



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Bless the World

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This morning is a special occasion in worship, when we recognize new members who have entered into our congregation's covenant to walk together in love. When new members join us, it is our responsibility and our privilege to share the life-giving stories and songs of our faith, those pivotal moments which have made us who we are and defined Neighborhood as a congregation. This week as I prepared for Sunday I found myself singing one of our hymns, "May Nothing Evil Cross This Door."

The lyrics go like this:

May nothing evil cross this door,
and may ill fortune never pry about these windows;
may the roar and rain go by.
And though these sheltering walls are thin,
may they be strong to keep hate out and hold love in."

This hymn brings to mind one of our more difficult defining stories from our recent past, one many of us would like to forget.

On a July morning in 2008, a white man carrying a guitar case walked into the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Knoxville, Tennessee. With their minister on a final week of sabbatical, a children's musical was being performed for Sunday morning worship. The man walked down the hallway and as he crossed the threshold into the sanctuary, he removed a rifle from his guitar case and open fired into the congregation. He intended to continue shooting until his own life was taken by an intervening police officer. Although he was quickly restrained by courageous members of the congregation, he had already wounded nine people. Two congregants lost their lives that morning, Greg McKendry, an usher, and Linda Kraeger, a visitor from another UU congregation.

As the police learned more about the attacker, it became clear that his violent act was motivated by a hatred of Democrats, liberals, African Americans and gays. Fueled by right wing media, the gunman had been convinced that these groups of people were in his words "ruining the country." Since he couldn't directly attack liberal policy makers, he vowed to attack those who voted them into power.

The Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist church had been a beacon for liberal religion for decades, known throughout the community for their social and racial justice work, their wide spiritual embrace, and their inclusion of gays and lesbians. After the attack, the church and the larger Knoxville community was left in absolute shock, as was our denomination. This was the first time one of our churches had been the direct target of such hate-fueled terrorism. Even though we had always existed as a religious minority, never in recent times had we been so vulnerable. And we had never been so visible.

The Unitarian Universalist Association took out a full page ad in the Sunday New York Times with the headline: "Our Doors *and* Our Hearts Will Remain Open." The text, written by our Association's president at the time, Rev. Bill Sinkford, included the following message:

On August 3rd, just one week after the joy and innocence of their Sunday service was defiled by gunfire, the Tennessee Valley congregation rededicated their sanctuary to peace. Inspired by the Unitarian Universalists of Knoxville, Unitarian Universalists everywhere have rededicated themselves to our religious mission: To welcome the stranger, to love our neighbor, to work for justice, to nurture the spirits of all who seek a liberal religious home, and to help heal this wounded world. We will not give in to fear.

We will meet hatred with love. We will continue to work for justice. Our hearts, and the doors of our more than 1,000 congregations nationwide, remain open. Unitarian Universalists stand on the side of love. We invite you to stand with us.

What followed was an outpouring of love, and a resolution to redouble our efforts at becoming an even more open, hospitable religious community. Bill Sinkford had long been an advocate for marriage equality, a vocal presence at critical moments and early wins for the movement with legalization in Massachusetts, which was immediately followed by the devastating November election when voters opted for constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage in 11 states.

Sinkford's phrase "Standing on the Side of Love" came to be an essential mantra for our faith's unique presence amongst other faith voices in the public sphere. Rev. Sinkford's final gift as president was to channel the outpouring of concern around the Knoxville tragedy, coupled with the burgeoning support for marriage equality nationwide to create our Unitarian Universalist Association's most powerful and effective public advocacy campaign, what we now know as "Standing on the Side of Love." In the tradition of the faith-based organizing of the civil rights movement led by luminaries like Martin Luther King, the charge of the Standing on the Side of Love, or "Sizzle" campaign is "harnessing love's power to counter oppression." Since its inception, the SSL campaign has been a visible force for faith-based organizing, from marriage equality and transgender rights to environmental justice.

When Rev. Peter Morales became the first Latino UUA president following after Bill Sinkford, our public witness as a movement broadened and deepened. Morales' message has worked to clearly link justice and spirituality. In Morales' words: "There's no difference between spiritual values and social action. They're two sides of the same coin." Morales has been active in the immigration justice and witness struggles, most notably in Phoenix, Arizona on July 29, 2011 religious witness against unjust immigration policies where 29 UUs, clergy and lay leaders were arrested including Morales himself. The community partnerships and foundation of grassroots organizing this action created resulted in our Annual Associational Gathering being convened as "Justice General Assembly" in Phoenix in 2012.

Through these and other actions with the Standing on the Side of Love campaign, members of our Unitarian Universalist Association became known as the “love” people. With our ubiquitous marigold yellow tee shirts, we could be counted on to show up for justice, to put our bodies on the line and raise our voices as people of faith and moral conscience.

What started as a campaign largely about marriage equality has evolved to be a wide-ranging umbrella to confront the issues of the day. And our congregations have evolved too. This congregation played a huge role in the struggle for marriage equality in California. One of the most proud moments of this congregation was in how you came together and organized over the course of many years. Starting over 20 years ago, your work was internal, building a culture of beloved community where gay and lesbian families felt welcome. When it came time to join the struggle for marriage equality, the personal was political. Your witness came naturally from your commitment to relationships, and justice for our families. You put up the banner outside which said “Love Makes a Family,” “Support marriage equality” and “We stand on the side of love.” For those of you who were here at the time, you know that the banner was not uncontroversial at the time. It was slashed and taken down multiple times, one time on Christmas day. The police were called, and hate crimes were reported. But you persisted. You kept putting up signs, one after another until the sign that we have come to know and love today was installed more permanently, safeguarded from vandals. You held peace rallies and marched together. In September of 2007 you designated our campus as a “hate-free zone,” and wrapped the sanctuary and grounds in ribbon to show our commitment to love and justice.

