



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

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### Holding the Center

Rev. Lissa Gundlach, Senior Minister

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Delivered at First Unitarian Church of Portland

Good morning. I want to thank you for having me this morning and bring my greetings from the Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Pasadena, California. I have served there as Senior Minister for two years, and before that served as Assistant minister at All Souls in New York City. I offer gratitude to Rev. Sinkford for the gift to share the pulpit this morning, and to send my blessings to him as he gives of his time and talent to serve our Association at a critical moment in our history. I want to send gratitude and blessings to our co-presidents Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt and Leon Spencer, and the UUA board and moderator Jim Key.

This Sunday morning and next, over 600 congregations across the country have committed to addressing racism and white supremacy in the Unitarian Universalist Association. As I preach this morning, I am acutely aware of the space I take up as a white minister.

Our ministers and religious educators have been engaged in a conversation about the dynamics of white supremacy that lie deeply embedded in our Unitarian Universalist culture.

They are asking us to take a hard look in the mirror. When you look at our UUA, our churches and our worship-- whose experience is valued, and whose is discounted? Who controls the center of our faith?

Many people of color in our faith are asking whose faith it this, anyway?

Growing up in the church, I've often said that Unitarian Universalism is the most mono-cultural institution I've been a part of, and looking back I can see clearly how our churches have awarded power and wealth to white people again and again. I remember being on the youth adult committee as a teenager in Massachusetts. I often puzzled about why the first African American woman minister to serve the church did not stay for very long.

In my adult career as a Unitarian Universalist minister, I've consistently served on all-white staff teams and in congregations with majority white lay leadership of board and committees. I have noticed the power imbalances in staff team dynamics—people of color in the lowest wage positions and white men at the top, and noticed the huge pay gaps between executive level and other staff salaries.

I've now gone to two senior minister gatherings and seen how few people of color have secured the highest-level positions in our denomination. I've listened to the voices of leaders and ministers of color pained by the racism they have experienced in our institutions and in my own congregation.

And yet, I'll admit it was hard at first to hear the phrase "white supremacy" and not feel defensive, even angry. It is hard for me to link the observations about our Unitarian Universalist culture of white leadership with such an ugly phrase. And you very well might feel that way too.

For many liberal white people, there could be no group that we wish to farther distance ourselves from then white supremacists. We think of white nationalist groups like the KKK and other alt-right groups who commit racially motivated hate crimes like lynching and church burnings, people who denigrate Jewish

cemeteries with swastikas and call bomb threats into Mosques. I heard there were protests in Portland yesterday – “free speech” protesters spouting hateful rhetoric against immigrants, and progressive counter protesters. One video I saw literally had the two sides of mostly white people yelling back and forth across a chain link fence.

No, we are the good white people on the other side of the fence, the people who care about racial justice and Black Lives Matter, the ones who traveled to Selma to march with Dr. King during the Civil Rights movement, the ones who do Beloved Conversations and strive to diversify our churches and our lives, both of which we admit are sometimes isolated from communities of color, segregated by race and class. We are angry at these bad racist white people who ruin it for the good whites. And we hate to think that white supremacist culture could somehow infect our lives, even and especially our most sacred spaces.

But as you might suspect, whether we like the phrase or not, what is meant by white supremacy culture doesn't care about whether we white people are racist or anti-racist, wealthy or poor, although it has a clear preference for rich ones, and a clear disdain for poor ones, hence the derogatory term white trash. White supremacy is a force much larger than any blatant act of racially motivated hatred. It's actually deeply woven into our personal attitudes, our culture and our institutions in a way that we can't often see. But it is working tirelessly to secure the most benefits for white people and the least benefits for people of color. Sometimes, white supremacy simply short changes people of color, sometimes, it actively harms them, sometimes, it kills them, whether by the hands of police or life-shortening health disparities.

White supremacy culture is having a real heyday in our world right now, with one of the wealthiest white male Americans in our highest office, surrounded by other white men who subscribe to white nationalist ideals. And it's not just in the United States, white nationalism has permeated Europe with the anti-immigrant Brexit decision and the outspoken French Nationalism of Marine LePen.

Just looking at the video of activists yelling at each other yesterday, or any rally around the world, and you'll see that the main fuel for the fire of white supremacy is anger.

White people are angry at Muslims and immigrants and black people and Mexicans.

They are angry at the multicultural world that has been growing and transforming our globe.

Yes, it's understandable that it would be hard for us good liberal white people to hear that we, too, are somehow implicated in this system of white supremacy that somehow associates us with Steve Bannon. But don't we too feel the anger that fuels this system, more acutely when we have been called out for our association with it. We are angry at other liberal whites for not being progressive enough in our attitudes about race, angry at conservative whites for being the “real” racists, and angry at people of color and more radical whites for bringing up white supremacy in the first place.

People in our faith movement are angry at one another.

