



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Fuente de Amor

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*Fuente de amor, ven a nosotros y nos dan fuerza para construir la justicia en esta vida. Amen.*  
Source of Love, come to us and give us strength to build justice in this life. Amen.

When I started doing research about Latino Heritage Month in connection to this service, I knew I wanted to lift up some voices that we may not be used to hearing. For me, that often means lifting up the voices of amazing women. And I knew that I wanted to do something more than a history lesson, although we could all do well to learn more about the history of our beautiful city of Los Angeles, to which people of Latino and Hispanic heritage have contributed so much. I wanted to delve into the richness of Latino theologies, ways of seeing the divine in the world, and in particular, the richness of theology from the perspective of Latina women.

For this service, I drew motivation from being Californian, living in this culturally rich city, and truly wanting to learn about the communities we live in. I also find deep meaning in being a woman of color and actively seek solidarity and relationship with fellow women of color. Lastly, I believe that as a Unitarian Universalist I have a responsibility to celebrate diversity, to join in the struggle against racism and oppressions of all kinds, and to stand in solidarity with marginalized communities. I am so grateful to the members of Neighborhood People of Color, and other friends and fellow ministers who gave me inspiration and support.

A few caveats before we get started: There is no *one* Latino or Latina experience. People who identify as Latino and/or Hispanic span numerous cultures, nationalities, racial and ethnic backgrounds, religions, classes, immigration histories, generations, and more. In talking about Latino/a stories and experiences, we seek *not* to make universal or essential claims, but to recognize a complex landscape with multiple truths and beauty in diversity.

It is also important to remember our context: for this sermon I draw on the writings of Latinas in the United States in the last few decades. This is the context in which they write, one of a historical and current crisis of racism, oppression and inequality. Economic inequality - using statistics from the National Women's Law Center, for every \$1 earned by a white man, white women earn 78 cents, and Latinas only 56 cents. Education inequality - according to UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, in the year 2000 Latino/as made up 22% of the California population, yet Latino/as made up only 13% of Californians who achieved a high school diploma, with even lower percentages for higher education. Latinos face inequalities in other areas such as housing, incarceration rates, and even in religious studies and theological scholarship. Latina feminist theologian Maria Pilar Aquino notes that the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in 2000, indicated a total membership of 10, 238, out of which only .49 percent identified as Latina. Immigration policy, including detainment and deportation adds yet another important factor.

For those of us, like myself, who do not identify as Latina, the concept of solidarity is very important here. This means completely letting go of any sort of missionary attitude, thinking of

ourselves as saviors or rescuers. Rather, we adopt a position of cultural humility and deep listening, of partnership and relationship, building community based on equality and liberation. This may mean stepping aside when asked to, and showing up when asked to. We seek to learn, to develop respect and appreciation, while respecting the context of Latina and Latino experiences. If you're interested in learning more about solidarity, particular on how to be an anti-racist ally and how to support communities that build racial justice, come hear Chris Crass, UU educator, leader, and activist this afternoon in the Sanctuary at 3:00 pm.

So keeping in mind our commitment as Unitarian Universalists to diversity and justice, our desire to be in solidarity, that there is no *one* Latino experience, and the historical-political context in which we live, let me introduce you to one of my favorite new theological teachers: Ada María Isasi-Díaz was born and raised in Cuba, and came to America as a political refugee in 1960. She writes that being brought up as a practicing Catholic allowed her to, “nourish a concern for the poor and the oppressed and a love of religious practices.” She learned from her mother, “the importance of struggling (*la lucha*) for what one believes without ever giving up.”<sup>1</sup> In her early life she joined a Catholic order, went to Peru as a missionary, taught high school, and eventually earned a Masters in Divinity and PhD with a concentration in Christian Ethics. She was deeply involved in the Catholic Women's Ordination movement, which led to her emerging feminist identity. As an activist, theologian and feminist, she saw the need to develop theology from the perspective of Latinas in the USA, which gave birth to *mujerista* theology. Seeing the power in names, she developed the term *mujerista* as an independent alternative to being simply an “adjective” as a Latina feminist. She died at the age of 69 in May of 2012.

One fun connection between Isasi-Díaz and Unitarian Universalists, in March 2012 she was invited to be keynote speaker at a religious symposium at Christian Brothers University in Tennessee, and her invitation was cancelled both because of her support for women's ordination, and because she officiated at her nephew's same-sex marriage at a UU church!

