

**One Nation?
July 5, 2020
Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson**

I want to speak about this topic
this question
are we one nation?
can America be America, for the first time?
is that a worthy project?
what would it mean to be united?

I want to speak about this question
without resorting to clichés
to bromides about understanding, harmony,
and some “common American values”

I want to talk about this
in a way that is real,
and theologically grounded,
in our faith,
our liberal faith,
not the liberal politics that many of us share, actually,
but our liberal faith tradition,
a liberal tradition that is reaching to be both liberal and
liberationary,
and without stock-phrases
or easy pot-shots at those
who exploit division
for gain
it's too easy,
a slam dunk on a four foot rim,
unworthy of this sacred time.

What does it mean to be an American?
I mean, really, what does it mean?
To see past the myths and the stories we were told,
and to inherit –

by birth, by choice, by force, by history, by possibility –
to inherit this tragic, messy, heroic, villainous, story?

chimamanda ngozi Adichie, the Nigerian novelist,
has reminded us of the “danger of a single story” –
and I want to start there.

I grew up thinking that American had a single story.
Even in my liberal household, my well-educated home,
my pretty-good schools,
there was an American story.

You know it too, I bet.
Brilliant men threw off the yoke of British Tyranny,
to form a new nation.
Those men were followed by other brilliant men, heroes,
thinkers,
and soon, some women, even,
and they made the country better,
struggles for justice happened, with heroes who led the way
against people who were noble, but wrong,
or just wrong, sometimes,
and later, other men went and fought for freedom,
in Europe and Asia, mostly,
and people invented things,
and explored places,
and named things.
And the journey is unfinished, but progress goes on,
and though America is not yet united,
we are on our way.

The danger of a single story.

Here’s another story.
Colonists, looking for land to make theirs,
arrived, massacred the people who lived here,
kidnapped and enslaved others to till that land,

enslaved their children and profited from the free labor,
and projected its imperial power around the globe,
to control the distribution of everything from bananas to oil.
When those oppressed rose up,
and violence failed to stop their rising,
modest incremental improvements were offered to appease
their larger demands
for justice and reparations.
To this day, the descendants of those whose land was
stolen
and people were massacred
fight to protect their water, which is life,
from the black snake of the DAPL pipeline and other
pipelines
which destroy the land and the water.

Is that story true?

It's surely as true as the first one.

Here's another story.

There was a time when American was great.
A vibrant middle class,
with access to education, jobs, hope,
and something went wrong.
What went wrong is its own story,
and there are many versions,
some say it was upending the racial hierarchy,
others say it was the attack on labor unions,
or it was globalization,
or partisanship,
or disinvestment and tax cuts,
or all of the above
but something went wrong,
and from the left or the right or the middle,
there is a longing to get back to where we were,

to be united again.

Is that story true?

Not fully.

But it's not fully untrue either, is it?

The danger of a single story.

How can a nation of 50 states, one disenfranchised capital district,
and five inhabited territories,
and 326 Indigenous land areas,
a nation of 331 million people,
have a single story?

Doesn't any single story erase all the variation,
all the nuance, all the complication?

And, in this country, the single story
is so often a story of whiteness:
it centers whiteness.

How white folks came here,
if the story of those already here, and still here,
is even told at all.

How people not considered white in Europe –
Italians, Poles, Irish, Bohemians, Scandinavians even,
how, through participation in the existent racial caste
system,
became white in this new land.

Whiteness becomes the black hole that sucks in all the light
of difference.

So, one nation?

Not if that oneness means a single story.

Not if that oneness means a single racial identity –
assimilation or else.

Not if that oneness means forgetting, or historical naivete.

Not if that oneness means one religion, one understanding
of God.

So here's the question:

can there be an understanding of unity, of common good,
of . . . neighborliness, of community,

which doesn't depend on a single story?

which admits of multiple truths?

which admits that some of those brilliant men were
profoundly evil?

which admits that some of our own ancestors participated in
evil?

which notices that some of us carry in our bodies

the marks of that history's pain,

and some of us carry in our souls

the hope that American will be, finally, the promise it says it
is,

while others doubt it will ever be?

