

Learning from Our Past

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Sermon

We've started this exploration of Unitarian Universalist history with two stories. One is an old standard – Francis David's 16th century radically inclusive Unitarianism. It's one of the first stories most Unitarian Universalists learn about our history. We're justifiably proud of our early Transylvanian commitment to religious freedom.

The other is a story we tell far less often. Universalist churches and schools in segregated Black communities after the Civil War that were closed, as resources were redirected to white communities.

Both of these stories are part of who we are. And both reflect two historical throughlines for today.

The first is a core theology of inclusion. All are worthy, all have dignity, all are loved, no one is outside the circle of love. This is a powerful theology that has called generation after generation to live - and build communities – in ways that are ever more inclusive and welcoming and just.

This call runs through our history, but not smoothly. The second throughline is resistance to that expanding inclusion in the hearts and minds of real people in real congregations. People always absorb societal norms, biases, and phobias; and also carry a human aversion to difference, discomfort and change that threatens our sense of belonging. There has always been a gap between what we say and what we do.

We're hardly alone in that. Anyone who expects perfect alignment between word and deed in any community, or any life, will be disappointed. But it is quite a tension for a faith tradition to hold. A theological call to ever greater inclusion experienced by human beings who resist it.

What's at stake in this tension is our very identity. Who is in and who is out?

With that question, and those throughlines in mind, let's talk history.

In this country, Unitarian Universalism really gets going in the 1700's. It was the Age of Enlightenment – a revolution in thinking about what it means to be human that emphasized individual freedom and reason. Christian authorities of the day saw the Enlightenment as a challenge to the hierarchy and obedience ingrained in their theologies and practices. And Enlightenment thinkers resented church authorities as impediments to human freedom and progress.

Out of this conflict emerged liberal religion – which sought to reconcile reason and ancient revelation. Liberal religion was an umbrella term that encompassed Unitarians and Universalists, among others. The liberal religions were Protestant, with the bible at the center, but individual interpretation was encouraged. Thomas Jefferson famously using scissors to remove the parts of the bible he found problematic ... was a very liberal religion thing to do. This whole movement pushed the boundaries of who could call themselves Christian in ways that were uncomfortable for many.

And it didn't stop there. Over the years, the theological boundaries of liberal religion expanded again and again. About 200 years ago, Unitarian Transcendentalists insisted that we look beyond scripture for religious truth. Famous transcendentalists like [slide] Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker brought the radical perspective that humans have direct access to the holy – that our lives, experiences and conscience are ways in which God is speaking in this world.

It may be hard to imagine today, but the Unitarians of the time weren't on board with this. Emerson became something of an outcast. Parker's stance provoked a debate about whether he was an infidel and led to disputes over what was OK to preach from a Unitarian pulpit. But later generations of Unitarians embraced – even revered - this formerly radical perspective. [end slide]

This is a pattern in our history. Our ancestors tended to resist expanding inclusion in their time, while taking great pride in the expansions provoked by past radicals.

About 100 years ago, along came the humanists, arguing that we don't need God at all. Do non-theists belong in Unitarian Universalism? That question makes no sense today, but at the time it became the hotly debated "humanist-theist controversy." Just imagine how hard it must have been for those theists, whose religion had always been rooted in a Christian conception of God, to welcome a theology that explicitly rejected that conception! But, ultimately, the boundaries widened again, Unitarianism changed again, and yesterday's radicals were now mainstream.

50 years ago, it was the Pagans and feminists, bringing the ideas that the earth itself is holy, that humans are connected and relational, and perhaps our journey is less progress onward and upward and more of a spiral dance.

All these once-radical theologies, and more, are now very much a part of this faith, preached from our pulpits, held close by individual Unitarian Universalists.

And it's not just beliefs – over time, more people were welcomed in, too. In the earliest congregations, as in society, leadership was male. [slide] The first denominationally-sanctioned ordained female minister was a Universalist – Olympia Brown, back in 1863. Soon after, there were 21 female Unitarian ministers known as the Iowa Sisterhood who had highly successful ministries in midwestern frontier churches. It looked like the circle was widening, but ... that resistance thing. The leadership decided these women were embarrassing, and they were pushed out; and we stopped telling their stories. In 1978, more than 100 years after Olympia Brown, only 6% of Unitarian Universalist ministers were women; most churches wouldn't even consider a female minister.¹ [remove slide]

But that call to greater inclusion never left. Today a majority of Unitarian Universalist ministers are women. What was once radical and embarrassing is now normal, and – as always - our churches changed.

The next circle-widening moved us beyond heterosexuality and the gender binary. Before the 80's there were no openly gay Unitarian Universalist ministers – the very few who tried it lost their jobs.² But ... that changed. Soon after, the denomination committed publicly to marriage equality. Most of our congregations have now embraced the Welcoming Congregation Program, to more fully include all genders and sexual orientations. The circle widens, and our congregations change.

And ... We've still got sexism. Some congregations still refuse to call ministers based on sexuality, or gender identity or expression. Trans and genderqueer Unitarian Universalists still experience discrimination, erasure, even hostility. Microaggressions have not gone away. We're still in the midst of that tension between our theology of inclusion and the human resistance to what it asks of us.

And we're in that tension as we strive to more fully include people with other historically marginalized identities. People with disabilities or mental health issues, neurodivergent people, young people, people with less formal education or experiencing poverty.

And ... people who are not white. Because some truths require specificity, I'm going to focus here on the call to greater inclusion of people who are Black.

There have always been Black people in Unitarian and Universalist congregations. Persistent, committed people who were nourished and inspired by the message of this faith even as their welcome was ... limited.

