

## Whole People

Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer – Homily, May 3, 2020

I haven't washed or shaved in a couple of days. Without my glasses and with a hat and a hoodie, you might not recognize me. But I'm still me. I wonder how many times we see someone who hasn't washed, hasn't shaved, maybe doesn't have clean clothes and not recognized their humanity? I've done it. I've walked by people and intentionally ignored them or not wanted to meet their gaze. People asking for money, people who look a little "scary". Sure there's a safety instinct involved sometimes, but sometimes, there isn't. Sometimes it's pure privilege. I don't want to engage because I don't have to.

And I get in my limousine and I drive away...

Well, I don't have a limousine, but I'm able to just turn away and not think about it again if I don't choose to.

In this current crisis, people who are unhoused are particularly vulnerable. But I want to challenge you today to understand that this is a completely irrational disconnect. Someone's right to be healthy or to receive health care has absolutely nothing to do with a dwelling other than the fact that they are housed in a human body...and that body has a human right to be safe. But too often, when we see someone who is unhoused, that is how we define them: "homeless."

I try to avoid referring to "homeless people" for the simple reason that people who are unhoused are not defined by not having an address. They are defined first by being *whole people*. This idea that someone is defined

by their housing status is sick. We don't refer to those of us with permanent addresses as "homed people". There's an assumption that is built into the DNA of the United States that has always defined a citizen and their rights according to land ownership and where their "home" was made. It is an ugly colonial legacy that played out in everything from the displacement of native people, to slavery to voting rights for women, to immigration. The original signers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution had one thing in common (other than being white and male): land. Even as many of them had little or no formal education, every single one of them had land and property (sometimes people) and that alone is what granted them their status as deciders of the communal fate. Even though they had no right to either the land or the people they "owned."

The way we approach someone's condition of being unhoused today is an extension of that colonial project. What happened to the human tribe? Today, we speak of "tribalism" as a bad thing where people are bonded by some aspect of how they are embodied or exist together, yet tribes are what allowed the human race to flourish and survive. Instead, we talk about land/property-based identities, cities, towns neighborhoods addresses, zip codes that are often defined by economic status and a limited set of criteria...but not necessarily how well we know the people next door.

And what of the human family? Western lifestyles have grown to think of "family" as only the immediate unit of mother, father, children...shrinking it away from even grandparents, aunties, cousins and others who in an earlier time would have been as essential to the functioning of the "family"

as anyone else. And this shrinking has been defined by our property and the way we live. Less and less our elders occupy space along side us because we live far away from them or we can't afford the space and care. I'm not talking about something that is vague or distant for me either. My own family is a product of these economically based decisions. This is the reason I'm in Boston, my brother is in New York and my father is in Maryland.

My message today is not about guilt, although I know it will bring up a lot for different people who are struggling with physical separation from loved ones, myself included. This is a message to me as much as it is to the rest of you. But I want to bring it back to my original point about how people who are unhoused are whole people. Just as our families who are distant from us now or maybe even before and after this time...they are whole people and the crisis makes that wholeness more important. We have a lesson to be learning in this time. As we understand new ways to be in contact with others, as we understand new priorities around the quality of those interactions...can we also reconsider the quality of our interactions with someone who does not have an address?

Faith is being tested right now. Unitarian Universalism is being tested right now. An ongoing conversation between me and other UU ministers is whether or not what we do is enough? In so many ways, modern Unitarian Universalism is defined by what it is not...non-creedal, non-doctrinal, non-scriptural, non-oppressive, non-racist. And those things that we are for... freedom and inherent worth and dignity...are these tangible enough, universally actionable enough and non-subjective enough to get us through a time of mortal threat?

My answer to this question is that for all of the things that Unitarian Universalists are not, and the few things that we say we are, all of it is dependent upon actually having relationships with others. So, maybe, just maybe, Unitarian Universalism is growing into the forward looking faith of inter-human relationships. Maybe our faith calls us to ask people “what do you need” before we tell them “this is what I am giving you.” Maybe because of all of the things that we say we are *not*, because of that vacuum of definition...we can offer a blueprint for what it means to be in relationship regardless of our similarities and differences. Maybe a mature Unitarian Universalism offers a healing theology of *relationship*. A Unitarian Universalism that says before I judge you for your skin, or your wealth, or your faith or your home...or lack of a home, I’m going to humbly invite a relationship of some kind with you that honors your whole humanity first.

Freedom is meaningless without feeling. Every time we miss the opportunity to operate from a place of actual, authentic relationship...whatever or however deep or not deep that may be...we trample on the freedom we profess to hold so dear.

I’m not telling you to go out and solve the situation of being unhoused for everyone you see on the street, or to give everyone a hug or money. All I’m asking is that because of what Unitarian Universalism asks of us, we may want to recognize the whole person before we label them as homeless. If we recognize the whole person, there’s much more of a chance that we will be able to work together to create an equitable home for all of us.

Go in peace