Can we have a sense of unity that isn't based on an idolatry,
that confuses a nation with what is sacred,

that knows nations are fictions, made by war and conquest
and theft and purchase,

and yet which has concern and hope

for the state of that nation?

I don't think those are easy questions.

There's a lot of evidence that even introducing some of
those other stories

causes so much cognitive dissonance,

such a threat to the commitment of innocence

that some people just can't handle it.

See, for example, how some people reacted to the 1619 project,
a truthful story, another story, about American's history.
See how committed people are to the stories they learned about
Columbus
Washington

and in our tradition – in Unitarian Universalism --
we've had to grapple with the fact some of our heroes
weren't that heroic, really –
Jefferson, a rapist and slave-owner, to name the most
troublesome,
but even Susan B. Anthony
who threw her Black sisters under the bus
to win the right to vote for white women.

But we're also finding other people,
people whose stories we haven't told as much,
but who we can say embodied the best of our vision better:
Whitney Young
Francis Ellen Watkins Harper
to name just two of many

But this task:
of telling truer stories –
richer, more complicated stories,
stories which implicate some of us,
and some of our ancestors,
in a history that is not progress always,
a history that is genocide, sometimes,
a history that is complicated: with moments of grace and
love
and moments of fear and pain,
telling true stories
is the first move on the journey to a united country,
if such a destination is even possible.

It's not the only step that's needed.

Far from it.

When we tell truer stories, richer and more real stories,
a whole variety of stories,
we will need to take action on those stories,
we will to make repairs.

We will need to stop harm,
and make repairs,

spiritual, material, economic, and geographic repairs.

Taking down statues and renaming places that glorify
enslavers

and those who committed genocide will be, should be,
the natural response to listening to each others stories with
heart.

If someone tells me that the icon I keep on my wall
represents someone who raped, murdered, and tried to
destroy their beloveds,
and I leave that icon up,
then I have not heard them,
then "one nation" is worse than a fiction, it's violence.

But changing who matters most in the history we tell
is only a small part of the journey:

we have to make sure those who have not mattered before
matter now,

until that happens,

"one nation" isn't just impossible, it's violence.

There's so much to do if we want
to be united, for the first time ever;

We will need to make the words that we say define us:
freedom

justice

hope

discovery

courage
democracy
we have to make these words real,
keys to open doors,
instead of false promises, written in scars on the bodies of
some among us.

All that work awaits.
But we must begin by telling more stories, and hearing
more stories.
Some people need to be a lot less defensive about the
history in their family stories,
in their faith stories and community stories,
while others need to keep telling theirs, until more listen.
It was important to me this morning to share stories
written and told by people who get to tell their own stories,
both our children's story and our reading.

It begins with more stories.
Because unity will not be found, if it will ever be found,
in myopia, in denial, in hagiography, in refusal to see one
another
and hear one another
and love one another.

Not all stories have equal weight in this moment;
some stories have been shouted over and over again,
and they need to take a turn to listen.
Other stories are hardly heard, and they need to be lifted
up.
When possible, folks should get to tell their own stories;
these stories are holy,
and not one more possession for the colonizer.

In the end, it seems to me,
that most essential thing to moving toward the kind of unity
that is sometimes professed

but not realized
is that we must tell our stories, and listen to the stories of
others,
with love.
With love. that is the most essential.

We must hold firm –
and here I am getting theological again –
we must hold firm to the idea that there is a love which
transcends but does not erase
difference,
which rejoices in the harmony of many voices –
which delights in rainbows and mosaics and miles and miles
of food carts
with every delicious thing,
a love which shattered the tower of babel not for fear of
unity
but for love of diversity
a love that reminds us that everywhere skies are blue
and people dream.

We must hold firm to this universalist vision
that love is stronger, that only a rich love, a love that sees
our fullness,
a love that reconciles, repairs, forgives, seeks justice,
is worthy of our allegiance and our effort.

