Justice = Just Us

Sermon by Rev. Julie-Ann Silberman-Bunn September 27, 2026

Caveat: *this is the pulpit copy of the sermon, written to be spoken. The editing may not be grammatically correct for reading.*

This past week was filled with situations that surprised me and made me think about who we are as a nation and as people of faith. Every week I lead a group in a nursing home. My plan had been to encourage conversation about what each person misses from their childhood, favorite foods and activities. When I arrived, one of my regular participants, an 85-year-old man named Jim, a Vietnam Veteran, recovering alcoholic, who relatively recently has found Christianity to be grounding, shared a reading from 365 days of reflections, using quotes from the Gospel of Luke talking about kindness and compassion.

I make a point in this work to avoid talking about political themes. I am not sure quite how it happened but each of the people gathered around that table ranging in age from their 70's to 102 started to share their anger and frustration with the current political landscape. Veterans are angry about the failure of our nation to make sure veterans have housing and healthcare. The 102-year-old is in utter disbelief about cuts to healthcare and social security. All of them were angry about the treatment of immigrants who are the vast majority of the direct care staff they have come to know and consider family. At the end of our time together many of them expressed how much better they felt having had the opportunity to express their anger, frustration and pain about the situations we are facing as individuals and as a nation. Truly it was all about justice and how we all need the opportunity to make our voices and concerns heard.

On Tuesday night I had the opportunity to hear former Congressman from Illinois Adam Kinzinger talk about how after six terms as a Republican, and having served on the January 6th Commission after a distinguished career in the United States Air Force, he has been voting for Democrats because his former Republican colleagues have no courage. They ask service members to put their lives on the line for our country but they don't even have the courage to stand up and vote in ways that they know to be right and just.

My parents always modeled living our values and doing what was just, because justice depended on just us doing what was right. A week ago, a life-long friend sent me an article from the **New York Times Magazine** section with this question: Wonder what your parents and Paul's reaction to this would have been? Paul was my older brother.

Later in the week I saw the same article discussed on *Linked In*. Where it was described as "an article in which Nikole Hannah-Jones asked, in the **New York Times Magazine**, a question no parent should have to ask in public: In fighting for every Black child, did I betray my own?"

"Hannah-Jones and her husband had the money to send their daughter anywhere. Ten years ago, they chose a segregated Brooklyn public school, because they believed that if

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families like theirs kept opting out, the school's poor Black children attend would never improve."

I need to tell you my friend asked that question because my parents made that choice too; they kept my brother and me in the inner city schools long after other white families had pulled their children out. This is how I responded to my friend: I can tell you Paul felt strongly that our parents had ruined his life. We had a fight once when we went to a party. As we were leaving, folks were saying how much they loved our folks and what wonderful people they were. Paul took me out on the porch while my husband got our boys ready for bed. Paul screamed at me for agreeing with the folks at the party that our parents were good people.

I told him we had the right to expect that they loved us and did the best they could. Was it perfect, absolutely not. But our job is to take what we had and use it to shape who we want to be. I have no questions. Our parents loved us, but like all parents they were flawed.

I do know Paul had a much harder time in the Trenton schools than I did. I also know that my parents wanted to send us to a Quaker day school not far away but by the end of kindergarten for me and 4th grade for Paul we were way behind and would have had to repeat multiple grades. That was why we ended up moving to a suburb.

I had a very hard time in my new school because I was behind in everything, and I didn't know how to be friends with the white kids. I missed being popular and having a ton of friends in my predominately black school.

The suburban high school was a terrible place for me. I wasn't in honors classes and at that point you were either in all honors or none. I skipped as many days as I possibly could in 10th grade and my guidance counselor was someone who my parents knew and she told them to get me out of there. I had a very small circle of friends but overall, I was miserable.

You see my parents believed exactly what Ms. Hannah-Jones and her husband believed; they needed to keep their children in the local public school in hopes it would help improve the public schools. They truly believed that Justice required us to step into challenging situations because justice required us and just us to step up because if we didn't who would.

