

UU Society of Northampton
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Guest Sermon Nov 04

The Role of Allies as Agents of Change

Thank you for inviting me to be with you, speak with you, and sing with you this morning. I have many friends at the UU; I admire the work you do, and I am honored to be with you today. Special heartfelt thanks to Jeff Luekens and Norma Akamatsu for helping me prepare for today.

I know that this congregation has done fine and focused work on issues of racial justice. You invited me to talk with you specifically about the role of allies as agents of change in the struggle to confront racism.

Let's begin with the question: who are allies, what do they do?

Allies are folks who are dominant in a form of systematic oppression who work in partnership with folks who are targeted to combat oppression. Examples: in the systematic oppression of racism, people of color are targeted, whites are dominant, therefore whites can be allies; with sexism, women are targeted, men are dominant, so men can be allies; with classism, poor and working class people are targeted, middle and upper class people are dominant and therefore can be allies, heterosexism, gay men, lesbian, bisexuals, transgendered people are targeted, heterosexuals are dominant, and therefore can be allies, and so on. Allies are members of the dominant group, the group that receives the unearned advantage, who work for equity and justice in the form of oppression that benefits them. You know this. I am looking out at strong, clear and vocal allies.

In terms of racism, white people are called, to use theological language, to be agents of change naming the privileges whites receive and working continuously to dismantle racism and level the playing field.

Why is this hard?

Our hearts are in the right place, why is this difficult for us?

Let me spell out three hurdles I think white people have to jump repeatedly to be effective allies:

The first: we have to train ourselves to continually see that which has been carefully hidden from us—our white skin privilege. White privilege was easy to see in the pre-Civil Rights era because discrimination was so clear. Racism was easier to combat if you were brave and took on that issue because racial injustice was evident all around you. In the years since the Civil Rights Movement, racism mutated—it became subtler, more insidious. The racism of the 90s and the new millennium is called "neo-racism" because although still virulent, it is harder to see, easier to deny, more likely to be camouflaged. As allies working to combat neo-racism, we are constantly trying to see that which is hard to detect. We are the ones seeing the absence, naming racism by omission. When only white parents gather for a PTO meeting at the Middle School, allies ask what might the meeting be like if parents of color were present—what issues might be raised, what are the whites parents not discussing, what might make the meetings gatherings parents of color might want to attend? When an all-white search committee is formed at our place of employment, white allies are the ones to say that people can mean well and do badly...white search committees can be well intended but they will (statistics show) favor candidates that look like them. White allies visit the public library and ask for displays that include information about the Arawak Indians when books on Columbus are featured in October. White allies do not just spot obvious discrimination and work for change on those fronts, we try to see what is missing and we raise those concerns and work for change on the subtler level.

During a workshop I led in Northampton years ago, a white woman raised her hand and said, "I hear what you are saying about being a white ally, but I work at the Y as a swim instructor and I cannot imagine how in my job I can put white ally behavior into practice." After some discussion with the entire group, the swim instructor said: "I show videotapes to my classes so they can see perfect strokes, I stop the tape and dissect each movement. I just realized that in every one of the videotapes a white person is demonstrating the perfect stroke. I don't even know if there is an aquatics catalogue that sells tapes with people of color demonstrating strokes." Another person in the workshop called out, "You could make one. Do you have friends of color who could be in a videotape?" Yes, the instructor said. She just lit up. "I could make one."

So the first hurdle for white allies is for us to constantly see with new eyes the whiteness that surrounds us and the privileges that surrounds us (those benefits given to us daily without our asking) and to name that hidden reality

and to be brave enough to alter the dialogue, work to expand opportunities, and most significantly, to share power.

The second hurdle white people must jump requires a change in our identity. We must move from a place of guilt as the oppressor to the proud identity of being an ally—that change in our sense of self will liberate us to be vocal and effective. Rather than carry the pain of guilt, we assume the stance of change agent equipped, ready and able to gently but persistently raise questions, name problems, brainstorm solutions, dismantle privilege.

