The Kindness of Strangers

A sermon by Jackie Clement
Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington Normal, IL
December 20, 2015

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.
—Martin Niemöller

These words were set in the particular context of World War II, but they remain a good reminder of the fruits of political apathy for today's world. Last Sunday, our congregation voted to speak out, to not remain silent in the face of oppression. More, we committed ourselves to doing the work of anti-oppression. Speaking out is terrific and necessary, but the work of education, witness and advocacy is also required as we continue to bend the arc of the universe toward justice.

Specifically, last week we voted to place a #BlackLivesMatter sign in the front yard of the church. A small act, but a courageous one to say that we will speak; that we will affirm the inherent worth and dignity of the lives of those who are made to be "other" and apart. It was the best of the democratic process as everyone who wanted to speak shared their truth openly, respecting the truths of others. The minister got a little mushy and told you all she loves you, not because you took one position or another but because you came to the process in love. That remains her truth.

The decision to place the sign did not come lightly nor will the work that is needed now be easy. Let us begin by understanding more about what the words #BlackLivesMatter means. Like most things in religious life, the #BlackLivesMatter hash tag is a symbol that points to something larger, deeper and more profound than the meanings of its individual words.

#BlackLivesMatter was founded in 2012 after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the killing of Trayvon Martin. The organization was started by three black women: Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullers. Rooted in the experience of Black people in this country, what #BlackLivesMatter aims to do is broaden the conversation about the ways in which Black people are systematically deprived of basic human rights and dignity by state violence. This includes seven areas of violence:

1. poverty

2. mass incarceration which keeps 2.8 million Black people behind bars
3. the assault on our children and our families
4. the devaluing of Black queer and transgender folk
5. the assault on undocumented immigrants including 500,000 Black people
6. the sad fact that girls are used as negotiating chips during times of conflict and war
7. the plight of Black folks living with disabilities and different abilities who are squeezed into boxes of normality

So this is a fairly broad spectrum addressing issues of economic justice, criminal justice, classism, racism, sexism, ableism and homophobia. To say that Black lives matter is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, of their humanity, and their resilience in the face of deadly oppression. Its guiding principles include diversity, restorative justice, empathy, and loving engagement. It is committed to valuing Black families and extended villages, the voices and work of people of all ages, all genders and sexual identities, and people of all abilities. The values of #BlackLivesMatter echoes in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he said that "we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

There is a misconception that #BlackLivesMatters stands in opposition to the police forces in our country. That is not the case. Because of the large number of cases involving police violence against Black people, it's easy to see where that idea originated, but as you can see from the points of their mission it is not actually the case.

That said, it's clear from the recent news of police misconduct that certain departmental policies and the actions of some officers are at fault in perpetuating unnecessary violence against people of color. But police departments are also peopled by good, just and well intentioned officers who are stuck in the same bad system. Just as Ta-Nehisi Coates said that race is the child of racism, so too are violence and bad policy the results of a larger system of racism. We cannot excoriate the police as the root of the problem, but rather work with them to be part of the opposition to the problem.

I called the Bloomington Police Public Affairs Officer with the hopes that she might join us this morning to begin talking about how we could partner with the police to make things better for everyone, but alas the holidays intervened. I hope we can begin such a partnership soon. The problem is so much wider than the actions of certain police officers. We not only need their help in bringing about change, but we should, if we are justice seeking people, be willing to help them change a broken system.

To go back to the words of Martin Luther King, "we are tied in a single garment of destiny." Justice in policing results in justice for people of color *and* for those who are sworn to serve and protect. As the #BlackLivesMatter web site says, "to love and desire freedom and justice for ourselves is a necessary prerequisite for wanting the same for others." It is a matter of perspective. Do you see the stranger as "other" or are they just like you? Do they deserve what you deserve?

Last week, as I was traveling back from Boston, I was finishing up Ta-Nehisi Coates book *Between the World and Me*, the source of our first reading this morning. It is a letter to his son

about growing to be a Black man in America and recounts his own youth and stories of his son's early life. I have to tell you that it is not an easy book to read, but one of the most worthwhile books you might ever read if you want to not only see but feel life from someone else's perspective. So, as I was traveling, I was deeply immersed in the audiobook narrated by the author. Hearing Coates' story in his own voice felt almost like being in conversation with him making it a powerful experience. As I arrived at my gate at Logan Airport, Donald Trump was on some TV program loudly trying to justify his hateful contempt of Muslims. I popped in my ear buds and went back to Mr. Coates who told the story of coming out of a children's play with his four-year-old son and having an impatient White woman shove his son out of the way. He spoke about how he reacted as a father, in the full knowledge that confronting this woman's rude behavior would bring the ire of the crowd and threats of arrest down on him, which it did. When I reached the level of sadness I could hold for that moment, I took out the ear buds and returned to airport life.

