



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Charge to the Bridgers

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Just as we charge our ministers during ordinations and installations, I want to offer a charge to our graduates—all of our graduates out there (there a few who just graduated from grad school & one from divinity school) and really anyone in the midst of a major life transition—including me.

I also offer this charge as a final farewell to this extraordinary congregation and all of the many blessings you have given me. This is one of those moments of “preacher, heed thy words!”

But last night I was reading over this charge, some of which I have used before and thinking to myself, this is not right. In light of the recent shooting at Emmanuel AME church in Charleston— a house of worship, a sanctuary, a safe haven for so many—the words I had prepared to charge you with feel trite and cliché. So I rewrote them. And since these may be the last words I speak from this pulpit in a very long time, I am taking a risk and speaking from my heart to give you— give us a different kind of charge.

When I heard the news of the Emmanuel shootings I was stunned. Like many of you this recent tragedy feels overwhelming, senseless, and incomprehensible. Nine people killed, including the pastor. It feels terrifying, most especially because it happened in the most sacred and holy of places, in a church where people are supposed to feel safe, to take refuge, to celebrate and honor God’s love. And in *this* church in particular where, as I heard one parishioner explain, it is safe to be black. Where blackness is celebrated. In a church that has stood for more than 200 hundred years fighting against slavery and racism and oppression, standing as a beacon of light and hope and equality.

And while this one act is horrifying enough—it just keeps happening, and we find ourselves asking why, why. But sadly, the African-Americans in the community are not as shocked as some of us are. They are asking why again? Because black churches have long been a target of hateful, racist, supremacist, violence. No one in this country should ever have to ask why again.

So here is my first charge to you:

Feel it. Feel this pain, this loss, this horrifying tragedy. Let yourselves cry and wail and shake your fists in anger. Because only out of those deep feelings can our hearts open. Out of those deep feelings we are moved to act, not out of vengeance, but out of agency. Agency for justice, equity, and compassion for all. **Be agents of love.**

I charge you, as agents of love, to take action. Say the words out loud. Call out the words racism and gun control, demand action for these complicated but important issues. They need your voices. Our voices. They especially need the loud, liberal, progressive voices of allies. **I charge you to act.**

We talk a lot about our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This statement can too easily become a nicety, a cliché of sorts. But remember, it is a statement of action. The statement of our seven principles begin with the words, “We Unitarian Universalists covenant to affirm and promote.” Those are active verbs! We don’t just think these principles, we enact them, we embody them and we must make a conscious choice to do so every day.

The way to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person—at least right now—is to call out our collective failures. Racism is one such failure. Systemic racism: when a society produces unequal outcomes irrespective of effort. This inequality is held in place by violence, whether intimidation or slavery or mass incarceration etc.

One way to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, right now, is to say aloud the words of the growing movement Black Lives Matter.

Because the truth is my friends many of us, most of us, the majority of us in this sanctuary will never, ever know what it is like to be so vilified and hated purely for the color of our skin. We will never know what is like to live in fear of law enforcement. We will never know what it is like to be afraid to send our sons to the grocery store. We will never know.

But not knowing should not paralyze us from acting—from being an ally. One of the most powerful things we can say to one another is, “I see you.” Not, “I am color blind,” but I see you, fully, inside and out, and I am here. I stand with you. I stand beside you. I want to know you, to hear your stories, yes, even the painful ones. And though I know my pain and hardship may never be as great as yours, **I see you.**

I charge you to see. To see the people around you and to notice one another’s beautiful faces, colorful faces. See the fear and the pain, the joy too. It is okay to see it, to own it, to name it for what it is and then, again, ACT. Affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion.

I charge you to walk across that bridge again and again. Yes, to new adventures, but also toward those who have endured lifetimes of society’s unequal outcomes. Know that the bridge you cross connects you to your home, to your faith, to this church where you grew up, which stands on the side of love. This faith which has taught you to seek fairness, equality, world community. This faith that teaches us that we are all connected, that my freedom, my liberation is bound up with yours.

I charge you to walk across the bridge and visit an AME church in your new town. Show up and say, I am a UU and I am here because I wanted you to know there are religious people who honor you and love you.

This is a beginning. You, seniors, are beginning a new phase of life, but really this is a beginning for us all. And beginnings are scary.

The poet John O’Donohue writes that the greatest challenge is to actually begin, but there is something deep in us that conspires with what wants to remain within safe boundaries and stay the same.

But we know we cannot stay the same. We cannot allow violence and oppression and racism to continue unchecked. Change does not happen when we stay safe so we must push against those boundaries.

Beginnings are inherently risky, but risk might be our greatest ally. So let’s begin, again and again. This is my charge to you. May it be so.