

“Finding the Way Forward”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on August 30, 2020

For several months now I have been identifying with the sentiment contained in our reading this morning. “Friend, I have lost the way.” In my conversations with a significant number of you, it seems that I am not alone in feeling that I have lost the way. Since the first case of the COVID-19 virus was confirmed in Montana there have been so many significant changes to the way many of us went about our daily lives that feeling lost, in one way or another, is both appropriate and normal. Much of life as I was living it as 2020 began has changed significantly. The many and significant behavioral changes that I, along with many if not all of you, have had to make have resulted in an array of feelings—feelings of loss, fear, anger, loneliness, sadness, grief and even despair for some of us. And the uncertainty about how long we will have to maintain these changes and our mental high alert status leaves me wondering how I will find the way forward. Again, I believe I am not alone in this feeling.

If the spread of the COVID-19 virus wasn’t challenge enough, which it is, there are other major issues that are disrupting the status quo. Over the past several months civil unrest has erupted across our country—unrest that is the result of the killing and wounding of black people by members of law enforcement agencies. The killings and woundings have brought to light the injustice that people of color face in this country. The wounding of Jacob Blake by a Kenosha, Wisconsin police officer one week ago today, and the subsequent killing of two black protestors on Wednesday night by a seventeen-year-old who had previously been a member of a “police explorer” program, were the latest incidents to fuel the outrage about the injustices suffered by those who are black in this country. As a country and as a people, we must come to terms with the racial injustice that is embedded in our culture and our institutions. And we must demand and work to see that effective changes are made.

On top of or maybe underlying both of the issues I just mentioned is global climate change. Global climate change is the most significant threat humanity has faced in thousands or possibly tens of thousands of years. Scientists have been telling us for decades that we needed to change our ways. But we have failed to listen to and follow their guidance. As a result of following the way we have become accustomed to living, we now face an array of consequences. Some of these consequences include extreme temperatures, intensifying wildfires, more frequent and powerful storms, the extinction of species at an alarming rate, and massive ice melting in the polar regions that will lead to sea level rise.

Any one of the three issues I just mentioned would be enough to have us question what the way forward might be. There are some who want, as we heard in our reading this morning, “to retrace the track.... Back, I must travel back!” they say. But “the track is lost and gone.” And “none goes back, none.” The way things were is not adequate to or appropriate for what we are facing today—or for what we will be facing in the days ahead.

So what is the way forward? I would really like to be able to say that I know the way. That is what I would like to be able to say but I can’t. I can’t because my mother taught me the importance of telling the truth. The truth is that I don’t know the way forward. Yet while I don’t know the way that lies ahead, I believe we have the capability of finding the way. Notice that I used the word “we” in that sentence and not “I.” Keep that in mind because I will return to this point later in my sermon.

I want to turn my focus now to what three of our visiting minister’s over the course of this summer had to say. The ministers I am referring to are Rev. Kathryn Bert, Rev. Dawn Cooley and Rev. Fred Small. In the sermons they shared with us, each of these ministers spoke to the topic of my sermon today, “Finding the Way Forward.” If you missed any of our services that these three ministers spoke at, I encourage you to go to the UUFB website, uufbozeman.org, where you can find and watch a recording of their sermons.

On July 19, Rev. Bert shared a sermon titled “Productive Disequilibrium: Navigating the Zone of Discomfort.” She stated that the issues we are facing today, the ones I mentioned previously, can’t be solved through technical solutions. We can’t simply flip a switch to end the pandemic, to eradicate racism or racial

injustice, or to change the global climate. Each one of these issues involve what she referred to as adaptive challenges. In other words, we will need to adapt—meaning we will need to change our ways—and not just a little bit but significantly, in order to address these issues. Here is a quote from her sermon. “... with adaptive challenges, we often don’t know how to name the challenge, we don’t know what to do, and we don’t have an expert who can guide us. The expertise we do have worked in previous situations, but not now.” What that means is the way we did things in the past isn’t up to the task of dealing with the challenges we face now. And here is a second quote from what she said.

“In order to continue to work on adaptive challenges – such as racism or global climate change – we have to maintain a certain urgency about the challenges and sustain the discomfort of not knowing. We have to try a lot of experiments, and we have to learn from the failures of those experiments, until we find some things that work.”

Recall our Story for All Ages this morning. To find our way forward we are going to have to experiment, like Facile did. As we experiment we are going to fail at times, just as Facile did. And we are going to feel disappointed, like Facile did. And when we fail, we are going to have to learn from our failures and proceed to experiment again, just as Facile did. Through this process of experimenting and failing we can learn a new way of doing things and we can find a way forward.

Last Sunday Rev. Fred Small, in his sermon titled “Journey to Environmental Justice,” began by sharing his early life experiences with coming face to face with racism and how his illusion that there was liberty and justice for all people in this country died in 1963. His illusion died as he watched television reports from Birmingham, Alabama. As he watched the evening news that day he saw police violently attacking black people who were peacefully protesting. What he saw disturbed and distressed him terribly. He shared about his own early failings in a relationship with a friend who was black and how those failings led to the demise of the friendship. He talked about his involvement in the environmental movement from the very first Earth Day celebration. And he let us know that in his current position as Executive Director of Massachusetts Interfaith Power and Light, he has come to understand that the ways of our dominant culture in this country have devastating impacts on people of color, and in particular people who are black. Here is a quote from his sermon. “More and more people are seeing the fatal interconnection of white supremacy, pandemic and pollution.” And he went on to state that: “Now is a time of reckoning and a time of opportunity. At the intersection of racism, and pandemic and climate crisis, where do we begin to confront the challenges that beset us?” His answer to that question, and here I quote him again. “We begin by taking power seriously.” (unquote)

Whether we know it or not, those of us who are white have significantly more power than most people of color. And one part of that power is that we tend to have far more options to do things differently than many people of color do. So it is up to us to use the power we have, both individually and collectively, to make it known to our elected leaders that the way things have been must not be the way things will remain in the future.

And at our first service this month, on August 2nd, we heard Rev. Dawn Cooley tell us that we are “better together.” Here is where I return to my use of the word “we” instead of “I” earlier. In her sermon, Rev. Cooley spoke clearly and eloquently about how important it is for us to work together to address important issues. She stated, and here I quote:

“We know that in order to create change in an organization, an institution or in a country, first a critical mass must be achieved. And change theorists tell us that the tipping point for achieving critical mass is 25% of a population. When 25% of a population believes a certain way they can tip the scales in their direction. Once a movement reaches 25% it is basically just a matter of time...the moral arc begins to bend.”

I think we would all agree that the moral arc in this country is in dire need of bending today. None of us alone can tip the scales or bend the arc when it comes to the three issues I have raised this morning. But when we join with others who share our values, we can create the critical mass that is required to make a difference. And I would add that when we work together to address any issue, or solve any problem, we have more resources, more creativity, more energy and more support for ourselves and the cause we are working on than if we were working alone.

So how do we find the way forward. First and foremost, we need to find it together. Finding the way forward together will not be easy, especially in these times when how we gather is so much different than just a few months ago. We will need to take time—time to listen deeply to one another. We will need to acknowledge our different perspectives and find where common ground lies between us. And when we find common ground, we will need to do what Facile did as he sought to offer a gift to his baby sister. We will need to plant a seed. We will need to plant a seed of hope for a new way. Together, we can plant a field of hope. And in that field of hope we can both discover and create a new way forward—a way that will offer liberty and justice for all, as well as hope and prosperity for future generations. That is the way things need and ought to be going forward. As the final line in our reading states, “the way leads on.”

So it is and so may it be.