A Black family—father, mother and three small children—were walking down the main corridor. Picture a day of typical air travel. The little boy is dashing ahead. Dad is chasing him laden with carry-ons. Mom looks like the vision of finally getting home is all that's keeping her heading after the two little girls. She has lost her sense of humor. Just then one of those golf carts that ferries passengers between gates goes by. Riding in it is an impossibly large dog. The children find this irresistible and bolt for the dog. The passengers around me lose all sense of perspective and begin to criticize the parents as negligent and uncaring. They end with declaring that the children should be kept on leashes. Feeling like the reality in front of me is actually harder to take than the reality in the book, I put my ear buds back in.

Now would those other passengers have declared that those children should have been on leashes if they were white? I don't know. Maybe. Would they have criticized beleaguered parents as neglectful because they didn't have the reaction times of college athletes if the parents had been white? I don't know. Maybe. But here's the thing. I was living in the perspective of Ta-Nehisi Coates who knows that, as a Black man, he will always be seen as being in the wrong and that to protect his son often means surrendering a piece of his dignity because he will never be the winner in a confrontation with White people or the law. I experienced the world this way for only a few hours. Imagine living your entire life that way.

I've wondered since that day why I didn't confront my fellow travelers and defend those tired parents. Possibly because I had moved into that mindset that said speaking up would only put me in danger. Possibly because I have actually been in that position of being threatened with arrest when I tried to assert my own rights. Possibly because, like in the poem I just read, I was not those parents and did not feel personally threatened. Whatever it was, I clearly failed to live into our ethic that affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all people requires us to speak against injustice, that in order for the kindness of strangers to be real I have to be the one to offer the kindness.

I drew the title of this sermon, The Kindness of Strangers, from the Tennessee Williams play A Streetcar Named Desire. Blanche DuBois is a southern gentlewoman who lives always in a world of illusion and fantasy. When she declares that she relies on the kindness of strangers she sees the world as place where strangers do not think that children should be kept on leashes or

that Muslims should have their families murdered. To live in this world and to work for change we cannot afford to have Blanche's naiveté or her ability to close our eyes to life as it really is. We can rely on the kindness of strangers when we make ourselves into those who are willing to extend kindness, to see another person's reality and stand in solidarity with what they ask of us, not with what we feel like offering them. To do this requires that we face life with our eyes wide open, but also with our heats wide open. It requires a hope rooted in reality, what Harvard Divinity professor Dan McKanan calls a "radical hope," that "transcends the institutions of present-day society, but… does not transcend the laws of physical or human nature. [Radical hope] looks to the future, not to heaven."

Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, spoke of something similar in reviewing Ta-Nehisi Coates' book. She says:

> *I tend to think we must not ask whether it is possible for a human being or society to become just or moral; we must believe it is possible. Believing in this possibility—no matter how slim—and dedicating oneself to playing a meaningful role in the struggle to make it a reality focuses one's energy and attention in an unusual way.*

This is what I think we are called to do as people of faith—to stand in the reality of the world as it is and to believe that the world as we dream it is still possible. More, we are called to see that we have a role in changing it. Our police department policies are broken because they are part of a broken society. Well, we are society. We can change it. We have a voice and vote and we can move the world.

From Unitarian Lydia Maria Child who said in the 19th century that the eradication of racism and slavery was not a matter of opinion but a matter of duty to filmmaker and UUA Director of Public Information Henry Hampton who made the civil rights documentary Eyes on the Prize, ours is a tradition of struggle for equality. It is grounded in our history and in our theology.

As we heard in the words of Abhi Janamanchi:

> *The center of Unitarian Universalism lies outside of itself, in the stranger, in difference rather than in similarity. In our faith, the margins hold the center. We are called to create holy communities where strangers are not only welcome but where all are enjoined to do the work of healing and transformation by wrestling with the strangers within themselves.*

May it be so. May this be a house for all people, one where we bind up the broken, one where we can see a larger reality outside of our own experience and know that the lives of others are just as holy, just as sacred as our own. May this be a place where we hold fear at bay and let our hearts lead the way.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.