It is a love that allows us to love and forgive,
and hold accountable, both ourselves and each other.

Justice is what that love looks like in public,
and we'll talk more about that next week,
but it is sacred love that must be at the basis of our desire
for unity –
whether that unity be worldwide, in a nation,
in a community, a congregation, or a family.

Sacred love loves the other for their own sake,
and not because they agree with us, or make us happy,
or are useful to us in some way.
But for their own complicated, real, holy selves.

It makes no strawmen, no Potemkin villages, and admits of
no stereotypes.

It is curious and caring,
slow to judge,
and quick to humility.

It is a love that asks "tell me more,"
not shouts "I already understand";
a love that is courageous enough to change,
to risk discomfort.

Our unity, our ability to be one people, one nation, one
church,
must be enlivened by this love:
not by fear of conflict,
not by assimilation
not by domination,
but by curious courageous love.

Love that rejoices in stories,
loving, painful, real, hopeful stories,
told with heart, heard with heart.

O God of all the nations,
be with us.
Be with us in our quest for unity,
and let us not settle for conformity instead;
be with us in our quest for justice,
and let us not settle for quietness instead;
be with us in our longing for love,
and let us not settle for power instead;
be with us,
make us curious, humble, with open hearts and minds.

O God of all the nations,
sing in our heart
a song of peace
for our land and for all lands
for our soul and all souls
for our stories and for all stories.

O God of all the nations,
may it be so.
Amen.

Know/No Justice, Know/No Peace
July 12, 2020
Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson

They call it "doom scrolling"
it's what you do,
often late at night
or in the middle of the day
or even first thing in the morning
when you scroll through
twitter
facebook
the front page of the newspaper

and have that feeling of doom.
like the world is falling apart
has fallen apart
the fallen-apartness of the world is now made more visible
and nobody is doing anything to fix it
and so it's doom
doom scrolling

Right now,
right now,
it feels like doom.

case counts on are on the rise, nationwide;

states that reopened too fast, with too little work to mitigate,
without masks and rules,
are seeing huge spikes in cases and deaths.
We were supposed to buy time by sheltering in
and we . . . didn't.
It is an abject failure of leadership,
and a failure of neighborliness, of love and compassion for
each other.

And now the consequences of that failure are upon us:
the time we bought was supposed to let us reopen schools
safely –
safely for students, who need school, and for teachers,
many of whom
are vulnerable -
many of you.

And, frankly, we failed.
We prioritized the wrong things, we made bad choices, our
national leaders
and the leaders of many states failed.

But it is parents – especially parents without resources,
wealth, or support –
and children
children who are not blameworthy
children who don't get to vote
children who are at risk
who will pay the price.

Doom scrolling isn't just about the virus though,
oh no.
The whole point of doom scrolling is that it,
like the case counts, is exponential.
It feeds on itself.

You think about the children not in school,
and then you think about the children who still have the
threat of climate change
bearing down upon them.

And then the next post is about another murder, a beating,
a protest, a hope for change dashed by infighting, inaction,
obstruction
and what happens

we get weary
and we get angry
all at once.

Unrest, they call it –
I've heard that on the news –
"In this time of 'civic unrest' or 'racial unrest.'"

I understand the shorthand, but I don't like it.
Unrest isn't the issue, unrest is the response.
Unrest in our hearts,
unrest in our minds,
unrest in the streets and the council chambers,
unrest in the boardroom and the lobby,
but the unrest
civic
racial
democratic
medical
spiritual

the unrest is a response
a response to injustice
to a world that is not fair,
that is not right,
that is not okay,
it is a response

to what some of us read and see
and to what some of us live in our bones and our bodies
the unrest
is a response
to injustice.

