

**“We Are the Power” – Sermon delivered at Old Ship Church,
First Parish Hingham, MA – October 20, 2019**

*Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer
First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist*

It is a pleasure and a real honor to be here at Old Ship Church. Let me say first that I am grateful to my colleague Rev. Ken Read-Brown for this most gracious invitation. As something of a church history buff, I have to really take time to process being in the oldest church building in the United States it is quite remarkable. I also have to process the fact that when this building was constructed the idea of an African American preaching from the pulpit would have been completely unheard of. I hold the complexity of that reality here as I do in my own pulpit in Cambridge. It is both a challenge and a blessing and I am grateful to the holy spirit to be welcomed here by you and inspired by my colleagues past and present to share a message with you today. Thank you.

I believe that the biggest question that spiritual communities are facing today is the question of who is “we.” Although a sentence like this is a grammatical nightmare, I will ask you to let go of your editorial brain for the next 15 minutes and hear me out. Who is “we” is the question that identifies the natural tendency of all communities to create a delineation between themselves and some other community or collection of others. It is a basic question of tribalism that is also playing out in our national politics.

Who is “we”? Is “we” determined by education, or economics? Is it determined by language? Culture? Race? Who is “we” is the first question that must be answered in order to then understand how “we” are the *power*.

In seminary, I preached a lot. Before my internship, I probably preached in 20 different congregations around the state of California. Although some were other denominations, most of them were Unitarian Universalist. Each church was different and each had a unique approach to what it means to be a community of faith. But even with all of the differences, there was one consistent theme that came to me in the Unitarian Universalist congregations. Each of them in their own way seemed to struggle with this thing called “welcoming”. Not enough people of color, not enough young adults, not

enough children and families...constant challenges of how to get the people who everyone seemed to think *should* be coming in the door to actually come through.

The ministers of these congregations also shared with me a consistent observation. Many of them expressed concern that true “welcoming” was a challenge because underneath the public longing for diversity, the congregations also wanted their communities to remain a “nice club”. I remember the first time I heard this. I found it shocking that someone would want their church to remain exclusive and selective and limited to people who could afford it or felt somehow that it needed to remain exclusionary in order to protect its value like a racial covenant in a gated community.

The problem is that if a church is a “nice club” it is not actually a church. Nice clubs don’t question how they make the world better. Nice clubs don’t model societal change by making room for change or growth within. Nice clubs are only nice for a very select few who can gain membership based on narrow criteria of social acceptability. Nice clubs are self-satisfied and protect their own status quo. Nice clubs are bubbles. But remember, bubbles are not just fragile, they are always temporary. Somehow, I don’t believe Unitarian Universalism as a faith, is asking any of us to be a “nice club.”

With his *Five Smooth Stones of Religious Liberalism*, Unitarian Universalist and liberal Christian scholar James Luther Adams cleared a path for us to move away from the dangerous froth of the ‘nice club’ into the warm river of richly mature spiritual engagement. Adams’ *Five Smooth Stones* points us toward: (first) continuous revelation...the ability to learn and reveal new truths; (second) mutual and free consent...freedom in relationships; (third) just and loving community...prophetic justice; (fourth) social incarnation...the reality of human made destiny; (fifth) an attitude of ultimate optimism...a foundational belief in hope.

Letting Unitarian Universalism be an excuse to form a “nice club” is a failure of this grand experiment of faith. A nice club must not be all “we” are.

So, speaking of failure, earlier this month, I published a post on my blog titled “A Failure of My Faith”. The blog itself is called *Spirituwellness* and I encourage you to read it when you have a chance. This particular post has gained some traction because it is a call to action to specifically address the history of the Puritan church and the Massachusetts Bay Colony and Native people. It is not seeking forgiveness from Native people, but rather it is calling on Unitarian Universalists, and the United Church of Christ in coordination with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to publicly take personal responsibility for their historical role in the displacement of native people through a declaration of atonement.

Part of what appears in the blog reads as follows:

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association (primary descendants and chief beneficiaries of the Puritan colonial project) recognize the year 2020 as a year of mourning and the beginning of atonement for the loss of life, the destruction of a way of life and for the stolen cultural autonomy of the Native people in this region.

Much of the talk that we hear right now about troubled racial and cultural history seems focused on reparations for slavery. I agree with this conversation and the goal of reparations. Yet as an African American who has no native blood who is also a leader in a faith that descends from troubled colonial histories, I insist on getting this in the right order. I cannot believe we will ever achieve reparations for the descendants of enslaved people until there is a substantial, definitive and ongoing recognition of the first crime against the original inhabitants of this land.

My reason for bringing up this effort is not to cultivate white guilt. It is not to point a finger at descendants of Puritan settlers, some of whom may be sitting here today. Rather I bring it up because in order to have the difficult conversation that needs to happen about the 400 year relationship between our church history and the history of Native people and for us to actually be in right relationship with that history and the

Native people who are still here, we cannot afford to be a “nice club”. In order to hear and truly take in Rev. Marta Valentín’s words at General Assembly we cannot be satisfied with facing only in one direction...away from our challenging and troubled pasts...we must participate in the gentle turning toward it. “We” must be something different.

As I consider the opportunities we have as a faith tradition for seeking right relation with history and legacies that continue to play out in our modern world whether it be relationships with native communities, reparations for slavery, full and unquestioned gender equality and total protection for the intimate relationships between all people, it is clear to me that “we” must be the opposite of a nice club or a place where everybody knows your name or a pre-determined plan or some other kind of mono-culture based script for relationship. “We” must be a community of far reaching interdependence. We must be the relationship that thrives on sharing different manifestations of humanity told through infinitely variable stories; the relationship that is built on a collective experience as uniquely embodied beings on this one earth. “We” is a community of diverse *universal* accountability.

Defining ourselves in this expansive way demands that we then recognize a power that is equally ambitious. Too often, we are satisfied with a myth of what our power is as Unitarian Universalists and that myth can be constrained by a limited repertoire of action. With apologies to Elizabeth Warren, we seem to have a plan for everything. We have a plan to work on white supremacy. We have a plan to fight racism. We have a plan to create greater accessibility. We have a plan for transgender inclusion. We have a plan for multi-culturalism. But if we only focus on these finite plans, we fall victim to a check box social justice that only lasts until the person who was leading the effort burns out.

We must gently turn toward something deeper...a real core power that may be subtly relentless like a breeze but one that can ultimately fill the towering sails of our ideals like no other. It is a power that underlies the entirety of James Luther Adams’ vast work.

Humility. Our real power is humility.

Humility, real humility is not self-congratulatory or in need of a curriculum to justify it. Humility shows up and doesn't need to stand in the front row wearing a yellow T-shirt. Humility prays with someone in pain without questioning whether it clashes with their personal beliefs. Humility reaches out and says "I love you" unconditionally and without qualification and without needing an excuse or a framework or quid pro quo.

Folks, we are the power. We, a community of universal accountability are the power; and our power is the humility to be present with the full spectrum of humanity... our success and failure, our need and hubris, our joy and celebration.

But the real challenge is not knowing that we are the power...

The real challenge will always be in how we use it.

Blessed be.