

Coming Home

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The Unitarian Society of Hartford

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Our opening words this morning come from Rev. Hosea Ballou, a founding father of Universalism and from President Barak Obama. Words taken from his Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney, one of the nine victims of the shootings at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston SC.

Hosea Ballou wrote in 1834; "It is well known, and will be acknowledged by every candid person, that the human heart is capable of becoming soft, or hard; kind, or unkind; merciful or unmerciful, by education and habit. "

And President Barak Obama "...justice grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other...my liberty depends on you being free, too. ...An open heart. That, more than any particular policy or analysis, is what's called upon right now."

Our reading this morning is taken from a New York Times Op Ed entitled, "*Why I Can't Forgive Dylann Roof*" by Roxanne Gay.

I DO NOT forgive Dylann Roof, a racist terrorist whose name I hate saying or knowing. I have no immediate connection to what happened in Charleston, S.C., last week beyond my humanity and my blackness, but I do not foresee ever forgiving his crimes, and I am wholly at ease with that choice.

I was raised Catholic. The line "and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." I always got stuck on that part. It's a nice idea that we could forgive those who might commit the same sins we are apt to commit, but surely there must be a line. Surely there are some trespasses most of us would not commit. What then?

Newspapers across the country shared headlines of forgiveness from the families of the nine slain. The dominant media narrative vigorously embraced that notion of forgiveness, seeming to believe that if we forgive we have somehow found a way to make sense of the incomprehensible.

The call for forgiveness is a painfully familiar refrain when black people suffer. White people embrace narratives about forgiveness so they can pretend the world is a fairer place than it actually is, and that racism is merely a vestige of a painful past instead of this indelible part of our present.

Black people forgive because we need to survive. We have to forgive time and time again while racism or white silence in the face of racism continues to thrive. We have had to forgive slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynching, inequity in every realm, mass incarceration, voter disenfranchisement, inadequate representation in popular culture, microaggressions and more. We forgive and forgive and forgive and those who trespass against us continue to trespass against us.

I, for one, am done forgiving.

Our sermon this morning is entitled - "Coming Home." Home as a metaphor for that place where all are welcome. That place within ourselves and wherever two or more are gathered and everyone is seen and treated as a person of worth and dignity.

Home, as a symbol for radical inclusivity and acceptance is the place where we embody our first Unitarian Universalist principle of the inherent worth and dignity of all people. If we are to actualize this principle we must welcome people home.

To live on this earth as though we are home. To make our hearts, and our lives, places where others know that they are home, requires much from us. The guiding force of this work is accountability. So I ask you this morning to consider as you hear these words. Where are you being less than fully accountable? How are you being called to *up* your accountability? Because the world needs accountable people.

Our Universalist forbearer's believed in the possibility of this kind of home. It is indeed the bedrock for our first principle; the inherent worth and dignity of all people. The primary theological message of our Universalist ancestors was that predestination is not a forgone conclusion. Predestination was a prevailing belief well into the 19th century that an all-powerful Creator decided before you were even born your ultimate fate. You came into this lifetime with your fate sealed. You would either go to heaven or to hell.

The early Universalists believed in free will. They believed that all people had the right, the opportunity to go to heaven, that is was our job as humans to choose how to live our days, that as we chose to live good lives, the world would become a better and more loving place.

There were the "ultra Universalists," like Hosea Ballou who believed that all souls immediately went to heaven when they died. This is what many of us think of when we mention Universalism. But in fact, most early Universalists believed instead that all people would ultimately get to heaven. Depending upon the kind of life they led that might happen immediately upon death, or it may happen in stages.

As time went by the message of universal salvation converged into one message of salvation for all people. So it is that in 1985 when our seven principles were adopted the concept of an afterlife was not such a disputed topic among our members. But the message of universal salvation lives on in our covenant to affirm the worth and dignity of every human being.

Today we continue to struggle with how to do our part in making the world a place where all are welcome and loved. We do so, I believe, first and foremost by holding ourselves accountable.

We hold ourselves accountable to truth and honest self-reflection. We become willing to see our blind spots and to do the hard work of changing them. We cannot do this alone. We need to be in relationship with people who know us, who will call us on our actions and love us into truth. We need people who will carry on the work when we are tired, need a rest, and ultimately when we die. Most of all we need people who will push us, challenge us and hold us accountable to living into our Unitarian Universalist principles. We need to be in community.

When I first heard of the shootings in South Carolina this tragedy hit me harder than others in recent times. Why? Because I had become a minister? Well, kind of. Because I had been doing work in developing a deeper understanding of my white privilege and the systemic evil of racism? Yes. But ultimately it was because I was held accountable. I was called to grow in ways that I would never have done on my own, both because it's hard work, and because I was blind to its need.

