that makes all lives matter less. I struggle to wake up from the nightmare, and the dream that is its mirror image. I struggle to make my life matter, for black lives to matter, so that all lives will matter"

**Our second reading today is entitled "Bent to the Earth" by Blas Manuel de Luna**

They had hit Ruben  
with the high beams, had blinded  
him so that the van  
he was driving, full of Mexicans  
going to pick tomatoes,  
would have to stop. Ruben spun

the van into an irrigation ditch,  
spun the five-year-old me awake  
to immigration officers,  
their batons already out,  
already looking for the soft spots on the body,  
to my mother being handcuffed  
and dragged to a van, to my father  
trying to show them our green cards.

They let us go. But Alvaro  
was going back.  
So was his brother Fernando.  
So was their sister Sonia. Their mother  
did not escape,  
and so was going back. Their father  
was somewhere in the field,  
and was free. There were no great truths

revealed to me then. No wisdom  
given to me by anyone. I was a child  
who had seen what a piece of polished wood  
could do to a face, who had seen his father  
about to lose the one he loved, who had lost  
some friends who would never return,  
who, later that morning, bent  
to the earth and went to work.

**Sermon:**

My grandfather grew up during WWII as the son of a Japanese immigrant. Because he was Japanese, he lost his job at a local hardware store. Because he was Japanese, he faced abuse on a daily basis. He was beat up before school, during lunch time, and after school. Every day. His father was a chef with a restaurant – until. Until the war, and he lost his restaurant, his business, his livelihood. Once he was old enough, my grandfather changed his name from Shimamura to Shima to sound more American. He was not placed into internment camps, as others were, but he suffered prejudice. He lost this wellbeing and his sense of belonging. My grandfather's world was broken – John Shimamura did not belong.

What does it mean to not belong? It means needing to advocate for basic rights, needing to advocate just to be heard. It means not being fully included in society – being cast aside, instead of being fully engaged in the patchwork of society. It means seeing the Confederate flag and feeling terror, feeling as if one's life does not matter.

When we live in a world where people don't belong, we are called to live our principles. This calls for our respect of everyone in our interdependent web. Our seventh principle states that we have respect for the interdependent web of which we are all a part. This is plants and animals, yes, and every single person.

When I think, I think in picture. So to me when I reflect on this web I picture a spider web – transparent, glistening, carefully spun by a spider – the black, eight-legged creature. But today,

I see this differently. I see a patchwork of hands. Hands, interconnected, holding on to each other. White hands, black hands, Japanese hands, manicured hands, calloused hands, youthful hands and hands to who held beloveds as they passed away. This web- this patchwork of hands – is stronger when we all hold on. If everyone belongs. If everyone’s hands are grasped and connected to each other. If every hand is included. Our web, our existence, will be stronger. We are interdependent. Dependent on each other. And when we fail to grasp each other’s hands, we, as a society, weaken. We need all of us, us of every nation, every creed, every race, every gender, every socioeconomic background, every ability.

When our web is broken, our world is broken.

And I ask, what can we do when our world is broken? We can listen. We can lift up voices from the margins. That is the first step. A tapestry of voices, a web of stories, a testament to what may not so often be heard. We can listen, we can accept, we can love, and we can advocate for justice.

We just heard two stories of a broken world. We just heard two stories detailing the pain of not belonging. The story of a black man in Maine. The story of an immigrant child.

What truths does Jabari S. Jones lift up?

The truth of being denied belonging because of racism. Of being denied belonging because of difference – that coarse hair and dark skin, and what coarse hair and dark skin has meant for

generations. Of living in terror because of all the meaning and hate hidden behind that fluttering red and blue confederate flag.

Jones states,

“When I hear ‘Yes,’ I feel heard. When I hear ‘but,’ I become invisible; my life doesn’t matter. It’s this ‘but—,’ this disbelief in the truth of black bodies, this tolerance for something that is ugly and intolerant.”

What does “yes, but” mean? It does not affirm Jones’s experiences; quite the opposite; it is a rejection of his truth. What about, “yes.” What about “yes, I hear you.”

If this older white woman had said, “yes,” and ended there? – in that yes, she would not be shrugging off racism. If she had said “yes,” and ended there, she would not have emphasized otherness. If she had said, “yes.” Let us always say, “yes.”

Let us never underestimate the power of listening, of affirming. That would be to underestimate the power of love and connection; for listening and loving are intimately connected.

This story depicts the binary of black and white; depicts the harm in insider and outsider groups.

We see this insider and outsider groups permeating our culture and throughout our history. Even as children, cliques form. Children are often in, or out. They belong, or they don’t. I remember that. We see this throughout adulthood- we hear this everyday- we hear this in

religion, politics – decade after decade of othering immigrants, like my grandfather. Irish or Chinese or Mexicans not belonging – inherently an “out” group. We see races dehumanized or deemed criminals, we see oppression of folks of all genders or those who suffer with mental illness. To create these groups is to forget the power of acceptance and love and understanding.

When we no longer see people as people, it becomes easier to exploit them, easier to erase them, easier to hate them. When we no longer see people as people, they no longer belong. And when they don’t belong, we can treat them as if they are not fully human. That is what it means not to belong. When we listen to stories, people become people.

Many people in this room have faced some form of not belonging – in school, at work, at home.

