

**SERMON** – Mary Margaret Earl

**“Justice and Joy”**

*Introduction and words of gathering and gratitude.*

For those of you less familiar with the UU Urban Ministry, we are a 190 year old Boston-based nonprofit. We have about 50 member congregations around Greater Boston, like Wellesley.

Over those nearly 2 centuries we have done many things – founded an Asian-appropriate food pantry, built elder housing, run a free legal clinic.

In 2020 we do these three basic things:

- We serve survivors of domestic violence at our Renewal House shelter, and offer a job readiness program for survivors from across Greater Boston.
- We provide tutoring and afterschool programming to Boston high school students of color, seeking to level the educational playing field and assist with college applications. We teach young people an appreciation for history and use the historic campus we inherited in Roxbury as a living classroom to give historic walking tours.
- And we engage the Roxbury community especially through the arts and humanities, and through partnership in the neighborhood.

This congregation in so many ways touches the work Urban Ministry now and as we look toward the future.

And the future, my friends, beckons.

This has a full and complicated year. A hard year.

Our country entered 2020 awash in anger and division - divided on the most basic of things like science. Late winter the Pandemic befell us. And in the spring we were jolted by the casual police killing of George Floyd, stunned to see 400 years of racism distilled into 8 interminable minutes.

And this summer we then witnessed the Black Lives Matter uprising in the streets and on town commons.

White people were confronted squarely by the legacy of enslavement: for the past four years truths long shrouded have been revealed. Racism no longer dwelled only in the

interpretation of health and wealth and educational disparities: facts like the net worth for white households in Boston is \$247,000 and for Black families is it \$8. Like the average lifespan in Roxbury is 30 years less than it is one mile away in the white neighborhood of Back Bay. Facts like African American adults are 6 times as likely to be incarcerated as whites.

Racism and white supremacy over the past 4 year became even plainer that those numbers. White supremacists marched proudly, stepping out of the mist. Racist ideas and attitudes were shouted into the open air, for us all see and hear.

And it has shaken and sobered us.

This season, with the election behind us, has for some brought a reprieve, a moment to exhale.

And yes, let us inhale and exhale.

But this also is a moment to look across our landscape, with the leaves fallen, and the golden veil fallen, and things made plain: The color of the sky and the shape of the branches, and the horizon ahead. .

The truth of our country's history, the legacy of enslavement that lives in all our institutions and also within us – emerged from the shadows.

And the gift is this: what can see, we can actually do something about.

This is the moment we are called to.

This is a moment when we each and as a faith community have an uncommon potential to help give birth something new.

The election is not the end of a struggle but a new and hopeful chapter in this struggle.

The work before us to heal racism will be the outward facing work of petitions and protest and marches and mobilizing.

But it also must be the work inward, the work within ourselves.

The journey inward to facing our own racism, is hard work.

And essential work.

This morning I wanted to walk with you on that journey, the journey I have been on since arriving at the UU Urban Ministry six years ago.

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I arrived in Roxbury after a decade working in the homeless community in Providence Rhode Island. I came ready to work with domestic violence survivors, and to support young people. But when I arrived I learned quickly that there was more to our organization than our list of programs: We stood at the intersection between communities – rooted in the historic heart of Boston's Black community that had experienced and borne witness to the city's legacy of racism, and encircled by white suburban UU congregations being awakened to that legacy

Standing at that intersection meant reckoning with racism.

But I didn't come to the Urban Ministry to talk about racism. I wasn't ready for it.

And on one of my first days, the police officers in Ferguson Missouri who had killed Michael Brown were not indicted. This moment propelled the Black Lives Matter movement into the national consciousness, and UU Urban Ministry staff came to me and asked me to write a public statement.

I didn't know what to say. I was afraid to talk about racism.

That day was the beginning of a new leg of my journey, not just my outward journey for justice, but also my inward journey.

This morning I share three lessons that I am learning on the way:

- First, the spiritual journey of dismantling racism - work we are all called to do - asks us to tolerate discomfort and pain. The pain of learning the real history of race in America. The pain of learning the ways it privileges white people. The pain of facing those health and wealth and educational disparities.

