

A Sermon for the Sunday Morning Worship Service
General Assembly, Spokane, WA
Sunday, June 23, 2019
Reverend Marta I. Valentín
“It Is Time Now”

Final

(Begin by looking out at them, from front of stage, moving from side to side and then begin speaking...)

I like to see with whom I am sharing the meditations of my heart especially when I want to begin by saying, I love you. I do. Love is a choice, love is a way of being, and I love you. And here’s the truth of that statement: I must love you to still choose to be among you...may I be a vessel for that which needs to flow through me, because here is another truth: I need you to survive.

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Podium:

In this great turning that is happening in our faith it feels most important to say that when I can tell you that I love you, and know that I mean it, I can be fully myself. I am empowering myself. And I hope it means that you too can be fully your empowered self. And that you will roll, step, sidle up into this circle made of my arms, and meet me half-way, even if I say hard things.

I was pulled to review past General Assemblies in preparation for this service because I felt that from year to year important messages are forgotten. Thus, I wish to include some of those voices today.

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When our theme, “The Power of We” was revealed, many from the historically marginalized communities immediately asked: Who is the “we”? It felt like the assumption was it is all of us Unitarian Universalists. But, is it, when many of us from the Black, Indigenous and People of Color communities experience a kind of Unitarian Universalism that is neither what we are told it is, nor how we know it could be? Is it, when our Trans family is repeatedly muted? Is it, when our people living with seen and unseen disabilities, are made invisible anyway? Is it, when Christian UUs and Military Chaplains feel like they have to be in the closet?

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Is it when our youth have to fight to be taken seriously, and our young adults to have space of their own?

As a Latina with skin in the game for thirty years, I observe the changes our faith tradition is undergoing, and note that those not paying attention continue to perpetuate old narratives like: “Nothing has really changed it just looks different.” Or, “People are withholding their money because they don’t like the direction we’ve taken.” Now remember these “people” are Unitarian Universalists who are trying to live out our seven principles, and maybe even an eighth one day. These are not random people who receive an email

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from the UUA requesting support. They are included in whatever version of “we” is being upheld. They are people who love and are loved. They may have taught our youth, taken care of our babies or our sages. Whose inability to deal with open conflict has led to more conflict. Who refuse to understand how their lack of engaging the work causes microaggressions to spill out of them, like unexpected spit in the faces of people who look or talk, or act like me. Who hang on to the supreme whiteness of being, at all costs, and who have not been able to grasp that we are all swimming in poisoned proverbial waters.

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This is a complicated picture, yet despite all of this, you, the faithful gathered when much of what would happen this year was uncertain. As religious folks, our presence together gives life and potential to new actions. It takes this same faithfulness to jump into the concept of “we”, and your presence is an affirmation that you too are in pursuit of this Power of We, because the power of a community is deeper and stronger than the power any individual can have. It’s a matter of what defines that power, and I like the kind that has “we” embedded in it.

The power of a reliable community gives us plenty of hands to take down the pieces of white supremacy we are dismantling and helps to hold the structure in place while the new is being imagined and then built. In this process I hold out for what we may want to keep. In the same way that not everything is all good, not everything is all bad either. To uncover what has worth and value and is crucial to maintain we must go on an expedition. We are called to be archeologists of our collective hearts and respectfully sift through the blood-soaked rubble.

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It is time now, for this great, delicate turning that we are engaged in. For decades, we Black, Indigenous and People of Color have spoken up many times about how exclusionary our faith can be, even as Unitarian Universalism swears, we are the most inclusive. We have all said hard and harsh things to one another in pursuit of that better, truly equal, truly just, life-saving world we know can exist for ourselves and for seven generations to come. And we are all so tired. All of us know we must do better. But are all of us willing to *be* better?

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My colleague Sofia Betancourt spoke this truth last year: “...we can never be the bearers of love and justice that the world so desperately needs if the foundation that sustains us is still perpetuating the very problems we long to solve.”¹

When I think about the archeology of my heart, I am reminded of sacred sites that have had edifices built on top of them. I think of the stories told and re-told to justify those acts, and I wonder, “What are the sacred stories I hold that remain buried within? What collective stories do we hold?” Those sacred stories must be built into the new foundation, because the old stories just won’t do. We’ve lost sight

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of the sacred stories that preserve the soul of what Unitarian Universalism set out to be before the world got its hands on it. Even though our faith came into existence through the dominant culture, whose goal was to look out for and preserve itself – I have to believe that there was also, a slim and barely visible filament of light, a placeholder for the clarity that is emerging now out of the murky depths; a murkiness that we could not easily, nor faithfully acknowledge existed/exists in our faith.

Sacred sites come to mind, because I do not want us to simply build over as a manifestation of power over. I want us to build with, which

I believe is the work before us. I do not want us to be like Mexico City's Cathedral built over an archeological treasure trove that was once Tenochtitlan (te-nawch-tee-**tlahn**), the City of the Aztecs, known as Templo Mayor. Underneath this centuries-old structure of power discovered only forty years ago lie seven levels of pyramids. And as each dig brings a new discovery, clearly there is still so much more to bring to light.² When voices rose to be rid of the Cathedral and build something new, others countered it was too sacred, and it is hard to dismantle what is sacred.

