

“Making Space for Belonging”©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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As a white man in Montana, I don't fully comprehend what the author of our reading speaks of. In the course of my life I have seen the flag he mentions in the back of pickup trucks in several communities, including here in Bozeman. My reaction to that flag however has always been quite different than what Jabari Jones writes of. When I have seen that flag I have never sensed that it represented a denial of my rights, or my ability to belong. And seeing that flag hasn't and doesn't indicate a threat to my existence. Because of that, I don't feel terror. Instead of terror, I typically feel deep disappointment and disgust. Disappointment that we are not living up to what is asserted in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Disappointment that the values of justice, equity and compassion aren't universally held. And I feel disgust—disgust that our culture and our laws make it possible for some people to terrorize and torment others under the guise of freedom of speech. Neither my disappointment nor my disgust, however, can hold the level of intensity that the terror Jones speaks of does. So while I have strong feelings when I see that flag, I can't fully comprehend or relate to the power such an experience holds for the Jabari Jones or any person who is black. I can't fully comprehend or relate, but I can strive to have empathy and compassion, I can consider the privileges I have because of who I am, and I can ask myself, what can I do to make space for belonging for those who have been or continue to be marginalized.

My training and experience as a UU minister has offered me the opportunity to study Unitarian, Universalist and Unitarian Universalist history in some depth. From both my experience and my study I am aware that our faith tradition generally perceives itself to be open minded, open hearted, and willing to champion the rights of those who have been historically marginalized. To a significant degree, I believe that perception has truth to it. It isn't, however, all of the truth. Let me provide some examples that will make my point.

Some of you may have heard of Olympia Brown. In 1863 she became the first woman to graduate from a regularly established theological school. She was subsequently ordained a Universalist minister, the first woman to achieve full ministerial standing recognized by a denomination. Over the course of the next 30 years about 70 women were ordained to Unitarian or Universalist ministry. Few of them, however, got to practice their profession in full-time positions. Of those 70, a significant number were often settled in the least viable pulpits, pulpits that men would not take. Following the 1875 Women's Ministerial Conference, 21 Unitarian women founded the Iowa Sisterhood. These women went on to serve churches throughout the Great Plains, far from the support and comfort of the denomination's offices in Boston.

Then there is the story of Egbert Ethelred Brown. Brown was born in Jamaica. As an adolescent, Brown's uncle let him borrow a booklet written by William Ellery Channing, a famous Unitarian Minister of the 19th century. After reading the booklet he realized he was a Unitarian. Once he came to that realization he discovered he had a number of problems. The first of those problems was that there weren't any Unitarian congregations in Jamaica. The second was that he had very little in the way of financial resources to travel to America in order to learn about Unitarianism or attend a congregation. And the third problem, even though it should not have even been an issue, was that he was black. In spite of these problems, Brown eventually made it to America where he attended and graduated from Meadville Theological School, a Unitarian theological school. With his ordination in 1912, he became the first black Unitarian minister. Then he faced a fourth problem. He was informed

by people at Meadville that because he was black he would not be able to serve a congregation that had white people in it. So he went back to Jamaica and started a Unitarian church there. He received minimal and only short-term assistance from the American Unitarian Association as well as the British Unitarian Association. In 1920 he returned to the United States and started the Harlem Community Church in New York. Again, he received very little support from AUA, possibly because as Rev. Mark Harris writes in the *Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism*, “Samual Eliot, the AUA president...was condescending to black people believing they could never understand Unitarianism.” I wonder what our denomination would be like today had Egbert and other early black Unitarian and Universalist ministers been given the space they needed to truly and fully belong.

