

Reconciliation or Punishment

Sermon Given at Mission Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation on 2-16-20

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I came across one of the songs that is on the website, Songs of the Great Turning. from Gretchen Sleicher and Friends. It's called Hold on Strong by Ben Bochner and I read it as a poem, so I will read it to you now:

<https://songsforthegreatturning.net/community/hold-on-strong/>

Hard times are coming, you can feel it in the air
You can read it in the paper, you can see it everywhere
Gonna be trials and tribulation, astonishment and shock
You're gonna need a strong foundation, need a solid rock

Chorus:

We gotta hold on to each other, hold on strong
We gotta hold on to each other, until the danger's gone
We gotta hold on to each other, all night long
We gotta hold on to each other, got to hold on

It's easy to get lonely, yeah, it's easy to get lost
And it's easy to get crumpled up, towed away and tossed
Don't let yourself get isolated, don't get caught up in despair
Don't run and hide, just come inside, you know you'll
find us there

Chorus

Even the tallest tree in the forest can't make it on its own
You're gonna need some friends around you when that wind begins a-blowin'
It's gonna shake up all our branches, it's gonna tug on all our roots
Til the only thing left standing is the love that's great and true

Chorus

We gotta hold on to each other, hold on strong
We gotta hold on to each other, until the danger's gone
We gotta hold on to each other, all night long
We gotta hold on to each other, got to hold on

It's not a song I was familiar with but the words spoke to me. And it described to me how many of us are feeling, how many African Americans in this country are feeling, and that change is needed, change is inevitable, but change is hard and during a time where we seem to be

turning back the clock, turning back our culture to a time that was more unfair, more segregated, more hateful and biased, that we need each other more than ever.

I don't want to inundate you with statistics this morning, with examples of how the systems in this country prey upon people of color and divide us from them, examples of how our systems in every conceivable way, hold back people of color from having the same advantages that white people have. We all know all that. As Unitarian Universalists we tend to read and study and want to be the woke minority amongst religious organizations. We honored Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Cornel West as Ware Lecturers in the past at General Assembly. We look to Ethelred Brown and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper as historic Black Americans in the Unitarian movement. We read the books that Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed has written, documenting the Black Empowerment Controversy of 1969 and feel we have learned from our mistakes. But have we?

How can we as Unitarian Universalists help to change the system? For unless something changes, it will remain the same. We need to use what we know and to gather together to identify those inequities that perpetuate these biased systems in favor of white people. Many of us know the statistics that Michelle Alexander quoted in "The New Jim Crow", how she showed the percentages and compared them to the population of black people in the United States. African American people comprise 13% of the US population and yet they total 40% of incarcerated people in our prison system. Hispanic people consist of 16% of the US population and comprise 19% of the prison population. White people on the other hand consist of 64% of the US population and yet only 39% of the prison population. The inconsistency lies in the numbers. Numbers don't lie.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incarceration_in_the_United_States

Hence the title of her book reflects how the system has never changed, it just relied on new and different forms of legislation to perpetuate the same system. Jim Crow laws as they were called years ago, had the name originate from a persona that a white man Thomas D. Rice portrayed as a black man who danced around and sang. His ethnic depiction was the white man's idea of what a black man was like. He popularized a slave song called "Jump Jim Crow" and used burnt cork to darken his face.

Padgett, Ken. "Blackface! Minstrel Shows". Archived from [the original](#) on September 27, 2014. Retrieved December 10, 2014.

When the segregation laws came into being after Reconstruction, this term was adopted in the South to again degrade the perception of black people and demean them to keep these segregated laws intact. This term remained until the 1960's when the Civil Rights movement gained momentum. It was a degrading term, that I didn't realize until reading about it. And yet we bandy about that term to describe how we ridiculed people of color in the past, not knowing how hurtful it really was.

We need to educate ourselves about our history. What Michelle Alexander proved in her book, was that we might as well call our systems what they are. We still have slavery in a different form. We have the largest population of incarcerated people in the world. And we're not the largest country in the world. And we know this, we talk about it sometimes, like when a book comes out, or recently the movie "Just Mercy" which just came out. It's in our consciousness momentarily and we all say, oh we need to do something about this. And then we go on about our lives and we forget and we move on to other things, because there's so much to worry about these days.

Does incarceration really work? Is punishment the answer? Our system seems to believe it is. I don't think so. In fact, there is a myth being perpetuated that incarceration is supposed to be rehabilitative, that during this period of punishment, prisoners are supposed to see the error of their ways and when they are released they will then return as full-fledged productive members of society. That somehow, while they are in prison they will gain the knowledge and self-reflection to correct whatever mistakes they made, modify their behavior enough to never make that mistake again and immediately present themselves to society with all the skills necessary to add to our culture. All of this by living in a cell for years on end, making pennies per hour manufacturing products for the outside world, not having access to counseling, education, therapy, to correct those bad judgements they lived in the past. All while sharing a cell with a stranger, seeing the sunshine outside for an hour a day, being bullied by guards or other inmates, and being expected to rehabilitate themselves. This does not follow our first principle of affirming the worth and dignity of all persons.