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We cannot deny that our beloved faith, our “cathedral of sorts”, as originally conceived by non-POC, was built on land not of its own, incorporated rituals and songs not of their making, and came together on two as yet unmet aspirations: that we are all one, and that all of us would be saved. We can also not deny that the time has come, again, to acknowledge that the Unitarian Universalist Black, Indigenous and People of Color, as well as those from other marginalized communities who have remained among us, are rising through each one of those pyramid levels to reclaim the opportunities taken or hidden from us, demanding our place within those two foundational aspirations.

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As an archeologist of my heart, I am digging with small brushes and toothpicks in search of my own Black and Indigenous roots as a Puerto Rican. All of us Boricuas have African, Taino Indian and Spanish blood in our veins, but not all of us were raised with that recognition. Now I am not saying that is the fault of this faith, but I am saying that all that has been happening in the last few years is leading me to acknowledge the ways in which I have been complicit in my own whitewashing.

In this turning we have embarked on, there is delicate dismantling work for all of us, because of the sacredness underneath. We think

we know what we will uncover, but we don't, because what we are doing has never been completed to fruition. "Will we," as Bill Sinkford once asked, "continue to trust this faith to build a way out of no way?"³ This delicate work necessitates the building of relationships, that many have yet to build.

As I sift through the personal and collective layers, I find scraps and messages that over time have been forgotten, intentionally ignored or worse, buried. Buried in the confusion of what is the politically correct thing to do or say; which cultural faction should be heeded due to its status; which training, book, program, school of thought

to follow. We've had Jubilees Twos and Transformation Teams, Journey Toward Wholeness, Beloved Conversations and Mosaic Maker programs; Intercultural Development Inventory and Public Conversations, not to mention all the private conversations that teach or tear down; G.R.A.C.E. and A.D.O.R.E.; resolutions and responsive resolutions; AIWs; we've heard from Martin Luther King. Jr asking us "not to sleep through the revolution"⁴, María Hinojosa's demand to "make the invisible visible"⁵, Bryan Stephenson's quiet fierceness to "get proximate"⁶, Cornel West's forthright question "What is the quality of your struggle? Justice is what love looks like in public"⁷; Winona LaDuke's deep thought:

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“How much and how brave are we in our ability to deconstruct some of the paradigms which we have embraced?”⁸ Krista Tippett’s “What we practice, we become,” with her offering of a way to start a whole new kind of conversation: Pose a question to another, like, what is love? Then answer the question, searchingly, honestly, through the story of your life.⁹

And there has been so much more, so I’m curious: After all that we have heard as a faith community, all that we have done, all the programs, interventions, exceptions, strategic plans, departments created, why are we still here? Really, what is holding us back? I

know you want me to offer my opinion on that, but I need you to think a little harder, dig a little deeper, open your hearts a little wider and tenderly poke around so your mind can follow suit.

As archeologists of our hearts we can unearth the sacred stories that must be preserved in this delicate work. It is time-consuming work, but we must keep at it to excavate the treasures, covered in dirt and mud, sometimes intentionally so. And the work is delicate because the stakes are so high, that it is about what deserves to be maintained, and who gets to make that decision? What is appropriate to go into the future with us, into the new sacred site we are building.

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Rev. Susan last year said that this is “no time for a casual faith”. Indeed, a casual faith will not carry us very far, not even into our own depths.

The Power of We that is a living community engaged in this delicate work of digging out, dismantling and rebuilding has us bumping elbows, yes, but hopefully no more than that. Unveiling sacred sites is collective work, and the Power of We moves us from the solitary “I” to the community “We” – where there is a strong sense of belonging and we work together to the benefit of all. In the “We” culture the *people* are centered, it is impeccably inclusive, and the

“I” exists only in relation to others, each of us must be strong for the collective to thrive. At the core the words we carry are not just ours, they include the voices of our ancestors speaking through and with us.¹⁰ And as this “We” engages in the delicate work it is not about the “power of tip-toeing”; the work requires speaking respectfully as we uphold our covenants; it asks us to listen reflectively; to teach the truth authentically and extend compassion to others we might not care for.

In the end, it is my Black, Indigenous and People of Color families that I wish to thank, for being pillars of strength, tenacity, and fortitude and for having largesse of heart. For the generosity of soul which has allowed your spirits to pull whatever needs to be pulled out of an already empty hat. Because we love this faith. Its theologies have saved us, and we want to save our children and our children's children from an increasingly frightening world. We know our white siblings are being called to pick up this work and until they all do, we also know we need each other to survive. That is, we cannot allow our othering to cause us to claw at one another.