It started three years ago. I was sitting at a massive oak table around which sat eight members of a credentialing committee. I was mid-way through my ministerial formation and was meeting with this group of appointed ministers, and lay leaders. Their job was to help me discern where I needed to focus my time and energy during the remainder of my ministerial preparation.

“So...tell us about a time when you knowingly hurt a person of another race.” They asked me. “Wow. That’s a good question. Let me think about that. I’m sure that I have...give me a minute.” They waited patiently. I told a story of a time when I made an erroneous assumption about a person based on their name. Knowing that it wasn’t exactly what they were looking for.

“When my daughter Ginger was young, she came home from preschool one day eager to tell me about a new friend that she had made. She wanted me to call the mother of this child and schedule a ‘play date’. Ginger went on to tell me that her new friend was funny, liked to jump rope and was from Ethiopia. Looking at the address and phone number on the slip of

paper that she gave me I assumed that it was an apartment complex. Would I have made that assumption if I knew the child was white? I don't think so. As it turns out the family didn't live in an apartment. The father was a top executive at a CT corporation and they lived in a home that could honest be described as a mansion.

I was ashamed of myself for making such an assumption based on the color of their skin, I told the committee.

They were kind in their responses but encouraged me to pursue experiential work in the area of anti-racism over the next two years. And so I did, begrudgingly at first. I was ashamed not only of my lack of experience or knowledge in this area, but even more at the fact that it wasn't top on my list of how I wanted to spend my next two years learning about ministry.

But I am accountable to our minister's association and to our faith. I completed my parish internship in an urban setting, taught the "Examining Whiteness" curriculum of the UUA, and met with congregants and community members monthly to examine issues of race, nationally, locally and most of all, personally.

In May of this year, Rev. Florence Clarke, Pastor of the AME Walls Temple in New London came with a dozen or so of her congregants to share her life story with our group. In her late seventies, Florence grew up in Charleston South Carolina. She played on the steps of the Emanuel African Methodist Church. It wasn't her family's congregation but it was the only place that she and her friends could run freely without fear of being confronted by the police for misbehaving.

We sat mesmerized by her tales. Honored by the openness with which she shared. Inspired by the hope of a budding relationship between the members of our two congregations.

Thus it was that we worshipped together, in Walls Temple on Sunday June 21st, four days after the shooting. When my colleague in New London, Rev. Carolyn Patierno learned of the shooting the first thing that she did was to call Florence. "I will never forget the sound of her voice." Carolyn told me. "It was the sound of human agony." We must go I told Carolyn. So we called members of the congregation who had been working on issues of race for the past

two years, and we all walked together, carrying our flowers from Flower Communion Sunday to Walls Temple AME Church. We were met with graciousness and open arms. We sang, we prayed together.

I have to believe that Florence and the work that the members of the congregation and I did together, month after month. That was why the shootings in South Carolina hit me so hard. No longer was this hypothetical, theoretical, or even theological. It was about being accountable to our values and to our relationships.

We are not islands. We are inextricably linked to each other. When one of us hurts we all hurt. Until all of us are free, none of us will be free. In his eulogy to Rev. Pinkney, President Obama eulogy spoke of accountability. He said, "to put our faith in action is more than individual salvation, it's about our collective salvation; that to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the homeless is not just a call for isolated charity but the imperative of a just society."

It was here in this church, The Unitarian Society of Hartford --- in these pews, down these hallways, that I learned of my own worth and dignity. I came here some twenty years ago seeking a community of believers, a place where I could raise my children in religious community, where all people were valued, where my sins, and my brokenness would not preclude my being welcomed. I came seeking a place to call my spiritual home. In return I found healing and love. I tried on being a leader, I found my voice in our board meetings, annual meetings, committee meetings. I became a part of, I became accountable. Ultimately I found a connection so deep within myself that I said yes to the call of ministry.

As Unitarian Universalists we are called to live our first principle; to see and uphold the worth and dignity of every human being. Specifically we are being called to put our first principle into action by engaging with the Black Lives Matter campaign.

Where does this challenge you? Is it hard for you to understand Roxanne Gay, and her words, "I, for one, am done forgiving."? Or do you join her in closing your heart? Have you seriously considered the impact that your own racism has on the world and the people around

you? Are you learning and growing with others? Or are you tired? Skeptical? None of us have arrived we all have work to do.

We start by being accountable to ourselves and one another. We work on developing a keen awareness of our privilege. If we are a few steps ahead on that part of the journey, we organize a circle where others can gather in safety and openness to learn. When people like Roxanne Gay tell us of their inability to forgive, we do not judge, rather we forgive for her. Ultimately we work until all we can welcome all who come to our doors. The doors of our homes, this congregation or our heart. We welcome them. We welcome them home.

Amen and Blessed Be