In one story I read about, there was a double murder and the two surviving relatives of these victims reacted completely differently. One of the victims was the sister of this relative, who was devastated at the loss of her sister. She could not forgive the murderer of her sister. 'I don't know what there is to say.' The victim's sister Kara Conn said: 'For every birthday party, holiday potluck and special event she will be absent from, so should he be absent from events he would have gone to. 'For as long as my sister remains dead, Vicente should remain in prison.'

That is such a common reaction to losing a loved one. We want to blame someone, we want to punish someone, sometimes we even want them to die, because they caused the death of a loved one. I understand that feeling, I can only imagine the sense of loss and grief that people who have lost loved ones to violence must be facing. And yet in that same story, the mother, Javika Wallace-Hawkins told the man who murdered her son, Vincente Rodrigues- Ortiz, 'In order to get through this process, I had to forgive you and I forgive you from the bottom of my heart.

She explained how her son Andre Hawkins' death had devastated her, and then she told Rodriguez-Ortiz:

I pray for you because as a mother, you're a child to me. 'And in my heart, I have no anger or bitterness toward you. 'As a mom, I just want to hug you because I know there is something that is not connected that made you feel so angry.

The courtroom in Grand Rapids, Michigan was stunned when they heard her words to this double murderer. She differed completely from the other victims' sister in that she had already forgiven him for the death of her son who was only 17 years old.

Vicente Rodriguez-Ortiz appeared to be very emotional as she spoke to him and then said, 'I just wanna say I'm sorry Miss Hawkins' after she finished speaking, as reported by WOOD TV. He killed Andre because he believed the teen to be romantically involved with his former girlfriend and other victim, Laurie Lundeberg. The gunmen opened fire in an attack outside an entertainment venue.

After he was arrested on suspicion of killing Hawkins, Vicente Rodriguez-Ortiz made a comment which also incriminated him in the fatal shooting of Laurie Lundeberg.

<https://metro.co.uk/2019/04/24/mums-extraordinary-forgiveness-as-she-tells-sons-killer-i-just-want-to-hug-you-9306186/>

Vicente Rodriguez-Ortiz is sentenced to life now without parole as he was convicted for the first murder and will remain there for the rest of his life. He is 23 years old.

What might have we done as a society to help prevent these two murders? Rodriguez-Ortiz was young, I don't know if he finished high school, I don't know what his economic situation was, but I can only imagine that he did not have the advantages and the tools to help him make healthy decisions. He will be spending the rest of his life in prison, for however long he can live in that environment. Prisoners don't always fare well in prison.

Our system is flawed. And holding anger and rage against those who commit crimes isn't solving the problem. Being vengeful does not benefit them. And I can only imagine the skills and talents that could have been encouraged and accentuated to help our world that may never come to fruition. Could he have become a research scientist and discovered a cure for a rare disease? Could he have become an artist and created a new genre of art never before seen? We don't know, for now he will be in prison for the rest of his life. There is not any chance of rehabilitation, not any chance for success in the outside world. There can be a chance for him to discover who he truly is inside, what caused him to strike out in anger twice, how he could make restitution somehow for what he did. We don't have that kind of system set up. We've only created a system of locking away, out of sight out of mind, those that we wish to take our revenge out on.

Yes, there are those of us humans who have deeply disturbing disorders where we do need to keep them away from other human beings. But I even believe that for every human out there in deeply disturbing trouble, we have an obligation to find a solution, a way to help them out of the hell they are living in.

Cornel West says, "Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public."

We need to heed his words and see what it is we can do, today. What we can do today.

Because there is much we can do.

Like the song said that I read as a poem,

Hard times are coming, you can feel it in the air
You can read it in the paper, you can see it everywhere
Gonna be trials and tribulation, astonishment and shock
You're gonna need a strong foundation, need a solid rock

We need to create this strong foundation to suppress this system that is oppressing so many.
But it will take all of us together.

We gotta hold on to each other, hold on strong
We gotta hold on to each other, until the danger's gone
We gotta hold on to each other, all night long
We gotta hold on to each other, got to hold on

I don't have the answer this morning. I know we need to change legislation, probably change administration, definitely need to change the systems that govern our lives. Sister Souljah, an American author and activist has a quote:

My definition of good is that you understand that this is a question of power. That you be willing to give up some power. That you be willing to give up some resources. That you be willing to pay Black people reparations for our years and years of service in this country. That you be willing to go home and tell your white mother and father about white racism and how it affects and kills Black people in our communities. That's my definition of good white people, and I haven't met any like that.

I have more hope than she does though. I do believe we owe reparations, I do believe that there are white people willing to talk about racism and how it is affecting Black people. I just don't have the answer as to how to make this great change that needs to happen. I do believe that there is an answer and that we can only find it together.

And we need to hold on to each other. Because it feels like a storm is coming and we need to hold on.

It's easy to get lonely, yeah, it's easy to get lost
And it's easy to get crumpled up, towed away and tossed
Don't let yourself get isolated, don't get caught up in despair
Don't run and hide, just come inside, you know you'll
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We gotta hold on to each other, hold on strong
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We gotta hold on to each other, got to hold on

May it be so. Blessed be.