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I want to thank us, right now for all to hear, for our ability to keep showing up even after we've been insulted, talked down to, overlooked for promotions, unjustly been terminated, had our truths that were courageously spoken trampled on and challenged, had our hearts torn to pieces, shards so tiny we've needed those archeological brushes and toothpicks to pick each fragment up. And we've survived on the glue that is our love for each other to set our beautiful, sensitive, strong, *power-full* hearts back together to face another day.

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We came and fell in love with the Unitarian and Universalist theologies but clashed with the culture. This is not a pity party, but it is to say that we do it all because this faith is ours too – and our “our” is all reaching, calling everyone in. Some of us may not know what it means to live with a disability, but we make sure that those who do not only have a place at the table, but that they can get into the room. Some of us may not know what it means or how to use the appropriate gender identity or pronoun, but as we develop relationships there is clarity. And likewise, we open ourselves to the beautiful variations of our human family as people with biracial,

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multiracial and transracial families and are reaffirmed of the magnificence that I call God. Ubuntu, I am because we are, this is our Power of We.

It is time *now*, because it is an extraordinary time to be alive, and we should all get to be the ones to shepherd this delicate turning with all the love we can muster. This turning that should have happened fifty years ago, is our great collective call now. We cannot continue to waste our precious breath on fake fights as my colleague Nancy MacDonald Ladd¹¹ has said.

This is not about serving the same old stuff in new cups as Silvio exclaimed in his song. This is about ministering with new ideas in new cups to thirsty, thirsty people. And I don't mean just newcomers who find us, I mean those of us who have been here all along. We have become so thirsty for the faith we know this could be and should be. The presence of all the historically marginalized UUs that has made us open and affirming has added a depth that only we could have, seven pyramids deep.

It is time to throw out our exceptional identity and humble ourselves. We are not 'all that' even as Eboo Patel¹² lauded all the good we've

done in the world. We have always “done good” in the world – it is in our DNA. The question is, are we ready to be better for our own people? Because ‘the world’ includes every person in our faith many of whom have been micro-aggressed right out the door. It is the silent revolving door that many do not want to acknowledge aloud. It is time now to ask ourselves, who are we, *really*? Which Unitarian Universalism are we taking into our future? If we have no intention of taking it to the equal opportunity promised land, then let’s just acknowledge *that*. Or, let’s Marie Kondo our unfaithful practices and release what no longer serves us, and make room for what will.

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How can we save the world if we cannot save ourselves? Remember, I say this because I love you and I need you to survive.

But I also need to say, and I speak only for myself: I am running out of truths to tell and ways of saying them. It is time now to keep this beloved faith from fracturing, moreover, in this delicate turning let us remember that before anything, *ante todos*, *somos sere humanos*, we are human beings who have *chosen* to travel together, to make a new, more just world together. We must continue to choose each other as companions if we are to accompany one another.

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Am I saying we all must be the same? No. Am I saying that power needs to be shared? Yes. Am I saying that power needs to be given away? Yes. This is part of the delicate turning, the willingness to be led. To accept that there is much you do not know and “the others” do, others whose voices have been kept marginalized and thus silent by even us, exceptional people. In this delicate turning, holding our humanity before us, loving ourselves over this hump, loving others enough to let them in, not just into our pews but into our hearts. Not just intellectually into our minds, but into our very souls. If we could do that then we can truly call ourselves exceptional.

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History is being made in this turning. Will we turn back onto ourselves and make of the circle a rut, or will we move slightly, delicately and like a spiral go deeper? Tell me, what are you ready to do with your now? How will you become ready if you aren't yet? Frankly, no one is ever completely ready, and no one's comfort is at the center, you just do what must be done. As Brittney Packnett so eloquently stated last year: "Your power is waiting on you to pick it up with love and expectancy and get to work."¹³ Let's be co-liberators and let's get free together. Our world is waiting for us, and so is our faith.

Que asi sea. So may it be. Amén. Ashé. Blessed Be.

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¹ Rev. Sofia Betancourt, 2018 Service of Living Tradition, Sermon “Sounding the Call”, Kansas City

² <http://oaxacaculture.com/2017/01/from-mexico-city-under-the-cathedral-an-aztec-empire/>

³ Rev. Bill Sinkford, Service of the Living Tradition, 2016, Columbus

⁴ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 1966 Ware Lecture, Hollywood, FL

⁵ Maria Hinojosa, 2012 Ware Lecture, Phoenix

⁶ Bryan Stephenson, 2017 Ware Lecture, New Orleans

⁷ Cornel West, 2015 Ware Lecture, Portland

⁸ Winona LaDuke, 2010 Ware Lecture, Minneapolis

⁹ Krista Tippett, 2016 Ware Lecture, Columbus

¹⁰ Juana Bordas, *Salsa, Soul and Spirit*, pg.45, paraphrased

¹¹ Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd, 2016 GA Sunday Service, Columbus

¹² Eboo Patel, 2013 Ware Lecture, Louisville

¹³ Brittney Packnett, 2018 Ware Lecture, Kansas City

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