

THE SANCTUARY OF ALL SOULS  
Sermon by Audette Fulbright  
Sunday, October 7, 2018  
All Souls Church, New York City

Before I begin the sermon, I want to reassure you of something. As you all must already understand, we have to talk about difficult things today, here, in our spiritual sanctuary. If our religious home cannot help us face the realities of the world we live in, and strengthen us, give us hope, and point us toward wisdom & justice, one must ask what then is it good for? We may face difficult things together, but it is my hope and belief that this hour will, by its end, be a balm and a blessing.

Writing for *The Atlantic* magazine - that Unitarian-founded stalwart of journalistic integrity - Adam Serwer writes this week in a piece titled "The Cruelty Is the Point", "The cruelty of the Trump administration's policies, and the ritual rhetorical flaying of his targets before his supporters, are intimately connected. As Lili Loofbourow wrote of the Kavanaugh incident in *Slate*, adolescent male cruelty toward women is a bonding mechanism, a vehicle for intimacy through contempt. The white men in ... lynching photos are smiling not merely because of what they have done, but because they have done it together.

"We can hear the spectacle of cruel laughter throughout the Trump era. There were the border-patrol agents cracking up at the crying immigrant children separated from their families, and ...the police who laughed uproariously when the president encouraged them to abuse suspects, and the Fox News hosts mocking a survivor of the Pulse Nightclub massacre ...the survivors of sexual assault protesting to Senator Jeff Flake, the women who said the president had sexually assaulted them, and the teen survivors of the Parkland school shooting. ...It is not just that the perpetrators of this cruelty enjoy it; it is that they enjoy it with one another. Their shared laughter at the suffering of others is an adhesive that binds them to one another..."<sup>1</sup>

I think, for those of us gathered this morning in this sanctuary, there is a sense of shock and horrified awe in the face of this reality. To be clear, it is not new. As Serwer points out, it is what can be seen in the faces of those old photographs of lynchings, and it is what can be seen on our screens when the most powerful man in the world capers on a stage, mocking a woman who has survived sexual assault, and the crowd around him laughs and cheers. We have made our way across the streets and boroughs to this place this moment, because we believe in original grace - we are moved by our hope and confidence that there is worth and dignity in each and every soul, and we circle round the warmth of this chalice to try to reassure ourselves of the truths that we hold dear in the face of so much that seems to deny our faith.

We have to understand this: there are deep human needs that are going unmet in this country. In many parts of the world, too, but let's focus here - in our country, in our city, in our neighborhoods, perhaps even in this place this morning. In a world where technology is outpacing our laws and moral understandings, where we can feel on a daily basis the temperatures rising and feel the winds blow, where those who have much stand so far from those who have too little, and where the framework of a communal sense of right and wrong has frayed almost to the breaking point, we all are at risk. We have to take seriously the life-changing matter of loneliness and isolation.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/the-cruelty-is-the-point/572104/>

I would hazard a guess that you already know what makes a terrorist, especially one willing to martyr themselves to a cause. Angry, isolated young men are easily identified by terrorist groups, gangs, white supremacy groups. Becoming a member of a group is the elixir - no longer being alone, living for something bigger than oneself, being taught that THIS is right and THAT is wrong. These things are what feed the soul - and that hunger demands to be fed, for good and for ill.

It's a need in all of us. We need to belong. We need to be seen and heard; we need to understand what "our people" think is the common good, and what is bad or wrong. We need a sense that we are living for more than just ourselves. It's why you are here today, but unfortunately, it's also why young men pledge fraternities that encourage them to bond through overindulgence and too often teach them to consider themselves worth more than others, those not in "the circle." It's what makes an AA group a saving company for many, but also makes the Proud Boys show up to cause trouble at an event organized by women or progressives.

It's that important. We need connections. We need a sense of place and community; we need to serve a larger goal, and we need friends - to be loved and known and to share values. We need people who will be there for us when times are hard, and make no mistake -- hate groups are often incredibly good at being there for one another, making lonely and lost people feel that they are needed and wanted.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have faith that we can believe different things, experience the divine or understand the nature of reality in different ways, and yet come together as a people who covenant to love and serve together. We believe that differences can enrich and ennoble us; we believe that human freedoms should accrue to each - not just men, or the rich, or those of one culture or background, or people who are currently able-bodied or straight. Other people and groups believe very different things.