One of the first pieces of writing by Isasi-Díaz that I read was called, “A Hispanic Garden in a Foreign Land.” She starts this essay by sharing a trip she took to Cuba, twenty-six years after leaving that country of her birth. She describes the beauty of the country, but also feeling like a “foreigner,” belonging neither fully to Cuba nor to the United States. I related to this feeling, when at the age of 20, I visited China for the first time. Feeling both intensely welcomed and loved by my grandfather's family in Shanghai, yet also, someone who did not belong in this culture or country, because I was born in the USA.

Isasi-Díaz uses the extended metaphor of the garden and writes, “As a foreigner in an alien land, I have not inherited a garden from my mother but rather a bunch of cuttings. Beautiful but rootless flowering plants—that is my inheritance. Rooting and replanting them requires

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<sup>1</sup> “Biographical Information,” Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, <http://users.drew.edu/aisasidi/bioInfo.htm>

extra work on the part of the gardener; it requires much believing in myself to make my life flourish away from the tropical sun of Cuba.”<sup>2</sup> In her gardening journey, Isasi-Díaz describes trying to plant her inherited “cuttings” in many gardens in the US, but the gifts she brings are seen as weeds or exotica, never the same as the common garden plants.

This is a struggle that many people of color experience, whether their ancestors are recent or ancient immigrants, or maybe as many Chicanos in California can say, they never crossed the border, the border crossed them, whoever is deemed by dominant culture as “other.” Our cultures, languages, foods, and religious expressions are seen as exotic at best, and at worst invisible to the dominant culture, or actively suppressed and discriminated against. In her personal journey to find space to plant her own garden on American soil, Ada María Isasi-Díaz also contributes a wealth of stories, concepts, and challenges to us as people of faith. I want to highlight three of those gifts as ones we can truly appreciate as Unitarian Universalists.

The first theme I want to bring out from Isasi-Díaz and other Latina feminist theologians is that of *familia y comunidad*, family and community. Isasi-Díaz cites her mother’s deep commitment to family as one of the beautiful plants from her garden that she seeks to plant in the US. For her, family consists of not just the nuclear family, but the idea of *familia* conveys a deep sense of connectedness to one’s ancestors, to the people of one’s *pueblo* or town, to distant aunts and cousins who may be caregivers of children, and to friend and neighbor. I come from a culture that also deeply values family, and resonate deeply with this love of *familia*, of one’s roots as well as those one adds to the family throughout life.

Isasi-Díaz used in-depth interviews with everyday Latinas to give voice to the religious experiences of *mujeristas*. All of the women she speaks to describe how they learned about prayer, the saints, God and morality through experiences of family, rather than the institution of the church and priests. One woman interviewed by Isasi-Díaz was named Inez. She was born in the US, but raised by her grandparents in Puerto Rico. She states, “If they would ask me to draw God, I would draw my grandmother smiling. Because she is the only person that I believe has filled me or filled me so much that I can compare her to God. I would draw a picture of my grandmother with her hands open, smiling, as if to say, ‘Come with me because I am waiting for you.’”<sup>3</sup> One woman talks about her grandparents who taught her to pray to the Virgin Mary, another, an uncle who taught her to give thanks at meals, another, how her mother told her as a child that, “God is everywhere.” For these women, the experience of God is intimately connected to the experience of *familia*.

Isasi-Díaz also developed usage of the term kin-dom, rather than kingdom. Instead of a word that invokes a patriarchal, hierarchical and elitist system; kin-dom invokes the family of God. She writes, “kin-dom makes it clear that when the fullness of God becomes a day-to-day reality

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<sup>2</sup> “A Hispanic Garden in a Foreign Land,” Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, in *Inheriting Our Mother’s Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective*, Louisville: Westminster Press, 1998, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> Isasi-Díaz, Ada Maria, *Hispanic Women, Prophetic Voice in the Church*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988, p. 16.

in the world at large, we will all be sisters and brothers—kin to each other.”<sup>4</sup> I love this idea of kin-dom, belonging to one another as one human family, beloved community.

The second concept which Isasi-Díaz developed that I believe enriches our discussion is called *lo cotidiano*, a term she would translate as “the stuff of everyday,” or “the stuff of our reality.” She writes, “Lo cotidiano is the main arena of Latinas’ struggles and knowledge and constitutes the place, the moments, and the occasions when they come to understand reality.”<sup>5</sup> This means that instead of abstract theory, academics, official church doctrines, or needing to read the Bible—theology emerges from how Latinas experience the divine in their everyday lives and choices. The narratives Isasi-Díaz lifts up include stories of finding God in praying for a sick child, fighting for fair housing policies, longing for a family member who is incarcerated, or eating a breakfast of *frijoles* with one’s family. One biographer wrote, “By relocating her primary theological sources out of the academy and to the kitchens, laundromats, home altars, and familias of Latina women, Ada flipped the locus of power, authority, and agency.”<sup>6</sup>

As UUs, we can really appreciate using one’s everyday experiences as the ground for theological thinking. Where can we draw on *lo cotidiano* in our lives? Where are those everyday places where we find the sacred amidst the mundane, where we find the Spirit of Life and Love alongside us? And, how can we listen carefully to the theology in the everyday lives of those around us? In the media we so frequently hear the stories of the rich and powerful; Isasi-Díaz challenges us to create space for the stories of the day laborer, the woman protesting for minimum wage increase, the child whose parents have been deported. She asks us to hear those who struggle everyday for work, food and safety, to say to them, “I see you and I know that you have something to teach me about God, about love, about humanity.”