In his book *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, the activist Paul Kivel writes:

*A person of color who is angry about discrimination or harassment is doing us a service. That person is pointing out something wrong, something that contradicts the ideals of equality set forth in the US Constitution and Bill of Rights. They are bringing our attention to a problem that needs solving, a wrong that needs righting. We could convey our appreciation by saying, “Thank you, your anger has helped me see what's not right here.”*

*We could say, "Thank you for pointing out the racism because I want to know whenever it is occurring," or "I appreciate your honesty. Let's see what we can do about this situation."*

*What keeps us from responding in this way?*

*More often white people get scared and disappear or become defensive and counterattack.*

*In any case, we don't focus on the root of the problem, and racism goes unattended. When people of color are angry about racism, it is legitimate anger. It is not their oversensitivity but our lack of sensitivity that causes this communication gap. People of color are vulnerable to the abuse of racism every day. It is the anger and actions of people of color that call our attention to the injustice of racism. It is tremendously draining, costly and personally devastating for people of color to have to rage about racism. They often end up losing their friends, their livelihoods, even their lives. Rather than attacking them for their anger, we need to examine the layers of complacency, ignorance and privilege we have put into place which require so much outrage to get our attention.*

*The anger may be a more assertive attempt to break through our complacency to address some core beliefs or actions. Many white people have been taught to see anger and conflict as signs of failure. They may instead be signs we're becoming more honest, dealing with the real differences and problems in our lives. If it is not safe enough to disagree, express anger and struggle with each other, what kind of relationship can we have?*

The conversation about white supremacy in our Unitarian Universalist Association is important for us to have. But unfortunately we don't always have the "ears to hear" it. Sometimes, we are deafened by our own anger. Sometimes, we are deafened by our own whiteness.

In his recently published book "Age of Anger," Indian journalist Pankaj Mishra asks questions about the foundation upon which liberal social democracies like ours are built.

He asks:

*How do we explain our age of anger?*

*Why do racism and misogyny abound on social media?*

*Why are lying demagogues gaining more popularity?*

In Mishra's view, both liberals and conservatives are angry that the reality of the modern world is so far from their religious and philosophical ideals. Everyone is angry, and pointing the finger at everyone else. Mishra calls it a "toxic culture of resentment." In his view, we have to get to the root biases embedded in our liberal democratic culture, including white supremacy. On the left, our own anger is sparked as we become aware that our foundation of liberal idealism, may actually be culturally specific to the 18<sup>th</sup> century white men who built it and not actually universal at all. To admit that the foundations of liberalism are somehow racist would disrupt our fundamental sense of who we are as Americans and as Unitarian Universalists.

He writes:

*The stunning events of our age of anger, and our perplexity before them, make it imperative that we anchor thought in the sphere of emotions; these upheavals demand nothing less than a radically enlarged understanding of what it means for human beings to pursue the contradictory ideals of freedom, equality and prosperity. With*

*so many of our landmarks in ruins, we can barely see where we are headed, let alone chart a path. But even to get our basic bearings we need, above all, greater precision in matters of the soul.*

Once we address the inherent biases of our liberal ideals and how they translate into our practices, we might in fact be freer to work towards a real liberation that does not ignore or paper over the reality of racism, but rather addresses it head on with real spiritual solutions.

Remember the W.B. Yeats poem *the Second Coming*.

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;*

W.B. Yeats' poem was written directly after the devastation and disillusionment at the conclusion of the first World War. It begins with the beautiful image of a falcon and a falconer, a graceful and powerful bird of prey trained to fly, but only so high that the falcon can hear the falconer's call to return to captivity.

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;*

The falcon is out of reach, and either cannot hear or is ignoring the calls of the falconer. The bird suddenly understands that it is actually wild and free, untethered to the commands of the falconer. The illusion that the falconer was in control all along is broken, and all hell breaks loose.

*"Things fall apart; the center cannot hold."*

Yeats' poem beautifully illustrates our current power struggles in Unitarian Universalism. With the current resignations and re-orientation of our UUA, the reality that white people have controlled the majority of leadership in the institutions of our faith has now been illuminated. We cannot deny it. But we can change it. The powerful surge of leadership from people of color is making our faith stronger, more beautiful and more inclusive. The kinds of changes that are being called for have the potential to center the experiences, voices and leadership from people of color in a more real and honest way. But white people need to listen, learn, and to stay at the table. We can't let our own anger paralyze us in defensiveness. We need to be prepared to share and even sacrifice our power, wealth and status within our churches to allow our churches to transform in the way we know they need to, even if that means setting our hopes not on this generation but on generations to come.

Remember the words of Paul Tillich in *Shaking of the Foundations* as he wondered if the great cities of Europe, shattered but not broken, would rise again. In the devastation, he saw the same possibility inherent in the world's beginning.

He wrote:

*There is something immovable, unchangeable, unshakeable, eternal, which becomes manifest in our passing and in the crumbling of our world... on the boundaries of the finite the infinite becomes visible.*

Things have fallen apart. The foundation of our modern-day faith has been shaken, the fault lines have been exposed. The center of our faith is changing to reveal a new world of infinite possibilities waiting to be born, the bold and beautiful beloved community for which we long.

So let us together to awaken to the reality of the world we live in, and to have the courage to imagine a new future where white supremacy does not choke us at our roots but rather liberates them for our future to form new roots that grow deep and wide into the next generations. The very soul of our faith is at stake.

I close in the spirit of prayer, written by Kenny Wiley.

*Spirit of life whom I know as God: be with us as over 600 UU communities embark together on an unprecedented journey of internal reflection.*

*a prayer for anger, hope, courage, and faith.*

*May Unitarian Universalists of color have the space to feel what they feel and be where they are. For those with anger, may it be received not with defensiveness, but in faith.*

*Allow courage to guide our souls. Give us the courage, God, to listen, to share, to try, to keep working.*

*And may our religion's members choose faith over fear.*

May it be so, and Amen.