

**The Idolatry of Nationalism**  
**Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson**  
**July 5, 2015**

On the evening of Wednesday, June 18th, more than two weeks ago, I and my children were checked into a hotel in Spearfish, South Dakota.

After they had gone to sleep, I got on twitter, as usual, to catch up on the news of the world; this is where I learned about the massacre in Charleston.

I was on my way to the annual meeting of Unitarian Universalists in Portland, with a stop in Seattle, to see family.

And I was confident that Erin Djika Holly, who was the preacher that Sunday, would speak to your feelings of grief, sorrow, and resolve.

I heard she did that, very ministerially. Yes?

Good.

During the week at the annual meeting, the topic of the shooting came up, and much more than that came up. The struggle against racism, to which our religious movement has been committed, off and on, for two hundred years.

This year, it's called "Black Lives Matter." And Unitarian Universalists — white and black and brown — are part of leading the struggle around the country.

In 1965, it was civil rights, and Unitarian Universalists of all colors marched and sat and sang and some paid with their lives.

In 1909, it was the founding of the NAACP, the founders including white Unitarian ministers.

In the 1840's and 50's, it was the abolition of slavery, for which our ancestors gave their treasure, their voice, and, yes, their lives.

There are gaps in that record. There are times when we failed the task, when it was too expensive to the reputation, or too hard to understand.

Yet, more often than not, we've shown up for the work.

And in Portland, we talked about this a lot.

About the risks to soul and body, about the imperative to struggle, about what it means to believe that all people have worth.

All people.

All people.

All people.

To live in this country which has never been American  
to all -

yet the promise, the hope, remains like a beacon in a  
stormy sea.

We celebrated, too; we celebrated the win for marriage  
equality. We were so glad!

One of the first people I saw after I heard the news  
was the Rev. Lisa Presely. Lisa is one of the  
congregational life staff for our region, and she's based  
out of Michigan, which didn't have marriage equality  
until Justice Anthony Kennedy said,

"it is so ordered."

And so Lisa's marriage, of more than two decades, was  
now recognized by the law.

I hugged her, and she wept, and I wept.

So, friends, this is America. A land of oppression and  
freedom, of struggle and promise, of discrimination  
and progress.

Of hope.

A land of hope.

Not yet realized.

But possible.

And we Unitarian Universalists asked ourselves the question:

How can we fight for racial justice as successfully as we fought for marriage equality?

It is a different fight. A harder one.

Despite the protestations of some on the religious right, recognizing the marriage rights, and equal dignity, of gay and lesbian people doesn't really cost straight people anything. Unless you are living a closeted life, nothing really changes if gay and lesbian folks get to be out and proud.

That's not the case for racial justice.

As Langston Hughes knew, and all those who pay attention know, the racial caste system in this country is deeply tied into structures of economic and political power.

It isn't about who gets to marry. It's about who gets paid a fair day's wage. And who gets to vote. And

whose story is counted as truth. And who gets to use violence to enforce their will. And who gets to decide where they live and who their neighbors are.

Two hundred years from now, historians will say one of two things:

They will say, America was founded on racism and overcame it. Or they will say, we didn't.

American was founded on racism - it's true. Southern slave owners sided with the revolution because they correctly believed that the new nation would be more friendly to slavery than the British.

Those who wanted to steal native land sided with the revolution because they correctly believed the new nation would allow "westward expansion" instead of respecting, more or less, the sovereignty of the American Indian nations, as the British did.

Yet, there are those who have dreamed a larger dream; who believed that Jefferson's words - all men are created equal - all people, even, all people are created equal - who believed that Jefferson's words were more important than his deeds. Those who want America to be America.

I cast my lot with that struggle, with that work, and I ask you, in the spirit of the best of this country, the best of our hearts, to join in the struggle and the work. To build a life, a country, a world, of justice and peace for all people.

It isn't easy work. They'll fill the swimming pool with concrete. It'll hurt something awful. But they you have to hold hands and walk into the general store.

At least six black churches have been burned since that massacre in Charleston. Two weeks.

Is it 2015 or is it 1963? or 1864?

The backlash against the claim that black lives matter, that black folks are full human beings, full citizens, the backlash against this notion is often violent.

But the image I love from the last few weeks is this one:

Bree Newsome scaling the flag pole to remove the flag of a traitorous, racist regime.

I didn't know about Bree before this, but she's a long-time activist and voice for justice in the south. Like Rosa Parks, who spent years in the struggle before she

refused to give up her seat, Bree Newsome has spent her life in this work.

And this picture, this act, is so beautiful.

It's past time.

I want this to be our inspiration.

What heights will you climb to remove the powers and principalities of oppression?

What heights will you climb for justice?

We've ordered a black lives matter banner to put up at the entrance to the church, down at the bottom of the driveway. If it gets stolen or defaced, we'll order a new one - and we know that might happen.

What convinced me that we needed to put one up was the burning of these churches. The places where people go to find courage and sustenance in this world, to have dignity - robbed of that feeling of safety.

What convinced me was the preaching and the discussion at that Portland meeting - what will we do to honor our vision and our faith? Including the passing of a resolution that says that UU's support the Black Lives Matter movement. And we do.