Robin DiAngelo in the book *White Fragility* writes: *"Race will influence whether we will survive our birth, where we are most likely to live, which schools we will attend, who our friends and partners will be, what careers we will have, how much money we will earn, how healthy we will be and even how long we can expect to live"*

DiAngelo, who is white, spent years as a diversity and inclusion trainer, and saw over and over again white people and especially those who saw themselves as progressive as so defensive about witnessing white supremacy that their defensiveness protected the systems that perpetuated it.

A step on our journey is laying down our defenses. To become aware when our shoulder tighten and we prepare to say But or Wait or Not me!

A step on our journey is to keep opening, waiting, breathing.

A step on our journey is the practice of stillness.

Black Theologian Howard Thurman said *Listen to the long stillness: New life is stirring  
New dreams are on the wing New hopes are being readied: Humankind is fashioning a  
new heart.*

*Humankind is forging a new mind. God is at work. This is the season of Promise*

When we still our defenses, something new may emerge.

- A second lesson on my journey, and this is so hard, is letting go of Goodness. Our task is not to be good or seem good. It's paying attention. It's looking at what needs to be witnessed.

In *White Fragility*, DiAngelo describes that our biggest hurdle to addressing racism is white intolerance to thinking that we participate in the systems that uphold racism – to seeing how these systems benefit us.

DiAngelo writes *"I could see the power of the belief that only bad people were racist ... I could see how we are taught to think about racism only as discrete acts committed by individual people, rather than as a complex, interconnected system ... It became clear that if I believe that only bad people who intended to hurt others because race could ever do so, I would respond with outrage to any suggestion that I was involved in racism. Of course that belief would make me feel falsely accused of something terrible, and of course I would want to defend my own character."*

When we protect our sense of being Good at the expense of seeing truth, we risk doing more harm.

None of us created the world into which we were born. And we were born into nation built upon enslavement.

Our modern police forces were born of slave patrols, whose charge was capturing fleeing slaves. Our founding fathers enslaved people even while writing the Declaration of Independence.

It would be impossible to imagine that we did not inhale racism, like a villager living by the smokestacks.

When we focus on protecting our goodness over examining our contribution to racism and white supremacy, we uphold it.

We need to trust that we are beloved. That is guaranteed and non-negotiable. And then we need to face what is.

- My third lesson is that working toward justice is not just toil. There is joy in the journey, joy in meeting Sisters and Brothers working alongside us. Joy in meeting new people across difference.

In the past six years I have had a thousand hard and challenging moments, scary moments, unsettling moments that I needed to breathe and listen my way through. But I have met the most wonderful people along the way. That's how this work is, we don't move alone - we build up our human family as we go.

I have met white allies who have modeled humility and taught me to follow Black leaders.

I have met Black leaders who have spoken truth and shown grace and generosity and forgiveness. I have listened to Black elders share stories of the Boston of their childhoods.

And I have sat at the table with people building up of sister and brotherhood, and laughed and broken bread and experienced how this is blessed and beautiful work.

This is a joy. No matter how hard and uncomfortable – this is the work worth doing.

In her book *Healing Zen*, author Ellen Birx, a nurse who works with ill patients, describes the work of caregivers for those who are sick. She writes:

*“Healing is not only physical and psychological; it is also spiritual. People define spiritual in many ways. What most of these definitions have in common is that spirituality has to do with the essence and meaning of life. Spirituality influences values and how your life is lived; it opens you to the mystery and wonder of life and fills you with energy and vitality. Spirituality results in a deep sense of connection with people, all creatures, and the earth. Spiritual development manifests in love and compassionate action.”*

She was writing of the work of healing patients who are sick.

We are tasked with healing a country that is sick. And we begin here.

When we pick up the work of the world, when we are willing to climb the mountain toward justice one step at a time, when we are willing to do the work outwardly and inwardly, we infuse our lives with our true meaning.

I invite you to join us at the Urban Ministry as we continue to pick up that work, with your help.

- Join us on Dec 22 for our next Virtual Community Conversation on mental health in the Black community.
- Learn about our Roxbury Artist Amplification project, which invites congregations to showcase Black artists. We have just completed a catalogue highlighting the work of artists of color, for holidays shopping.
- Join our mailing list for ways to partner with us in partnering with Roxbury.

Come be with us as behold this moment. As we lay down the magic and mirage of early autumn and open our hearts to the gifts of winter

The gifts to be celebrated:

The bareness

The emptiness

The witnessing of what is.