Then over the last few days UU minister colleagues have been discussing how our Unitarian Universalist faith can break our hearts and yet we continue to believe and fight for this faith. My colleague, UUA staff person and military chaplain David Pyle shared the words that struck hard, David wrote:

"Years ago, when I first applied to work for the UUA, one of the interview questions was "Tell us about a time that Unitarian Universalism broke your heart, and why you decided to stay?" David goes on to say: "I have since asked this question in some of my own interviews of UU religious professionals applying to work for the UUA. The person who asked me the question said later that if someone said Unitarian Universalism had not yet broken their heart, then they were not yet ready to work for the UUA."

David continues: "I have come to believe it is an essential skill of our faith, this

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learning how to have your heart broken by Unitarian Universalism and figuring out how to stay, if you can. As an aspirational faith which sets values and ideals that draw humanity towards a different way of being in relationship, with each other and with the world, we will fail to meet those values and ideals, both individually and collectively, over and over again.

"I hold hopes for this faith that are so high that when we fail to meet them, it breaks my heart. When I fail to live the values and ideals of our faith, it breaks my heart, and I know my failures have broken the hearts of others. When others who profess this faith fail to meet the values and ideals of Unitarian Universalism, it breaks my heart. And when we collectively and together fail to meet the values and ideals of this faith, it breaks my heart.

"We do it over and over again. You, me, all of us UU's... the challenge of an aspirational faith is that we will fail, over and over again.

"Like trying to follow the breath in meditation... but with each failure causing harm. Sometimes real, irreversible harm.

"One of the central spiritual practices of Unitarian Universalism, for me, is to let this faith break my heart... and to find a way to stay. Maybe not the same as before, because the harms when we fail are real. But the practice is in finding a way to re-establish trust in the aspiration of the faith, even when the practice and form of the faith in a particular moment has broken my heart.

"These last two weeks I have been living that spiritual practice of finding a way to stay, of re-establishing my faith in our aspirations again." (David Pyle)

I would suggest that believing in the United States, Justice, Democracy, and Just Us requires a similar discipline and practice. My colleague Cindy Landrum, minister to the UU congregation of the Assabet Valley, formerly the UU Church of Stow and Acton shared this essay she wrote 12 years ago:

***This Religion Will Break Your Heart**, June 05, 2014*

It's something I learned in seminary -- I went to one of our two UU theological schools, Meadville Lombard, and attended the other one, Starr King, for one semester. When you're at a school full of people who want to dedicate their lives to serving our religion, your heart will be broken. Something will go wrong or toxic or just plain hurtful, and it'll hurt all the more because it happened in a place of love and trust and faith.

It happens again and again in our churches and in our ministry, for congregants and ministers both. A congregation will behave badly as a system, and congregation members will leave, hearts broken, from pain that the institution they loved could behave so badly. Ministers will behave badly, too, and people will leave, hearts broken. And people will stay, hearts broken.

For ministers, we will see colleagues we know and love behave badly. We will see a friend leave the ministry, forced out by their own misconduct, and our hearts will break. We will also see friends we love forced out of the

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ministry for reasons we can't understand, and our hearts will break.

If you stay in this faith long enough, your heart will be broken. Somebody you loved and trusted in this faith will do something you think is so hurtful and incomprehensible, so wrong-headed, that it will break your heart. Or something will be decided that you just can't agree with, and it will break your heart. And then, if you stay long enough, it will happen again and again.

That person who has broken your heart still has inherent worth and dignity; they are still worthy of love.

That system that has broken your heart still has important work and worth to our movement.

This faith that you love still is a vehicle for greater love and justice in this world.

Carry on. Love on.

One of the greatest gifts of my childhood was to learn that those we love - people, institutions, and philosophies will fail us. All of these are fragile and flawed because in the end they are just us. We must be prepared to have our hearts broken, and still fight for justice, because in the end it will always be just us who can make those things we value better.

Shalom, Salaam, Amen and may it be so