No justice, no peace,
I've chanted it,
marching, sitting, holding hands –
you remember holding hands? –
I've chanted it
in Walla Walla, Washington, against the death penalty,
in Colorado Springs,
circling the block around Focus on the Family in support of
dignity for GLBTQ people
in Phoenix, Arizona, for immigration justice,
in Cleveland and Seattle, in Rhode Island and Chicago,
and in Rockford
against gun violence
and ICE detention
against racial injustice and police brutality
for women's equality
It's a chant I know well.

It's a good chant,
because it counters the ideology of oppression.
Oppression says that the problem is the protestors,
that the agitators and the disrupters
the marchers and the letter-writers,
the people who call their congress member over and over
again
they're the problem.
If they would shut up, we'd have peace.

But the chant reminds us:
the problem is injustice.
And if you want peace, there must be justice.

But the chant illustrates another truth:
a spiritual truth:
it is very difficult for a person paying attention
to have peace in our heart,
in our bones and our breathe
without justice.

We feel the unrest.
We are an angry people, marching for our lives,
and we feel that unrest,
that discomfort,
that lack of peace in our own soul,
and if we are honest with ourselves
if we listen to the deeper wisdom
we know
we feel
that that soul unrest
that lack of peace in our heart
can be both useful
and dangerous.

It can be useful because it keeps us from complacency,
from the privileged position of disinterest,
from a narcissism that says "well, it doesn't affect me."

But that interior unrest can also be dangerous
it can eat at our heart
it can make us self-righteous, judgmental,
it can amplify our wounds
and prevent healing,
and it can – especially when we are doom-scrolling,
when there are SO many things to work on,
it can mean that we are playing wack-a-mole,
and the forces of injustice
the forces of distraction
win.

Critique is a seductress,
writes the organizer, activist, and movement leader
adrienne marie brown,
whose book, emergent strategy, has been a touchstone
for those working to connect the work:
the work for racial justice
and climate justice
and justice for poor people
and justice for women
and immigration justice

she says,
that door is open
but we are going further
to a vision
a real peace, a real justice,
one that invites and welcomes,
one that calls us.

I don't know if adrienne marie brown
and William Barber II have met,
but I want them too.
I want to sit in the back of that hall and listen.

Because here you have two people fired in the struggle for
justice,
two people who know in their bones,
for generations,
that if there is no justice there is no peace.
And two people who have a deeply spiritual vision
of what it means,
what it means to have a vision of the beloved community,
the just nation,
a spiritual vision:
brown's based in ecology, science, love, and mystery,
Barber's based in the prophetic teachings of Jesus,

who, as his stole reads, was a poor man.

Sometimes, when I speak up against injustice,
I heard back from people,
“well, that’s not very Christian of you.”
I always reply,
what bible are you reading?
Tables in the temple anyone?

But you know what?
Even more than I heard that do my young, female Christian
colleagues hear it.
And my colleagues of color,
when they protest injustice,
not only do they hear “that’s not Christian”
they get dismissed “just another angry black or brown
person.”

Yes, angry.
For good reason.
For very good reason.

And one of those many reasons is that I’m allowed to
express anger
in a way that women and people of color are not.
Do you notice this in the video of William Barber –
he is a big man, much taller than me, with a severe back
injury,
and he has to prove his intellect, his knowledge of Greek,
he cites his sources,
he stays so very calm –
though not everyone will see that,
will they?

But Barber and brown don’t ground their work for justice
in their spiritual lives,
in their vision,

in their heart work and in their vision for community just because their calm insistence on justice makes it easier for fragile white folks to hear them. Quite the opposite, actually.

They do it because they are claimed by something larger than themselves.

By a power beyond them.

Barber, a devoted Christian, names it as God, and Jesus, he echoes the old words "I was restless until I found rest in you,"

but instead of finding the love of God as an invitation to quiet surrender,

he is motivated by the God of love to work for justice.

brown names it love; the deepest calling and function of human beings.

she writes, elsewhere:

when we are engaged in words of love, we humans at our best and most resilient.

The love in romance that makes us want to be better people,

the love of children that makes us change our whole lives to meet their needs,

the love of family that makes us drop everything to take care of them,

the love of community that makes us work tirelessly with broken hearts.