When marriage equality became of the law of the land this summer, Unitarian Universalist congregations like ours celebrated. The Supreme Court decision was handed down while we were at General Assembly in Portland, Oregon. Thousands of Unitarian Universalists gathered in song and praise that the day had finally come. Members of our congregation Melinda and Grady Goddard appeared on the GA stage as we rejoiced and took stock in the fruition of years of organizing and hard work, and the deep affirmation that came with the recognition of full equality.

We are now at a crossroads in our life as a denomination and as a congregation. The marriage equality struggle that we fought for so many years is now a reality. What we have learned from the Standing on the Side of Love campaign is that our struggles are interconnected and intersectional, and our justice approaches need to follow this model as well. Black feminist Audre Lorde once said: “There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”

When three young, queer Black Women created the hashtag #Black Lives Matter, they changed the conversation about racial justice with their particular brand of social media activism and street protest highlighting police brutality and anti-black racism. In the wake of police killings of black men and women in Ferguson, Los Angeles, Cleveland, New York, and Baltimore, Unitarian Universalists naturally joined in, as we have in other struggles for racial justice. We have marched, protested, and showed up. Our Standing on the Side of Love t-shirts have

adopted the black and yellow logo of the movement for black lives. Marriage equality signs have been supplemented or supplanted with “Black Lives Matter” signs on our campuses. Perhaps naively, many congregations were not prepared for the eerily similarly vitriolic responses received during their witness for marriage equality. Many banners have been stolen or slashed, left for the congregation to see the visible artifact of the crime. The most common vandalizing has been the removal of the word “Black” from the banner, leaving a gaping hole in its place.

The [River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation](#) wanted to highlight the struggles of their black brothers and sisters by placing a "Black Lives Matter" sign outside their Bethesda church. After vandals defaced it, all that's left is "Lives Matter." Churches in Illinois have received threats and false claims that they are anti-police, anti-white and anti-Christian. They have been bullied and intimidated in their insistence in their claim to sustain a commitment to “Black Lives,” not simply “all lives.” This blatant resistance has not stopped our congregations from persisting in their efforts. The River Road church has a movement for Black Lives vigil every Friday on their property, and have invited the community to join in.

As our congregations began this commitment on the grassroots level, our Association supported and amplified these efforts, making it possible for us to step into a place of solidarity on a national level. Sunday, June 28, the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in Portland voted to adopt an Action of Immediate Witness in support of the Movement for Black Lives. After the passionate GA session, youth and young adults of color [moved into the street](#) for a “die-in” blocking traffic, chanting “Black Lives Matter.” It was a powerful moment of affirming our faith’s prophetic imperative to stand on the side of love, a moment that will shape the direction of our inclusive, justice centered liberal faith movement going forward. The song heard at this witness was: “I can hear my neighbor singing I can’t breathe. Now I’m in the struggle singing I can’t leave. We’re not gonna stop, till people are free.”

Our future is in front of us as a denomination, as a faith. Through our unfailing commitment to love and justice, of inclusion, worth and dignity, of lives mattering and particularly at this time in history black lives mattering, we have made our congregations vulnerable. Now we must make our congregations accountable. As we discovered that fateful day in Knoxville those many years ago, our commitment to love has made us vulnerable to be a target for hate. In keeping our doors open, in standing up for black lives and gay lives and trans lives and poor lives, we are bearing a fraction of the burden of racist, homophobic and transphobic hatred in our world. And there is so much to bear, sometimes it is unbearable. As we rejoiced in the achievement of marriage equality, nine members of Mother Emanuel Church were murdered by a white supremacist during their Bible study. Church burnings all over the South have followed, including five historically black congregations in the St. Louis area over these past two weeks. As we hear these horrific acts of violence, we take comfort in our freedom to worship in safety, and hold up our message of love and unity, our neighbors in faith are simply fighting to exist, and to worship freely while black.

Whose congregations are vulnerable? Whose are truly free? And whose congregations have the freedom to stand in solidarity?

This congregation has been convening conversations about race and racism for years, with the wonderful presence of Beloved Conversations, Neighborhood People of Color, and through our social justice program. Over these past six months, in our new ministry we have been having more, building our capacity, internally and externally, to be a truly multicultural beloved community, and to be in accountable partnerships with communities of color. Next week we add another layer to our community conversation, with the addition of a group for white people to have a safe place to gather courage and support for their important role in dismantling racism. These efforts are generating power and energy for action. In November, I have been invited to participate in a multi-racial, multi-faith Moral Imagination Retreat called *Re-Visioning Racial Justice in Faith Communities*. It is convened by the Faith Matters network, Showing Up for Racial Justice, the Unitarian Universalist Association and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice. I will bring back my learnings, and listen deeply for where we are being called to show up as leaders and be of service. This winter and spring, we will continue our conversations together here on campus, and move towards action and community partnerships.

What next steps will we take to show our support for the movement for Black Lives? How are we willing to make ourselves vulnerable to stand in solidarity? I want to close with a powerful quote from Dr. Martin Luther King:

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral,
begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.
Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.
Through violence you may murder the liar,
but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth.
Through violence you may murder the hater,
but you do not murder hate.
In fact, violence merely increases hate.
So it goes.
Returning violence for violence multiplies violence,
adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.
Darkness cannot drive out darkness:
only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.

May we be just in our loving, and in our loving just. May love call us into our future together.
May it be so, and amen.