

Sermon: **Community Day** by Julie Lombard 03/16/2014

On Monday, March 3rd, my theological school stopped running classes for a biennial event they call Community Day. Classes are not held so that students and staff can attend the event. There are two Community Days; one in the fall and one in the spring. In the fall, the focus of the event is doing community service work. My first fall at the school my fellow students and I spent time in Munson, MA picking up the pieces after the destructive tornado had ripped that town apart.

In the spring, Community Day takes on a different shape and it becomes a place for interfaith learning and dialogue. This spring, I attended a joint project between Andover Newton and Hebrew College called “I have a Dream: Living the Legacy.” This event had activities located at both campuses, since together they reside as neighbors atop Herrick Hill in Newton Centre, MA. The event was sponsored by both schools and Circle: The Center for Inter-Religious & Communal Leadership Education.

I arrived late to the myriad of speeches; both presidents from the schools spoke followed by a number of students, each with their own lenses coloring the topic at hand. Behind them, a large picture was being projected of a Civil Rights march from the 1960’s. I’m not sure which one it was, but it showed a handful of people, arms linked as they walked through a neighborhood. Dr. King was in the front row. I couldn’t name the rest of the people in the line-up, they were nameless people to me changing history one step at a time. These folks started the Civil Rights journey, a journey unfinished. It’s our responsibility to continue the march forward.

A fellow Andover Newton student took his turn speaking; he spoke about the concept of maladjustment from that period. He urged us to think about how we tend to the maladjustment of today. How do we respond to the liberation of the oppressed? What role do we play? The picture on the large screen behind him changed from the black and white image of the Civil Rights marchers to show a colorful picture of more of my friends from school who had recently attended a voting rights rally in North Carolina. While those students were there, I was here with you, preaching in this pulpit. They went to liberate the oppressed; is that what I was doing here? Maybe we were liberating the oppressed. I know whatever we were doing then, we were immersed in doing the good required of us because that’s what we do here-- have you noticed that? I have.

In an ever clever way, the student speaker then wove into his speech his favorite highlights from the night before the Academy Awards. He spotlighted the Cinderella story where a Kenyan actress’ portrayal of the brutalized plantation slave Patsey earned her glowing reviews and top honors. The award winning actress made her feature film debut in the movie titled “12 Years a Slave.” The student told us that the actress began to break into tears as the audience cheered her win for best supporting actress. She said, “This has been the joy of my life.” She claimed her happiness had come at the expense of those who suffered during a century of slavery in the

United States. She dedicated her honor to children around the world and she said, “No matter where you are from, your dreams are all valid.”

The student at the microphone kept talking, but my mind lingered on what he quoted:

“No matter where you are from, your dreams are all valid.”

I loitered on that statement until he invited another friend forward to help him lead everyone in singing a song they had sung together while in North Carolina, “This Little Light of Mine.” The sanctuary erupted into song as my friend belted out the verses just before the rest of us sang them. The student was surely full of the Spirit of Life, his religious roots holding him tight as his spiritual wings set him free leading us in joyous song. After we finished singing, we were all certain that no matter where we came from, our dreams were all valid.

Later, the participants of that Community Day were sent out into the desert, so to speak. We wandered the two campuses from classroom to classroom where multireligious dialogues were being hosted on an array of topics. We had choice in what we could attend; yet there was no way to attend all the offerings. I found myself in Davis Hall, room 201, a room which I intimately know. I could tell you where every coffee stain is on its rug and which ones I had made. There, a Muslim woman was in the front of the classroom ready to lead the discussion. We were there to consider what it’s like for both children and adults to wear the sacred Muslim head covering, the Hijab.

The first activity was to share common stereotypes of Muslims. And as diligent students, together we made a long list until one student finally said she was having trouble participating in this activity. When the Muslim woman leading asked the student why she felt this way, the student said she felt that the activity dehumanized Muslim people and the rest of us, the people partaking in the stereotyping.

Following a brief silence, the leader said she had been leading this activity for years and she never heard anyone say that before. I wished it had been me who had made comment, but it wasn’t. I was entrenched in my listening mode and believe it or not, I spoke little during the dialogue session. I was full; full from the earlier speeches, full with anticipation about going to the Unitarian Universalist Association the next day to see the Regional Sub-Committee on Candidacy for UU Ministry, and if I must admit it, I was still full from pondering that quote, “No matter where you are from, your dreams are all valid.” How could I possibly think about dehumanizing anyone while thinking no matter where you are from, your dreams are valid?

How could I live in a dualistic paradigm where hate and love co-exist? But I do every day and you do, too. We live there amidst love and hate; we become content to the clanging sounds of the cymbals, their song the common background in our everyday busy lives. We rarely react; we are seldom moved to say, “No, I won’t stand for this because it dehumanizes me and others.” We come to this sanctuary to renew ourselves, right? Don’t we all suffer from the injustice in the

world? Sure, we frown in protest or even turn our gaze to focus on something more pleasant; it's our smallest effort because we know we can't do it all.

If we want make a dent in the evil in our world, we know it must be done over time and with the help of many hands. We must take a grassroots approach to changing our world, linking our arms as we embark on this march. We must be consistent in our direction and reliable to those around us. We may never leave the city limits on this march, but perhaps we never need to, especially if our aim is to make our world a better place. Let's start here on Ashland Street.

This is a time to think outside the box with our approach toward participation. We need to give more, but I also think we need to be creative as we give more. This reminds me of a story about Gandhi that I heard long ago. He lost one of his shoes as he was getting onto a train, it slipped off his foot as he boarded and it landed on the track below him. Just as he was about to go down and get it, the train had began to leave the station. Instead of worrying about retrieving his lost shoe, Gandhi quickly took off his other shoe and threw it at the one on the track.

A startled passenger on the same train asked him why he had done that, Gandhi explained, "The poor man who finds the shoe lying on the track will now have a pair he can use." Like Gandhi, I would like us to feel empowered to give in similar ways. I urge that we give as fully as each of us can because I know you have more shoes. Let us be honest and look deeply at why we come together; we come here to renew our spirit and be held, to love and be loved, to prepare us to re-enter the wider world. We come to learn how to be frank, like Gandhi, and to not hold back. We come to learn new ways to give and live more fully and authentically.

Fellow Pilgrims, I impel you to stop living life as usual for a day or for a short time to contemplate your participation in your own community day. Maybe afterwards you'll sign up to lead a Community Meal or donate a pair of shoes or some clothes to the Community Action Drop-in Center downstairs. Only the Spirit of Life knows of the oppressed that live among us-- they are the ones waiting for us to reach out, to stop dehumanizing them with our silence, avoidance, and our frowns.

Universalist Unitarians of Haverhill are called to act, we are called to give, we are called to make a difference here within these city limits. We are called to believe that no matter where you are from, your dreams are all valid. We are here to be the common liberators of Haverhill because we are the powerful ones who always have a shoe to spare to fully show our love for our neighbor. May we now go out into the world with our arms linked, united as one because together we are mighty. Let us give more, let us continue to march boldly for those of our generation and for future generations. May we become the many nameless people of today changing history, one step at a time.

Blessed be. Amen.