What convinced me was reading, from afar, about the abuse and disrespect toward the Rockford Housing Authority, it's staff and it's residents. I was ashamed of this town, and thought, we need to do better.

What convinced me was reading, from afar, the statements of folks like the exec. director of the RHA, my friend, Ron Clewer, to keep working on it, not give up, and, on separate matters, to know the commitment of the chief of police, and so many of our own force, to have a department that respects everyone - this makes me very proud of our town. It is not like that everywhere, folks.

What convinced me was knowing the work that so many of you do - personally and professionally - to improve the lives of those on the margins, to work for their safety and insist on their dignity and responsibility, to raise anti-racist children and become anti-racist adults.

What convinced me was Bree Newsome atop the flag pole.

It's the least we can do.

When we marched last fall, in solidarity with the marchers in Ferguson, we chanted, "Black Lives Matter! All Lives Matter! Black Lives Matter! All Lives Matter!" I was proud to be part of that march that day.

All lives matter. We are Universalists, and this is our heart claim.

All people matter. All are loved and worthy and deserve dignity.

All lives matter - we affirm the universal truth.

And in a society that for 500 years says black lives don't matter, it is necessary to spell out, explicitly, the particular application of our general principle:

black lives matter.

Putting up a sign is good stuff, but it's the beginning at best. We continue here at this church to work for racial justice - in coalitions with others, through our education, preaching, and teaching ministry, in our personal and civic lives.

You're going to hear more about this from me and others in the church all year. I urge you to cast your lot with the struggle, the work. To join hands and walk into the general store.

What might that mean, in particular? What might it mean to make America American again, though it never was?

A few ideas:

One thing we can all do is learn our history better.

I saw online this week that those most supportive of the confederate flag knew the least about the facts of the civil war. Not a shocker, I suppose.

But even those of us who think we are enlightened are often ignorant of the true history of this country. Everything from the size of the middle passage, the role of supposed "great Americans" in the support of slavery, the horrors of Jim Crow, the reality of housing segregation - up to and including the present day.

Start with "the case for reparations" by Ta-Nehsi Coats, the twitter feed of Bree Newsome, or Frederick Douglass' 1841 speech, "What to a slave is the 4th of July?" Just to name a few. All found online. I'll be making more suggestions as the year goes on, for those who want to learn more.

The more you know, the more you'll know what it means and what it takes to oppose the regime of oppression and to work for justice.

Another thing, especially for those of us who are white, is to be the kind of white person where folks don't say racist things around you. Have a reputation as the one it's not OK to be racist around.

Let me tell you a story about that.

I was in Jr. High when I heard my first racist joke. It was in the locker room after gym, and it was a horrible joke. I won't repeat it, but I remember it exactly. I was shocked. I was a lowly 7th grader and these were big 9th graders; we were unclothed and unsupervised in a locker room. I dared not say anything.

In 8th grade, however, with some encouragement from my church, I started being the one at the lunch table who would say "that's not funny" when someone made an anti-gay joke or a racist joke. And I lost a few friends, but gained others, and folks stopped making those jokes around me.

And it is rare these days that I find myself in a place where people don't know who I am and what I do. But, it happens sometimes. And someone, seeing the paleness of my skin, assumes that I agree with their internalized white supremacy.

They'll say something. These days, I don't even have to say "that's not funny." I just give them the side-eye. And they know I ain't on that team.

In Portland, three of us Unitarian ministers took an Uber right from one place to another late at night, and

the driver and we were talking about the experience. He started to say something about the different neighborhoods there, and it became quite clear to him real quick that despite the middle-class whiteness of his passengers, digs about some people and some parts of town weren't going to fly with us. He changed topics and asked what brought us to town. "God bless you" he couldn't say fast enough.

Be the kind of person where folks realize that maybe racism isn't actually appropriate in polite company. Even all-white company. It's not everything, but it's a good thing.

One more thing you can do, of course, is work on policy. Stand by those trying to do effective community policing, where public safety and respect for all are not opposed but go hand in hand.

It can be done!

Work for economic justice and quality education and yes, work against housing discrimination. Pick your particular issue - there are plenty - research, and get to work.

We know how to do this. The fight for marriage equality was never ours alone - it was not led by us or won by us alone. But we played a key role - we were trendsetters, early allies, and a moral, religious voice.

We took a stand when it was unpopular, and rejoiced when others eventually joined us.

We can do the same here.

We've a long history of being in the work for justice, a history that needs our continuing participation.

Get ready, get to work, and keep at it.

History marches in the direction of the drummer, so drum for justice, drum for inclusion, drum for equality for all.

It's the day after Independence Day. We've celebrated, and that's all good. Now is the time to get to work.

America is not yet America. But it can still be.

The land of peace can be.

The land of justice can be.

The land of freedom can be.

I do not believe we have always done right. I am no nationalist.

But.

I believe in the possibility of this country - that we can do better.

That, I think, makes me a patriot. To me, this is all the difference.

So let us do the work, join the struggle, be the beacon, keep learning, keep trying, and build the world of our dreams.

And let us sing.