These two examples are from the distant past. I would like to say that as Unitarian Universalists we have learned a great deal and that we have changed our ways. We **have** learned a great deal. Changing ours ways? It seems to me that is still in question. Yes, there are many more women in UU pulpits across this country. Four of them preceded my arrival. And there are significantly more Unitarian Universalist ministers of color than at any point in our history. Considerably fewer however, than would be expected considering the percentage of people in this country who identify as something other than “white”. From discussions with my ministerial colleagues of color, it seems that they continue to struggle to find their place, both within congregations and within the Unitarian Universalist Association. In UU churches across the country we have made amazing progress in our efforts to make space for ministers and congregants who identify as lesbian, gay and bisexual. But when it comes to people who are transgender, we still have a long way to go. A survey was recently jointly conducted by the Transgender Religious professional UU’s Together and the UUA’s Multicultural Ministries. Here is a sample of what they learned. Seventy two percent of transgender individuals who participated in the survey did not feel that their congregation is completely inclusive of them as trans people. And 42% of trans UU’s regularly experience trans-related marginalization in UU spaces. Ministerial colleagues who are transgender have a great deal of difficulty finding a congregation that will call them as their minister. I could easily go on in this vein and mention other areas where we continue to struggle with making space. One of those areas involves a person’s physical ability. By now though I hope you have a sense of at least some of the places UU congregations as well as our national association continue to have work to do related to changing of our ways.

So far I have been talking about long ago and far away. But now I want to bring this topic home—right here to this Fellowship. My experience in this Fellowship has convinced me that the members and friends here typically strive to be empathic and compassionate to others, especially others who are marginalized or mistreated. And my experience has been that it is quite common here for people to talk about and consider the privileges they have that many others don’t. That said, I am reasonably certain there are privileges I have that I am unaware of and therefore take for granted. I imagine the same is true for a good number of you. With that thought in mind, I would suggest that it might be beneficial for each of us to ask ourselves the question I posed earlier—what can I do to make space for belonging for those who have been or continue to be marginalized.

As we ask that question of ourselves, both as individuals and as a Fellowship, I would suggest that we both look at areas we have done important and beneficial work on, as well as areas that continue to need work. Here are some examples of areas where we have taken positive steps. This building is handicap accessible and we have designated handicap parking spaces in our parking lot. And in the winter when the parking lot and sidewalks get icy volunteers have braved the cold and the ice to assist people in getting safely into the building. Two of our three bathrooms are handicap accessible. Some years ago we went through the process of becoming a Welcoming Congregation. What that designation signifies is that we welcome people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual,

transgender and/or gender queer—often referred to as LGBTQ. We recently began displaying a rainbow flag in our Social Hall as a way of indicating our openness to and support for the LGBTQ community. And all three of our bathrooms are gender neutral so people who are transgender don't have to concern themselves about whether they will be able to use a bathroom that matches the gender they feel themselves to be. Again, I could easily go on and on about how we strive to make space for belonging in this Fellowship.

But might there be even more ways we could be making space for belonging? The answer to that question is of course we could be doing more. And some of the “more” that we could be doing is currently under discussion. For example, we have known for some time that we need to make accommodations for people such as myself who have hearing loss. Currently we provide a few large print texts of both the service and the sermon so people can read along. It would be much better if we had hearing assist devices so people could hear all elements of the service. There is a group that is looking into this and hopefully we will have some type of hearing assist system in the not-too-distant future. And there is discussion about displaying a modified rainbow flag outside. The flag would include the rainbow colors that has become the symbol of gay pride. The flag would also include the colors of white, blue, pink, brown and black. These added colors symbolize skin color and male and female gender identity. The hope is to put up a flag pole so we can fly the flag prominently and proudly. And I am certain that we can find more ways to let parents with children know that there is space here for them to belong. We currently provide Religious Education and childcare on Sunday mornings. But how much more welcoming would it be if childcare was offered whenever we have an event. We could offer childcare when our men's or women's groups gather here. We could offer childcare during committee and Board meetings so parents with children would feel supported and encouraged to step into leadership positions.

This Fellowship has done a great deal to make space for belonging. And we continue to work to find ways that will let people with diverse backgrounds, persuasions, life situations and abilities know that this is a place where they are welcome and supported. There is more to do and my hope is that many of you will think about and share what that work needs to be. And as we do the work, may we all remember what the goal of this work is. We do this work, as our First Principle states, “to affirm and promote the inherent worth of every person.” And we do this work, as our Sixth Principle asserts, that someday we may have a “world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.”

So may it be.