The third and final gift I want to lift up from the contributions of these amazing women is that of *justicia*, justice. This includes liberation from many forms of oppression including: exploitation of women’s work and bodies, marginalization and “other-izing,” powerlessness to speak one’s story in the face of dominant narratives, cultural imperialism and racism, and systematic violence faced by women, sometimes within their own communities, and from the outside.

There are many ways that Neighborhood Church has joined the struggle for justice in solidarity with others. Our work on drawing attention to the need for immigration reform, finding compassionate responses for refugees, and the campaign for the living wage are all examples. If you attend the Social Justice Summit, just after the second service today, you’ll find many groups and avenues for contributing to our mission for justice.

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<sup>4</sup> Isasi-Díaz, Ada Maria, *En la lucha: Elaborating a mujerista theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, p. xi.

<sup>5</sup> “Feminist Theology from a Mujerista Perspective,” Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Religion and American Cultures: An Encyclopedia of Traditions, Diversity, and Popular Expressions, Volume I*, ed. by Gary Laderman and Luis D. Leon, ABC CLIO, Inc.: 2003, p. 192.

<sup>6</sup> <https://sojo.net/magazine/july-2012/mother-mujerista-theology>

More than giving inspiration and reasons to strengthen our justice work, I believe that Isasi-Díaz offers a profound orientation to justice as the foundation *and* fruit of the spiritual life. As she wrote in her definition of a *mujerista* as read by Adalila this morning, a *mujerista* is one who “savors the struggle for justice, which is after all, one of the main reasons for living.” Can we say that we truly “savor” the struggle for justice, which is often long, daunting, and painful? She challenges us to examine our relationship to justice-work—is it something we do just on Sunday, just once in a while, or is justice our mission, as if our lives depended on it, as indeed, they do. Because building the kin-dom of God, or beloved community, is vital, holy work, and the responsibility of each and every person, not just the young or the elders, the able-bodied or the experts, nor solely the responsibility of the most visibly oppressed. Justice work is all of our work.

Isasi-Díaz writes, “For *mujerista* theologians the ongoing revelation of who God is and what God is like is to be found in our struggle for survival and justice.”<sup>7</sup> Every Sunday we sing, “Spirit of Life...move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.” Or as Cornel West puts it: “Justice is what love looks like in public.” To be a Unitarian Universalist, is to embody a justice-seeking faith. Everyday, we seek to find ways to put our faith into action by advocating for justice, equity and equality, by building right relationships and beloved community, by finding small and big ways to contribute to *la lucha*, the struggle. We know that in order for us to experience wholeness as spiritual people, we must join in creating liberation for all people.

Family, *lo cotidiano*, and justice. Rich gifts indeed that have found root and blossomed in the American Latina experience, and which we are grateful for.

I’m sure that some of you are surprised – that we made it through the whole sermon without mentioning Pope Francis even once! But, it’s not the end yet. This week the news reported on a group of women marching for immigration reform and labor justice, called, “100 Women, 100 Miles.” Beginning outside a detention center, this group of more than 100 women and men, marched to Washington DC, inspired by Pope Francis’ visit, to bring attention to the immigration crisis, and the suffering of the lives of everyday men and women. One woman, Esmeralda Dominguez, is a US citizen struck with stomach and bone cancer; her husband is undocumented and faces the risk of deportation, and is her primary caregiver. She said, “Two months ago, I couldn’t even walk. I was stuck in bed. It’s my faith in God, it’s the love I have for my family that has allowed me to walk these 100 miles . . . sometimes, our bodies say ‘enough already,’ but the spirit stays strong.”<sup>8</sup>

May *our* spirits stay strong as we struggle for justice. We join in solidarity with people all over the earth to build the kin-dom of God, beloved community. Amen and blessed be.

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<sup>7</sup> Isasi-Díaz, Ada Maria, *En la lucha: Elaborating a mujerista theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.refinery29.com/2015/09/94405/women-illegal-immigrants-pope-francis-support>