

Why should we support the Black Lives Matter movement? Because black lives matter - full stop.

I could stop the sermon right here because if all lives matter, and they do, then black lives matter. What is going on and has gone on in regards to blacks in our country is shameful. You probably know much of the history:

This country came into its own as an economic force in the 1800s based on slave labor.

After slavery ended Jim Crow laws enforced segregation and the continued enslavement of blacks through the judicial system.

Black children were denied educational opportunities under the guise of separate but equal until Brown vs. the Board of education in 1954.

Blacks were denied the right to vote until 1964 and the ability of blacks to vote is still in question in some of our states to this day.

After World War II Black GIs could not use their GI home loan benefits to buy houses, in the same way their fellow white soldiers could because of redlining by the banks.

The war on drugs has not worked to significantly to reduce illegal drug use, what it has done has bloat our correctional system with blacks, mostly young men. In a way that looks much like the Jim Crow laws of the previous

century. Our drug laws and how they are implemented continue to reduce opportunities for blacks in this country. This is a country where supposedly once you do your time you have paid your debt to society. But if you have a felony conviction when you apply for a job you must check the box that says you have had a felony conviction. I am not a lawyer and I cannot tell you, which actions should and should not be a felony but it does seem to me that if you have done your time then we should hold up the value that says you have paid your debt to society. To deny jobs to folks who have a felony conviction record is to relegate them to poverty. It simply keeps them from opportunities to pull themselves out of poverty.

As a primarily white congregation we could ignore this problem with the logic that this is not our problem - it is a black problem. But that belief at its heart comes from our white privilege. Privilege is a social status or power granted to you or me by others based on different social factors. Generally speaking I have privilege because I am white, heterosexual, cisgender, educated, and have money. That may not be a complete list. We each have our own privilege. I as a white person can more easily choose to ignore the issue of racism. I can pick it up and put it down and it may not impact my life a lot. If I were a person of color the question of race comes into everything. A black person in this country does not get to choose when they are black and when they are not. They do not get to choose when they are representing "their people" and when they are not. Let me put it another way. Let's say you were the famous astronomer Carl Sagan. I bet he had a certain amount of privilege when he went out. I would hazard to guess that it was not hard for him to get a table at an elite restaurant. But I also bet that if he put on an old sweat shirt

and perhaps a baseball cap and avoided saying the word billions he could go unnoticed in the world and shop in the local convenience store without being bothered. I also think that Neil DeGrasse Tyson could get a reservation at an elite NYC restaurant by dropping his name. But I'm going to bet that if he put on an old hoody and a baseball cap and went out he would be followed, or worse in a convenience store.

Let me really clear here I don't believe that anyone in this congregation is a racist. I believe that we all affirm that first principle of our UU principles "the inherent worth and dignity of each person." I do believe each of us as individuals, and also this congregation exist in a culture that is racist in its institutions. And that racism skews to benefit of those of us who are white, and skews to not benefit people of color.

I do believe it takes effort for any of us who are white to let go of our white privilege because the American culture we live in tends to reinforce it without even thinking. We must be intentional about not acting out of our privilege.

Kenny Wiley in his article "A Unitarian Universalist Black Lives Matter Theology" writes the first principle operates as what UU and Harvard Divinity professor Dan McKanan calls "radical hope." "Radical hope," ~~McKanan writes i~~ ~~n his book Prophetic Encounters,~~ "transcends the institutions of present-day society, but it does not transcend the laws of physical or human nature. It looks to the future, not to heaven." There have been in our UU history those who looked to the future and not to heaven, William Channing, Theodore Parker, Abigail Adams, Louisa May Alcott, Susan B. Anthony, Samuel J. May,

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, all abolitionists. In our present era we remember James Reeb, and Viola Liuzza, Unitarian Universalists, who gave their lives for civil rights. And there are many, many more. We look back at our history with pride - we are the denomination that was loud and proud and vocal in the abolitionist movement. We chose the higher ground.

But it was not without struggle, all those names I read. Those were real people, with real families, real churches, and real responsibilities. They did not lightly go off in a crazy way risking life and limb without careful consideration. Sam May known here in Syracuse for participating in the Jerry Rescue struggled deep in his soul about whether he should participate in that. He was a committed pacifist. He believed that the gospel of Jesus Christ called him to live peaceably on this earth respecting other human beings. That pacifism was challenged by the intractability of slavery. After much soul searching he finally set aside his pacifism to support what he saw as a greater good the end of slavery. Then and only then did he participate in the Jerry Rescue.

