

“Principled Action”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

February 28, 2021

When we gather together, we do so in a context. As we have amply learned this year online, the walls of the buildings on Boston Post Road do not define us. We interactively dwell in the world around us—impacting and being impacted by the trends, events, and legacies of that world.

Our context today is not simple. It is context that reflects dwindling engagement with institutional religion. It is a context of political and ideological divisions. It is a context long shaped by assumptions of whiteness as superior to blackness. It is a context of global change with the pandemic and climate crises leaving no place unaffected.

Today our context is also the end of Black History Month. This celebration is one good step towards righting the wrong of centuries of devaluing the experiences and contributions of Black lives in the US. And, it is not enough to only consider black lives one month a year; it is not enough to only speak of history and not of today or the world we dream about for tomorrow.

[“Ella’s Song”](#)—the video we watched a few moments ago—exemplifies the links of past, present, and tomorrow. The title refers to the past—a tribute to Civil Rights activist Ella Baker. In 1964, Baker said,

“Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a white mother's son, we who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens.”

Two decades later, Bernice Johnson Reagon put these words to music for her group, Sweet Honey in the Rock. Reagon had also participated in the Civil Rights movement as a member of the SNCC Freedom Singers. When the Resistance Revival Chorus began in 2017, they continued [this tradition of music to fuel social change](#). When they released a rendition of “Ella’s Song” on June 19, 2020, they did so as protests against the killing of George Floyd continued on streets across the country. The song we hear today emerges from a context.

Another part of our context as a congregation is the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations (or UUA) of which we are a part. We pay money to belong to this Association and we vote annually in the business of the Association. There is not “the UUA” over there

and us over here. To speak of the UUA is to speak of the congregations who make up the Association. To speak of the UUA is to speak of us.

Throughout its existence, the UUA, its predecessor institutions, and, as best as I can tell, our congregation have been majority white. While we appropriately laud our religious ancestors who have actively engaged in abolitionism, the Civil Rights Era, and other anti-racism work, as an institution and as a culture, the UUA itself has been stubbornly white. But NOT entirely white and NOT without attraction to people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color. As the recent report from the [UUA Commission on Institutional Change](#) states, “we continue to attract a greater diversity of people and to retain a very small percentage of those who do not match the resourced, white, aging majority within our congregations.” ([Trends](#)) That difference between attraction and retention suggests a problem with what people of color find when they spend time in the culture of our congregations and our collective UU spaces such as General Assembly.

The report itself emerged from a larger context. In the Spring of 2017, the UUA announced a [new hire for a Regional Lead](#)—a white man. Another candidate for the job, a woman of color, decided to speak out publicly about the hiring process and question just what the UUA meant by a good “fit”—just what and who determines “fit” was not clear. The issue exploded on social media, in professional associations, in attentive congregations, and in the national leadership of the UUA. By June, when the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations met, the President of the UUA, Peter Morales, had resigned as had other senior leadership, including the new hire for Regional Lead. A trio of highly respected UU leaders of color took on a co-presidency of the UUA. The Committee on Institutional Change was created with a charge “to conduct an audit of white privilege and the structure of power within Unitarian Universalism, and analyze structural racism and white supremacy culture within the UUA.”

From that charge emerged three years of listening to stories and experiences of UUs, an external audit of our institutional structures and culture, and the final report, “Drawing the Circle Wider.” As you heard in the excerpt read earlier from the trends section, the report is written not to make readers comfortable with the status quo, but to inspire change. Change, they argue, is not an option. *“What is at stake is nothing less than the future of our faith.”*

I have come to agree.

As a scholar of religion and society, I am fascinated by how religion changes and adapts over time and place. Context changes religion as much as religion changes the context in which it finds itself. In the face of contextual change, I believe that humanity will continue

to have an impulse to make meaning and a need for ethical guidance such that something ‘religious’ will persevere. I am less convinced that any one religious expression is immune from change, decline, or even death. To survive, religious systems must remain meaningful and relevant to their contexts. They must make a difference in how people experience life. They have to help—and not harm.

As a religious tradition deeply steeped in the experience, assumptions, and biases of white people, Unitarian Universalism not only risks becoming irrelevant, it also risks continuing a record of harm to people of color. In a context of an increasingly multicultural society, failing to deeply consider the ways in which our tradition, our culture, and our institutions do not offer safe harbor to people of color is to turn from the future. So also, to not ask how welcoming we are being to younger adults, to gender expansive folks, or to others who may not “fit” our mental model of a good UU—of a good First Parish member—is to turn from the future.

In many ways we are already wrestling with these questions. Many of us have been deepening our understanding of racism and whiteness through reading, movies, workshops, conversations, and relationships. Thanks to the work of the Welcoming Congregation, we have been expanding our awareness of gender expression. In sermons, we have been challenged by Alex to consider what radical welcome and courageous love might mean. Such inner and interpersonal work will be critical to change and to moving towards a fuller welcome of folks of many different experiences and perspectives.

And the UUA is challenging us to do more by also looking hard at our institutional practices and commitments—nationally, yes, but also at a local congregational level. Who is part of our congregation? Our staff? How do decisions get made? Who holds power? What are we teaching our kids about oppression and justice? In what ways are we accountable to Black and Indigenous folks—for current oppressions as well as for legacies of harm?

You may be asking yourself, ‘wait, are such questions even *religious*?’ Well, it depends on how you understand religion. For some of us, religious means beliefs about God, death, and a life beyond the here and now. I know a number of us grew up in religious traditions that understood religion in these terms. However, over the last century, a new framework has been growing within liberal religious traditions—a framework of liberation.

You can see this framework of liberation at work in the Commission’s report. In this framework, God—or the ultimate concern—is not primarily about rigid adherence to right/wrong, good/bad according to a particular system. Rather, the ultimate concern—or God—is the flourishing of life and love in freedom. Put otherwise, rather than God worrying about how well each of us is following a particular system; God cares more about

the poor, the oppressed, and all those whose suffering diminishes their living, their loving, and their freedom. What matters is not individual salvation to another life, but how free people are from oppression in this life.

It is for this vision of the future that Ella Baker cried out, “we who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens.” It is for this vision of life, love, and freedom that Bernice Johnson Reagon put these words to music. And, it is why the Resistance Revival Singers continue to sing out for a future of equity between the value of a white life and that of a black life.

Imagine if our central reason for being as a congregation was this—to insure the flourishing of life, love, and freedom for all persons. Towards this end, the Black Lives of Unitarian Universalists have proposed adding an 8th UU principle. The proposed [8th principle](#) reads:

“We, the member 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.”

By adding this principle, Unitarian Universalism would make explicit a commitment to engaging and welcoming the multicultural context in which we now dwell. Furthermore, it places liberating people from racism and oppression at the center of our shared religious life.

No one of us alone will bring about such changes to our national Association, nor to our local congregation. Nor is such work simple or easy. And yet, if nothing else lingers in your mind from today’s sermon, I hope you will continue to ask yourself—what must we do to remain meaningful and relevant as a congregation in the context of today’s world? From this question, a whole new conversation and journey just might begin.

So may it be. Amen.