

“People of a Covenant”
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What does it mean to be a sanctuary? For us as people to be sanctuaries, especially those of us who are white? For this collective community to be a sanctuary?

The term has become more common recently with all the work to provide sanctuary to immigrants and I know many of you are involved with that important work at the Bedford UU congregation.

I think it’s clear that sanctuary speaks of safety and shelter, of creating solace for people who don’t have it otherwise. We think of sanctuaries as places of refuge in a violent world.

But there’s more to it than that. The root of the word, the Latin “sanctus” means holy.

And in theological terms, the process of sanctification is a process of becoming holy, a process of ridding oneself of sin. Different traditions have different ideas of how sanctification happens.

If you remember, in October I preached on heart transplants and defined sin as the divergence from all that is good and kind and moral and loving.

And I talked about how the original sin in this country, the first divergence from the good, was the belief that some people are more human than others, which made the genocide of native people and slavery and lynching and all manner of violence possible.

Robin DiAngelo, the author of *White Fragility*, says this, quote, “whiteness rests upon a foundational premise: the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm.” This is that original sin.

What would it mean to be a sanctuary – not a savior, but a sanctuary? To push back against white supremacy, to be a place and a people offering safety and solace in a world that is violent towards people of color. How might we, a largely white denomination, do this holy work?

We Unitarian Universalists are not people of a creed. We do not all ascribe to the same beliefs. We have no common confession of faith. And there is no official UU church doctrine on sanctification that I’m aware of. But what we do have is a covenant, one that guides us towards how we might live in alignment with the good and the kind and the moral, how we might build the Beloved Community.

When I was growing up I learned the seven principles as belief statements: we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people. And I’ve heard so many people curious about Unitarian Universalism say that they read the seven principles and didn’t disagree with any of them. But that doesn’t

make someone a Unitarian Universalist because the principles are not a credo, they're not a statement of belief. According to the UUA bylaws the seven principles are a covenant. They are what bind us together as a people of one tradition. We are a people committed to this covenant. Our commonality isn't a belief it's a commitment, a choice we are agreeing to make together.

Our covenant calls us to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people – it's the first principle. But just as the fact that all lives matter requires specifying that black lives matter in a world that operates otherwise, affirming everyone's inherent worth requires that we push against the foundational premise that white is the standard for human.

To be a sanctuary is to create safety where it does not otherwise exist. In the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, quote “You must always remember that the sociology [of racism], the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.”

I went to a workshop on youth ministry last year, and one of the youth group leaders at the workshop shared that they have a practice of doing a covenant check in with their teens. They have everyone close their eyes and they read through each line of their group covenant. As they do this they have everyone rate how well they personally have kept that part of the covenant by raising their hand and putting up between one and five fingers. Then they do the same thing and ask everyone to rate how well

the group is holding each part of the covenant. It gives the leaders a sense of what they need to work on.

There is a movement in our denomination to add an eighth principle, perhaps you've heard of this. It grew out of Paula Cole Jones' work as the Director of Racial and Social Justice in the mid-Atlantic district and it has the support of Black Lives UU. This is the eighth principle:

“We covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and in our institutions.”

Whether or not this request to add an eighth principle goes into effect, to me it is itself a collective check in for all of us as UUs. Because a request to amend the covenant tells us that the way we're all collectively living is missing something really important.

In describing the origins of the 8th principle they write, quote, “after working with congregations on these issues for over 15 years, Jones realized that a person can believe they are being a ‘good UU’ and follow the seven principles without thinking about or dealing with racism and other oppressions at the systemic level...The 8th principle came from a feeling that we need something to renew our commitment to this work, to hold ourselves accountable, and to fulfill the potential of our existing principles” end quote.

I wonder what all of this means to you. How it lands in your body, how it feels to consider the ways we fall short of our ideals.

I can say that I feel the complexity of how to preach about racism and white supremacy as a white woman and a minister. It is not lost on me that lynchings often happened after church, often in the name of protecting white women's so-called innocence.

I am wary of any notion that we are the good ones, because white supremacy is the water we all swim in, it's not just the klan. And the division between good people and bad racist people obscures that racism is, as DiAngelo makes clear, a system not an event. She writes that it's much more useful to think of ourselves, those of us who are white, as existing on a continuum, not in this good/bad binary. Because racism is so deeply woven in the fabric of our society that we won't escape it in our lifetime, but we can seek to continually move farther along the continuum of awareness and action.

Part of the brilliance, I think, of doing a covenant check in is that it's based on the assumption that we are fallible and human and fall short of our ideals. And that neither condemns us nor does it release us from the covenant. We are, after all, Universalists. This is no house of damnation. And I think there's some relief in acknowledging that white supremacy is a systemic problem, not a personal act of meanness, both because it

buffers against white people wanting to defend our goodness, and it exposes a system that relies on invisibility for control.

Our task, as people of a covenant, one in which we agree to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people, our task is to increase our capacity to do so. Which means checking in with how well we're upholding the covenant, beginning with ourselves. Looking at how white supremacy lives in us and engaging in the hard work of holding ourselves and each other accountable.

The great UU theologian James Luther Adams in his writing on covenants quoted Martin Buber who said that humans are promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing creatures.

The existence of the 8th principle is a clear indication that we have work to do around racism and that we are actively engaged in doing that work. As DiAngelo points out, feedback is a positive sign in a relationship.

And I will verify that I am someone who grew up thinking I was being a good UU and it wasn't until I was in my mid twenties that I started consciously paying attention to systemic racism. So I know personally that it is both possible and necessary to move ourselves along the continuum.

To be a sanctuary is to push back against the systemic violence that operates through us.

And that work is never done. We cannot be motivated by a desire to be finished. But it is possible for us to make meaningful change, to move farther along the continuum towards the vision of the eighth principle.

Though our theologies vary, we are a people of a covenant. A covenant that keeps calling us in.

In a world that says whiteness is the norm for human, that whiteness is the basis of humanity, we need a religion that says no. A religion that calls us to a higher truth, that speaks of the holiness inherent in everyone and asks us to create a sanctuary, a Beloved Community, that is ever widening.

We are a people committed to this covenant.

Amen.