We have some eye-witness examples from the 19th century Unitarian abolitionist Lydia Maria Child [slide]. Child was a rare white voice calling out the racism of the North, including within our congregations. One time, when a Black man bought a pew, she says, "I heard a very kind-hearted and zealous democrat declare his opinion that "the fellow ought to be turned out by constables, if he dared to occupy the pew he had purchased."³ She talks of regularly seeing a solitary Black man come up to

¹ <https://files.meadville.edu/files/resources/v2n1-sangrey-the-feminization-of-the-unitarian-uni.pdf>.

² <https://www.uua.org/files/documents/lgbtq/history.pdf>

³ https://www.gutenberg.org/files/28242/28242-h/28242-h.htm#Page_195

receive communion after all the white folks had sat back down. Or the time a white man left the church after discovering that Black people had sat in his pew.

We have individual abolitionist heroes, and the Unitarian Universalist response to Martin Luther King's call to Selma will always be a point of pride. But in our congregations, Black Unitarians and Universalists were reminded over and over that this circle did not fully include them.

Remarkably, they persisted. But they almost always held dual memberships – a quiet Unitarian membership and a more engaged and public membership in a Black church.⁴ Theological alignment only gets you so far.

This was true for one of my all-time heroes: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. [slide] She was a quiet member of a Unitarian church and a leader in an African Methodist Episcopal church. Harper was a brilliant and courageous 19th century writer and activist in all sorts of justice movements – including abolition and ... women's rights, where she spoke out about intersectionality long before there was a word for it. She publicly spoke racial truth to white suffragists in ways that would take courage today. She was the kind of prophetic, boundary expanding voice I would like to believe we would welcome with open arms. We didn't. It was our loss.

And we have a history of Black ministers starting churches that might have been denominational game changers. Rev. Egbert Ethelred Brown [slide], told that no Unitarian church would accept a Black minister, began the Harlem Community Church. It showed real promise, but because of its location the denomination saw no reason to support it.⁵ The church did not survive. "Can you imagine," asks historian and minister Mark Morrison-Reed, "how we would be enriched today if there was a vibrant UU congregation in Harlem that had been around for almost 100 years?"⁶ [slide down]

Then there were the Universalist churches and schools in Black communities –started and inspired by Rev. Joseph Jordan. The opportunity they offered us all was lost when the denomination chose to invest in white communities instead.

Or Rev. William H.G. Carter, who started a storefront Unitarian church in Cincinnati in the 1930's. Unitarian officials said they were impressed by Carter, but offered no denominational support because the church was "in the wrong place" and "the neighborhood surrounding it is poor."⁷ Isolated from the denomination, Carter's church did not survive.

The last 80 years brought both progress and setbacks – including a significant conflict in the late 60's and early 70's that led to a dramatic loss of Black membership that we have yet to recover from.

But there has been progress. And resistance today is less overt. But it's still here. It's here in the daily decisions about whose comfort is prioritized, and where we put our resources and what language we use to describe ourselves; it's in the persistent microaggressions; and in the history we do and don't tell. But that call to ever greater inclusion is relentless – and right now, in that spirit, Unitarian Universalists are engaged in and prioritizing anti-racism and anti-oppression work as never before.

We can see this in that poster of famous Unitarian Universalists ... and in this sermon! We are broadening the scope of the stories we choose to tell.

We can also see it in some of the denominational processes, financial commitments, trainings and decisions. And in books like "Mistakes and Miracles" that are being widely read and discussed and acted upon. That book is about congregations becoming more multicultural and anti-racist – specifically what this has looked like in other churches and how we might learn from them. Last year, the Programs for Children and Youth Council read and discussed the book, and this year we're expanding the conversation to include ... you. It's a chance to learn and explore how we will respond to this historical call to inclusivity – in this place – at this moment in history. How will we engage with today's prophetic voices? If you might be interested in participating or facilitating, Pam Collins will be in Channing Hall with a sign after the service, or you can reach out to me.

⁴ Mark Morrison-Reed, *Darkening the Doorways*, 22.

⁵ Mark Morrison-Reed, *The Black Hole in the White UU Psyche*, UU World 2019.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Morrison-Reed, *Darkening the Doorways*, 188.

We can also see the engagement with anti-racism and anti-oppression work in the ongoing resistance throughout Unitarian Universalism. And, you know, I get it. Just like those who came before us – think of the early 20th century theists suddenly confronted with humanists - each of us who feels now that we belong has to contend with a fear that expanding the welcome might change our belonging - might even ask us to change ourselves. Which it will. It always has. Our spiritual task is to avoid allowing that fear to drive our decisions about who is in and who is out.

Because, this is who we are. We have changed, and we will change, and the circle will widen, again and again.

If you long for a church that stays the same throughout your life, this is hard. If you love the ways in which our religious circle widened in the past, but are uncomfortable with today's calls for greater inclusion, our history tells us ... that's often how it is. If you're frustrated with the slow pace of change, our history offers good company across the ages. And if you're new here and wondering what this is all about ... well, anyone who tells you Unitarian Universalism is easy ... is wrong.

A religion with an ever-expanding welcome at its core is not easy, but it is desperately needed. We live in a time of building walls and narrowing circles, and backsliding in the protections for (and inclusion of) the most marginalized. This theological throughline in our history is a prophetic message that is hopeful and powerful and offers a way forward.

Because our history tells us that we can learn and grow and change and that the best way forward is together. And it tells us that the call to widen the circle of who is fully welcome is deeply ingrained and does not give up. And our history – flawed, hesitant and sometimes regrettable though it is – offers hope that we – the keepers of this faith - will continue to hear that call, to proclaim that no one is outside the circle of love, and – imperfectly but irrevocably - make it so.

May we make it so.

Amen.