Now here's an important question: do you believe the world would be a better place if more people were Unitarian Universalist? If more teachers and Justices lived by our Principles? If more business leaders and public servants shared our ethics? If so, then what you are saying is that our doors should be open wider - that our sanctuary can and should hold more people than it does today. How do we get there?

Who did you invite to church this week? Who have you talked with about the community that helps you feel strong, gives you hope, inspires or uplifts you? Is this church a secret you keep safely in your heart, or is it a saving grace you share with those you think might need it?

These past few weeks, I have been with and encountered so many women who are admitting, many for the first time, the harm that they have endured at the hands of abusers. And not just women - the trans community, and men and boys, too, have faced traumatic sexual assault, and this has been a hard time. But numerically and emotionally, the heaviest harms these past few weeks have hit women. Ijeoma Oluo, a Black feminist scholar, wrote in an article titled, "Women Can Be Anything. But Can We Be Angry?" states, "I am angry that we have a president who brags about assaulting women, a Senate who will confirm a Supreme Court justice accused of assaulting women. I am angry that undocumented women who try to seek safety from abusive partners now risk deportation. I am angry that neo-Nazis are marching down the streets and police are more likely to arrest their counter-protesters than the racist thugs with torches. ...I am angry that our already struggling healthcare for vulnerable and sick and disabled people is being gleefully stripped away. I am angry that black babies are dying in childbirth, dying in our playgrounds, dying in traffic stops. ...I am so angry, I am angry because all that I love is being

threatened. I am angry because the people, the institutions, the values that I and so many others love are being destroyed. ...And we are constantly being told not to be angry. As a black woman especially, I hear it from all corners....To be angry is to trade intellect for emotion. To be angry is to be irrational and violent. ...But none of that is true. I am angry because I love. I am angry because what I love is being harmed. I know why my people matter, why the environment matters, why human rights matter, why justice matters. And I know that this all deserves love.”<sup>2</sup>

Do we know why our people matter? Do we know why our values and our Principles matter? Do we understand why the sanctuary of All Souls matters? If we do, what are we willing to do to build it up, and open its doors wider? What will we do to share it? Whom will we tell about this place where lives are saved?

Here’s what I believe: I believe that, more than ever, we need to be with one another, here. We need to talk to one another about what we believe, what sustains us, what matters most to us. We need to be friends with one another, and each and every single time we are here, add at least one person more to our circle. At a dinner I hosted recently for church leaders, when we talked about what was most needed at All Souls, do you know what the answer of the evening was? More greeters. More people speaking to newcomers. More people taking time each time we gather to welcome every person in, to say hello, to reach out so that no one who enters would leave without being greeted, without knowing that this is a place where you are welcome and wanted. At every door, a friendly face, when you come or when you leave. At every turn during Coffee Hour, someone new saying hello.

The world is full of hungry, lonely souls. Our greatest hope, and our greatest power, lies in reaching out beyond ourselves, seeking both to build our relationships in community here, and to encourage each other to act for change in the world around us. Bring in one more lonely person or family. Come to one more event here, to deepen your friendships, to know others and to be known. Make time for the spiritual renewal that we undertake, so your own sense of serving something larger than yourself, and your own sense of shared meaning with your people grows.

If your soul has been thirsty this week, if you have been hurting and need comfort, welcome. Welcome to the sanctuary of All Souls, this company of people who love and need you. In closing, I’d like to offer the gift of Audre Lorde. This is her “Litany for Survival.”

For those of us who live at the shoreline  
standing upon the constant edges of decision  
crucial and alone  
for those of us who cannot indulge  
the passing dreams of choice  
who love in doorways coming and going  
in the hours between dawns  
looking inward and outward  
at once before and after  
seeking a now that can breed  
futures  
like bread in our children’s mouths  
so their dreams will not reflect

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://medium.com/@IjeomaOluo/we-women-can-be-anything-but-can-we-be-angry-48f837625ff1>

the death of ours;  
For those of us  
who were imprinted with fear  
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads  
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk  
for by this weapon  
this illusion of some safety to be found  
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us  
For all of us  
this instant and this triumph  
We were never meant to survive.  
And when the sun rises we are afraid  
it might not remain  
when the sun sets we are afraid  
it might not rise in the morning  
when our stomachs are full we are afraid  
of indigestion  
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid  
we may never eat again  
when we are loved we are afraid  
love will vanish  
when we are alone we are afraid  
love will never return  
and when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed  
but when we are silent  
we are still afraid  
So it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive.

Friends, take heart. Wherever we are going, let us go together, in love and trust of each other.

Amen, ashe, blessed be.