None of us created the problem of racial injustice, that fire was blazing when all of us were born. But as allies we are the bucket brigade throwing water, bucket after bucket, on the fire and over time making a difference. I remember years ago when we were discussing this point in a workshop, a white woman started talking about how terrible she felt about this nation's history, how badly she felt as a white person about her own complicity...she went on for a while. A Black man rose and interrupted her. He said simply: "Your shame will not aid our liberation."

Whites can move with pride from a place of guilt and shame to claim a proud identity that includes foremothers and forefathers like the Grimice Sisters, William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, Viola Litizzo, Anne Braden, Morris Dees, James Reeb (a UU Minister), and others. Our shame holds us back. It will not aid the liberation and empowerment of people of color but our activism as bold and effective white allies will.

The third hurdle that makes this work hard for us is our tendency to flatten racism to the one dimension of personal interactions. White people tend to reduce racism to individual acts of meanness, person-to-person experiences. While this dimension is important, it causes us to work only on the individual level missing the manifestations of racism on the cultural and institutional levels. As white allies, we need to be smart and savvy about seeing and naming racism in our culture (in our standards of beauty, in Disney movies, advertisements, video games, text books, TV programs, comics and children's books) and in our institutions (who is recruited, hired, promoted, retained, who makes the most money, who makes the least, what is the spread).

Racism does not operate simply on the individual level. It is, in the end about POWER—who has access to social, political, and economic power.

As white allies we need to be able to discuss and to combat institutional racism that keeps power in white hands in schools, colleges and universities, banks, hospitals, prisons, courtrooms, the Senate, the House of Representatives---every institution in America is dominated by white people except maybe some sports (although most have white coaches), some forms of music and some corners of the entertainment industry. But even so, the examples are few and far between. And when you look hard, even those examples are mainly controlled by and benefit white people.

So the third hurdle is to see our power to make change on not just the personal level but to poke holes in cultural racism and to name and work to dismantle institutional racism. Institutional racism involves life and death issues: where people live, who receives medical care, who is on death row. The work of allies is tiring but important: writing letters, boycotting products, getting on search committees, volunteering with organizations committed to change, investing in formal mentoring programs, joining Boards and groups led by people of color, giving money to organizations led by people of color—working for change not charity.

If we narrow our focus just to individual racism, we are missing the even more virulent forms of racism. We must, as allies, step out and be brave knowing that we will make mistakes and stumble. But if we are aware, attentive, and continuously engaged in this work, people of color will be forgiving when we make our mistakes and we will, over time, make a difference. Remember the words from the Talmud: "It is not incumbent upon you to finish the work, but neither can you turn away from doing your part."

I have talked and written about allied behavior for many years. And, over the years, I have asked a number of targeted people what they want from their allies. No targeted person has ever given me a Long, guilt-inducing, flowery response. The answers have been short and many have been eloquent.

When I asked Ken Jones, an African American man, what he wanted from white allies, he said simply: "I want to know you have my back."

When I asked Joe Gerson what he as a Jew wanted from Christian allies, he said: "Help me carry these ashes..."

When I asked my friend Chris Perry, a homeless man, what he wanted from his allies, he said: "Make sure you tell our story."

When I asked my sister Gina, who is a lesbian, what she wanted from her allies, she said: "Be aware each day of your legal and social rights and privileges. Your awareness will increase your compassion."