She continues

If the goal was the increase the love,

rather than winning or dominating a constant opponent,

I think we could actually imagine liberation from constant oppression.

It was Cornell West who said that "Justice is what love looks like in public,"

and it is love – love of neighbor, of friend and family,
and love of self, too, don't forget that part –
it is love that gives our work for justice its heart.

Know Justice, Know Peace.
With a K.n.o.w., this time –

and it is true:
there can be no real peace until there is justice,
and the way for us to know the true meaning of peace –
which, perhaps, we have never really known as a species,
not really,
the way to know it
is to know the meaning of justice:
and justice is what happens
when our relations between each other
are transformed by the spirit of love.

And yet, if we have no peace in our heart,
or if our capacity for love and joy and hope
is shriveled up,
well, that isn't justice either;
it might be vengeance, it might be victory, it might just be
rage,
but it isn't justice.

And it's too much.
It's too much to ask folks who have been harmed by
injustice
to nurture their rage, as if it was a rare plant,
to store it in their heart as if it was fine wine.

Rage, they say, is grief which cannot be expressed in tears.
Anger is who we protect ourselves from feeling powerless,
from feeling defeated, worthless, alone.

And you can start there but you can't live on that bread.
brown and Barber give another vision:
where our sorrow, our tears, water the soil of justice
making,
where it is our love – and our joy –
our joy in the people we make justice with,
our joy in the earth, our home,
our joy in music and food and community,
which sustains, enlivens, gives fuel to our work for justice.
Know justice, know peace –
k.n.o.w.

Barber will tell you that he knows what justice looks like
because he has attended to the preaching of Jesus,
to vision of beloved community, to the heaven on earth
when we treat each other as kin, as holy.

brown will tell you that she knows what justice looks like
because she's felt it and seen it
around the kitchen table with chosen family
in the bedroom with a tender and consensual lover
in the forest, where the trees and the flowers and the
creatures
all make one system together
and this vision of love, mutuality, and creativity
is worth working for.

They know the peace we seek, the justice we demand,
because they have let love and hope into their hearts.

I don't know what to do with all this.
Honestly, I don't.

I need to stop doom-scrolling, but having information
makes me feel a little more in control of a world out of
control.
And it's overwhelming, right?

So many things to fix. So many injustices to correct.

I know that we need our unrest,
it is unrest that produces change,
the refuse to go quietly into the night, as it were,
and surrender isn't an option.

I also know that not every fight needs to be my fight today,
that we all have a role to play,
and that role will change, day by day, need by need.

I know that it isn't my place to tell anyone who is a more
marginalized position than I am
to not be angry, to not express that anger:
that would be a kind of violence, an enforcement of
passivity and white supremacy norms,
so I won't do that.

And I know that the Black and Indigenous leaders who are
most effective
at turning the world toward more justice,
who can stay at the work for a lifetime, not just a season,
come to the work from their love,
their love of their people, their ancestors, their children,
they come with fierce joy,
with blessed unrest,
with a vision of the world they long for.

I don't know what to do with all of that, I don't.
I don't have a three point list for you,
and I remember that brown, in particular,
reminds us this is a complex movement,
that to-do lists and deadlines and easy answers are a way
out,
not a way in.

I know that we can't go the old way.

I know that we must hold our love and our anger both,
that we must weep for injustice and dance for joy,
that we must go a new way,
that a land of freedom and mercy,
a world of justice and love,
depends on restless people,
and that restless people
need a source of rest in their heart:
from community, from self, from the holy, from all of the
above,
it doesn't matter:
but that you need to know a love in your heart
that moves you to justice in the world;
I know that.

I know how to cultivate that love in your heart:
through art, beauty, community, spiritual practice, nature,
books and music, children and elders, history and vision,
I know how to do that.
And I know that if we wish to join the struggle for justice
we will need to do all those things.
Not so that we can accept injustice, so that we can change
it.
So that we will know the way.
So that we show others the way.
The way to build a new way.