William Channing was slow to support the abolitionist movement. Dr. Christopher Cameron writes:

"One reason for this delay was that Channing did not want to be associated with a group of cranks such as the abolitionists, as most people viewed them in the antebellum era (~~many historians likewise did so up until the 1960s.~~) He believed strongly that abolitionists "have fallen into the common error of enthusiasts, that of exaggerating their object, of feeling as if no evil existed but

that which they opposed, and as if no guilt could be compared with that of countenancing or upholding it."<sup>3</sup> He believed that the tone and manners of antislavery activists was often unchristian and he disagreed with the notion that all slaveholders were evil. Lastly, and this is what has likely pushed him into the category of moderate reformers, he thought that the immediate abolition of slavery, which the Garrisonians championed, was "inconsistent with the well-being of the slave and the order of the state."<sup>4</sup>

Channing came around to more active participation in the antislavery cause after a conversation with Samuel Joseph May, ~~a fellow Unitarian minister and a Garrisonian abolitionist in his own right~~. They met at Channing's home in the fall of 1834 and, after Channing seemed to dwell at length on the severity of the Garrisonians' denunciations of slaveholders, May replied, "I am tired of these complaints. The cause of suffering humanity, the cause of our oppressed, crushed colored countrymen, has called as loudly upon others as upon us, who are known as the Abolitionists. It was just as incumbent upon others, as upon us, to espouse it. We are not to blame that wiser and better men did not espouse it long ago. The cry of millions in bondage had been heard throughout our land for half a century, and disregarded. The wise and prudent saw the wrong, but thought it not wise and prudent to lift a finger for its correction."<sup>5</sup> This line of critique continued for a few minutes, after which Channing responded "Brother May, I acknowledge the justice of your reproof; I have been silent too long."<http://uuhhs.org/research-resources/unitarians-universalists-slavery-conrad-wright-lecture/>

That interchange between Channing and May sounds so much like some of the discussions we whites have around the Black Lives Matter movement - those activists are exaggerating it, there is no arguing with them, they are just foul mouthed rioters who are not interested in supporting America, they are whiners who do not want to work.

Kenny Wiley writes:

"To fight for black lives now is to participate in radical hope. It is to battle for salvation on this Earth. It is to fight for life, for love, for justice. It is to demand more out of the first principle. It is to demand a more perfect faith.

Most of us in the faith are here because we felt welcome—at last—here. Some of us were too agnostic somewhere else.

Some of us weren't vindictive enough somewhere else.

We were too working-class somewhere else.

We were too lesbian somewhere else.

We were too nerdy somewhere else,

too introverted somewhere else,

too gay-married somewhere else.

Many of us are here because this faith and the people in it affirmed: you may not be perfect, but your life matters just the same.

[Wiley continues]

That's what's on the line now. Through racism and posthumous victim blaming, through silence and bullets and indifference and vilification, black

people are being told that our lives do not matter—or that they matter only conditionally. Black lives matter if. If we are educated. If we are respectful. If. And sometimes, not even then do our lives matter.

Right now we as Unitarian Universalists are being called to act. We are being called by our ancestors—those who insisted, who demanded that we help end slavery, that we fight for suffrage, that we join the struggle to end Jim Crow, that we listen to and honor Black Power. Lydia Maria Child and William Lloyd Garrison are calling us. Lucy Stone is calling us. Fannie B. Williams and Frances Ellen Harper are calling us. James Reeb is calling us. Viola Liuzzo is calling us." <http://kennywiley.com/2015/03/26/a-unitarian-universalist-black-lives-matter-theology/>

It is time it is long overdue for us to finish the work that our abolitionist ancestors started. It is time we recognize how broken our country is because we have not done the work that we need to do repairing the damage that slavery did.

Anti racism work, supporting Black Lives matter is spiritual work. We, as UUs do this work because of our first principal. We do it because it is the right thing to do. But it must be intentional, we must continue to think about it, learn about it, practice it. We must change in our souls the legacy that has been handed down to us. Also it takes strength to question the status quo. Without faith this work will become shallow and it can burn us out. Letting go of white privilege takes practice and when that practice is rooted in our spirituality then the work is authentic.

There are things that we can do

- Read some blogs or books to educate our selves -  
our adult Ed is looking to have a book discussion on *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*.
- Participate in discussion groups
- Maybe we could host a *Beloved Conversations* an experiential curriculum that provides a space to re-form the brokenness of racism into new patterns of thought and behavior.
- We can write letters to our representatives
- We can vote for candidates who support this
- We could have our Board consider whether or not we should support this movement
- Or as a congregation we could consider whether or not to put up a Black Lives Matter sign
- We could participate as First UU folk in actions or groups that support Black Lives Matter

Ken Wiley reminds us:

"There are a lot of things that we can do. We do not lack for opportunity - the history of racism is in the roots of this country. Bringing up the history is a way changing the future. When we are more aware of the horrible mistakes we have made in the past we are much more likely to not repeat those mistakes in the future or in the present.

~~Wayne Arnason~~ said, "The way is often hard; the path is never clear, and the stakes are high. Take courage. For deep down, there is another truth. You are not alone." <http://kennywiley.com/2015/03/26/a-unitarian-universalist-black-lives-matter-theology/>

Black Lives Matter - full stop.

Hear this prayer: In a world without end may it be so