I thought I knew a lot about allied behavior because, in the seven forms of systematic oppression in this society (the 7 isms) I am dominant in every one except gender (sexism). In every other way I am dominant—overprivileged, by class, race, physical ability, sexual orientation, religion, etc. So I have many opportunities DAILY to be a strong ally. But I learned a new lesson in allied behavior, unexpectedly when something sweet and surprising happened a few years back. I am Armenian. Every April, a small group of Armenians stand out front right next door around the flag pole on Armenian Martyrs' Day to remember and honor those killed during the Armenian Genocide in the early part of the last century. We hoist the Armenian flag up the flagpole, my father, a Genocide survivor speaks, we pray in Armenian and English. We sing, we even laugh. Mainly, we are together. A few years ago when we gathered, a number of non-Armenians appeared and joined us. Shoulder to shoulder, they stood with us in the circle—Jim Levey and Christine Olson from this congregation. Peter Ives and Jenny from First Churches, Mary Brandt from Mount Holyoke—they joined our circle of remembrance witnessing to our pain, caring about our people. The presence of allies there in the circle was deeply emotional. People beyond our own families knew our story and came to support us. I was moved to tears.

Listen again to the words of some targeted people talking about allies:

"Make sure you tell our story..."

"Help me carry these ashes..."

"Your awareness with increase your compassion..."

I want to close by telling you a story that relates to the Marge Piercy poem you heard read earlier. I found that poem stuck in one of my files recently. When I read it, I realized I wanted to include it in this service and to tell you about the women inmates I visit every week at the Hampshire County Jail and House of Correction here in Northampton.

Listen again to one stanza from the Piercy:

let me
not feel I forgot to love anyone
I meant to love, that I forgot
to give what I held in my hands,
that I forgot to do some little
piece of the work that wanted
to come through.

"...to give what I held in my hands..."

That relates to an exercise I did with the women in the jail this fall. We stood in a circle. There were maybe ten of us. Each of us held our hands out in front of us and we went around the circle several times. Each woman looked at her hands and said: "These hands..." and then finished the thought with something our hands had done.

Around and around the circle we went, looking at our hands and saying:

"These hands..."

"These hands..."

changed a lot of diapers (the women said)
made a lot of meals smoked a lot of cigarettes
hitchhiked a lot to work
folded a lot of laundry
held a lot of beer cans
changed a lot of beds.
These hands...
drove a motorcycle
hit my boyfriend
stole money
threw a coffee mug...and on and on it went.

When it was my turn I said things like:

These hands...

baptized a lot of babies

wrote a lot of letters

made a lot of coffee...

Then one time around the circle, the woman on my right said: "These hands have done bad things."

My mind flashed to all kinds of awful things her hands might have done. But then I was next. I had to say something. Suddenly I found that I wanted to join with her; I did not want to feel separate or superior. I surprised myself and blurted out: "These hands have done bad things too!"

It was later after I left the jail that I realized that as a white person my statement had been so true.

I realized that the bad things the inmate's hands had done were overt acts... the bad things my hands had done were acts of omission.

Her hands had done bad things when she used them, my hands had done bad things when they stayed in. my pockets...

When I should have reached out, raised my hand, written a check.

Her bad things were active, mine like so many others with power and privilege, were passive. My "bad things" involved the times I should have acted and did not.

Piercy says:

"let me not feel that I forgot to give what I held in my hands...

That I forgot to do some piece of the work that wanted to come through."

I know that one piece of the work that wants to come through me and each one of us is work for justice, fairness, and equity.

It wants to come through our hands and our voices, through our prayers and our actions.

The piece of work that wants to come through is our being able to see what a very white culture has helped us not to see;

Our being able to discuss what a very polite culture wants us not to say; Our being able to do what a very complacent culture wants to leave undone.

The piece of work that wants to come through is our naming and claiming our identities as white allies—agents of change willing to take risks, to tell the story, to carry the ashes, to see the privilege, to be compassionate, to make a difference.

These hands have missed opportunities to do good worst in this life.

These hands have also done good things in this life once I learned how, once I was made aware.

These hands are strong.

But these hands are stronger when they hold your hands.

Our hands together can create the nonviolent multiracial army King referred to in his speeches.

Our hands together can transform a fractured society into King's beloved community.

Our hands together can create a culture that values each life, that shares power, and that loves justice.

Our hands, together...
Amen.