Perhaps you faced bullying, or suffered discrimination. Perhaps you struggled because of prejudice around sexuality or gender or felt rejected because of skin color or because of the clothes you couldn’t afford to buy. Yes. This pain is real. Hold tightly to our web. Whose hands are you holding on to?

At 5 years old, Blas Manuel De Luna witnessed the destructive power of racism and of family members who had been deemed “illegal,” detailing his experience in poetic prose in the reading we heard earlier. “five-year-old me awoke to immigration officers, their batons already out, already looking for the soft spots on the body, to my mother being handcuffed.” Yes. We hear this story. At 5 years old, living in a broken world. Can we grasp on to those small, brown

hands? Yes, this is reality. Yes, this brute violence, this disregard for human life – this is the story of a broken world. This is the story of hate overpowering love, of otherness pervading acceptance. Take a moment to truly hear this story.

When the world is broken, we need call upon our principle to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This means the black man in Maine. This means the 5-year-old witnessing violence and family members being deported. This means every person in this room who has ever been “othered,” who has ever felt as if they did not belong. I see you. I say, “yes” to your story.

This calls for love. This calls for love of the woman draped in a bourka, the child bending gender norms.

This calls for love of a person who worships differently, who speaks a different language, whose skin color may be different.

This calls for a radical love, a radical inclusion, for all of us. All of us.

Our world is broken if not everyone knows their inherent worth; if everyone doesn't live a life of love.

Our world is broken if not every person is seen; if not every person is acknowledged and accepted for exactly who they are.

Kristen Harper writes,

Look at me – I am black and you are white, but I too am beautiful



Look at my face, my hair, my clothes – they may be different but aren't they worthy of your gaze?

Look at my walk, the way my hips sway to the music in my soul, the way my proud neck tilts to the sun, yes look at me

Look at my darkness, it contains light and love, rebirth and growth

Look at my pain, don't turn away

Look at the way you see me, I am human, I have tears and fears

I have laughter and joy

Look at me and walk with me

I too am beautiful

I say to this poem, yes.

Claiming true self, claiming identity, claiming this beauty in identity; it is there if only you look.

Claiming acceptance, claiming belonging word by word, claiming self-worth, celebrating self, look at me! I too am beautiful. "My darkness, it contains light and love." A woman who has tears and fears just like any other person; she has worth, she has dignity, she is a part of our web and she is beautiful. Look at me – I too am beautiful. Sharing her story so that she, too, and all of her experiences, can be heard, can be humanized, can be seen.

Who else can be seen? Who do we not notice? Do we even see the unhoused on the sidewalk or standing along the road? Do we see those who do not belong?

Radical love, acceptance, and listening. Listening to stories that make people, people. These stories need be shared. These stories need be heard. These stories need be celebrated.

We can encounter these stories every single day. Each one of us, if only we care to listen.

The story told by a child who is struggling with bullying. The story told by the victim of a crime.

The story told about racism at the airport, the story of someone struggling with depression, or the story of a confederate flag hanging off the back of a truck. If only she had said, "yes."

I want here to take a moment to tie together the words of Natalie Fenimore, an African American UU minister and Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian poet. Fenimore writes,

May what we know of suffering, redemption and salvation bring us to Love.

Having been the other, may our hearts exclude no one.

Having been the slave, may we long to be no one's master

Nye proclaims,

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,

you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

You must wake up with sorrow.

You must speak to it till your voice

catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.

Fenimore experienced other, and this led her to practice the holy art of radical inclusion.  
Suffering leading to love. Nye writes of the transformation of this sorrow she has felt and  
expresses that this sorrow is what leads to deep kindness. She poses the question, can we have  
true kindness without true sorrow?

What power do these two women have? What strength? What resilience? These words are  
remarkable.

Let them be heard. Let us say yes. Yes.

We close with the words of African American author James Baldwin, a poem that reminds us  
that change is possible, a poem of hope

For nothing is fixed,

Forever, forever, forever,

It is not fixed;

The earth is always shifting,

The light is always changing,

The sea does not cease to grind down rock.

Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only  
witnesses they have

The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us

The moment we cease to hold each other

The moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out

Nothing is fixed! We can change, we can mend, this broken world. We can listen, and say “yes.”

We can love fiercely and accept radically. We can take steps towards justice for all – within these walls and beyond.

“Nothing is fixed, forever, forever, forever.”

My Grandpa Shima died a happy man. He died living in a society that had stopped abusing him for his race, a society that had begun to say “yes” to his stories. While his story was heard, there are so many more that aren’t. But nothing is fixed. We can mend this broken world.

What stories can we say “yes” to now? The black man in Maine? The Mexican refugee child?

How can we stop this broken world? Let us be a part of this change! To lift up stories, to listen to what folks have to say.

“Nothing is fixed, forever, forever, forever.” We can be this change! We can love, and we can be radically inclusive! We can take action steps towards social change, social justice, social responsibility, in our own community and beyond. Lifting up stories so more people can hear them.

Let us live into our principles; clasping hands with every single person in our interdependent web, holding on and offering this belonging to each and every person. Let us never break faith with each other.

This is what unitarian Universalism calls us to do. This is what love calls us to do. “The moment we break faith with each other, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.” Let us grab hands, hold on tight, love radically, and always say, “yes”

May it be so, and Amen