

***Celebrating Rosa Parks***

**A Message for All Faiths**

**Unitarian Congregation**

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This month we are celebrating.

Celebration is the theme for

our messages, beginning last

week in celebrating Hannukah.

We will celebrate the Winter

Solstice and Christmas Eve

shortly. In researching  
December celebrations, I  
found that Rosa Parks is  
honored and celebrated the  
first week of each December.

And so, we are using our time  
together this morning not only  
to honor Rosa Parks, but to be  
inspired and answer a call to  
action.

On December 1, 1955, during  
a typical evening rush hour in  
Montgomery, Alabama, a 42-  
year-old woman took a seat on

the bus on her way home from  
the Montgomery Fair  
department store where she  
worked as a seamstress. Before  
she reached her destination,  
she quietly set off a social  
revolution when the bus driver  
instructed her to move  
back, and she refused. Rosa  
Parks, an African American,  
was arrested that day for  
violating a city law requiring  
racial segregation of public  
buses.

On the city buses of  
Montgomery, Alabama, the  
front 10 seats were  
permanently reserved for white  
passengers. The diagram  
shows that Mrs. Parks was  
seated in the first row behind  
those 10 seats. When the bus  
became crowded, the bus  
driver instructed Mrs. Parks  
and the other three passengers  
seated in that row, all African  
Americans, to vacate their  
seats for the white passengers

boarding. Eventually, three of the passengers moved, while Mrs. Parks remained seated, arguing that she was not in a seat reserved for whites. James Blake, the driver, believed he had the discretion to move the line separating black and white passengers. The law was actually somewhat murky on that point, but when Mrs. Parks defied his order, he called the police. Officers came and promptly arrested her.

In police custody, Mrs. Parks was booked, fingerprinted, and briefly incarcerated. The police report shows that she was charged with "refusing to obey orders of bus driver." For openly challenging the racial laws of her city, she remained at great physical risk while held by the police, and her family was terrified for her. When she called home, she spoke to her mother, whose

first question was "Did they beat you?"

Mrs. Parks was not the first person to be prosecuted for violating the segregation laws on the city buses in Montgomery. She was, however, a woman of unchallenged character who was held in high esteem by all those who knew her. At the time of her arrest, Mrs. Parks was active in the local National Association for the

Advancement of Colored  
People (NAACP). Her arrest  
became a rallying point around  
which the African American  
community organized a bus  
boycott in protest of the  
discrimination they had  
endured for years. Martin  
Luther King, Jr., the 26-year-  
old minister of the Dexter  
Avenue Baptist Church,  
emerged as a leader during the  
well-coordinated, peaceful  
boycott that lasted 381 days

and captured the world's attention. It was during the boycott that Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., first achieved national fame as the public became acquainted with his powerful oratory.

After Mrs. Parks was convicted under city law, her lawyer filed a notice of appeal. While her appeal was tied up in the state court of appeals, a panel of three judges in the U.S. District Court for the

region ruled in another case that racial segregation of public buses was unconstitutional. That case, called *Browder v. Gayle*, was decided on June 4, 1956. The ruling was made by a three-judge panel that included Frank M. Johnson, Jr., and upheld by the United States Supreme court on November 13, 1956. For a quiet act of defiance that resonated throughout the world, Rosa

Parks is known and revered as the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement."

I've often wondered about Rosa Park's decision, her act of courage. Why didn't she move to another seat? Why did she risk her safety? What was her defiance telling us? In her autobiography, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (1992), Parks declares her defiance was an intentional act: "I was not tired physically, or no

more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was 42. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in." An acquaintance told me a few weeks ago that she was tired of all the "race stuff" like watching everything you say, you can't say what you want online and on and on. I had to respond. I told her

imagine being black in  
America. And because  
you're white you will never  
know what its like to be  
black, perhaps we can't even  
imagine. I also told her that  
her "race stuff" is easy. All  
you have to do is talk about  
and treat others as fellow  
human beings. Thats it. Not  
very difficult work but  
intentional work. She will  
likely choose to never see or  
talk to me again. I'm alright

wit that. But I'm left with questioning my response. Is our only duty as allies, as a congregation, to simply treat others as fellow human beings or is there something more we should be doing?

Thinking of Rosa Parks' intentional work, I wondered what our congregation is doing in the racial equity arena. "Someone saying, 'I'm not a racist,' doesn't help the problem," "Simply saying I'm

not doing *that* does not save  
somebody's life. It's like  
witnessing someone getting  
jumped and being like, 'Hey, I  
didn't jump 'em.' But you also  
just stood there while he or she  
got jumped. And being an  
antiracist is like... getting  
involved and being like, 'Break  
it up. Stop this.'" I wonder if  
we talk about not being racist  
too much and could do far  
more in being antiracist.  
Saying we are not racist isn't

enough. "When most people think of racism, they think of you know let's say what happened to George Floyd, or they think of the KKK, or they think of slavery," said lifestyle blogger Ayana Lage. "When that is kind of your perception, it's very easy to say, 'Well, I would never do that. I would never do that awful thing.' But it's more nuanced than that." Subtle acts of racism can often be just as hurtful as more overt

ones. Whether it be allowing a relative's offensive comment to go unchecked, or laughing at a racially insensitive joke in a TV show, or clutching your purse a little tighter when a person of color approaches on the sidewalk, seemingly small manifestations of racism contribute to keeping systematic racism in place. Action is the key difference between being not racist and being antiracist."

I recently read an interview with author Jason Reynolds who used a baseball analogy to explain the difference between not being racist and antiracist. He said, "If you think about baseball, to be not racist is going for a bunt. You hold the bat out. You hope the ball hits the bat. You're not expecting to hit the ball hard. You just want to get the ball to connect with the bat so that you can attempt to make a play." He said. "To

be antiracist is to swing the bat as hard as you can and go for the home run; to put in the extra effort to shoot for the stars and to actually swing that bat. To risk the strike. You risk the strike, but you swing that bat as hard as you can every single time because you understand that that's the way you win games. That's the way you change things." Risking the strike, so to speak, is an important distinction because

one can be "not racist" quietly.

Antiracism, on the other hand,

often involves sacrifice. It can

mean getting into

confrontations with friends or

loved ones, and it can mean

initiating a lot of

uncomfortable conversations.

As a congregation, what is our

team strategy? Are we

satisfied with bunting or do we

want to swing the bat as hard

as we can and go for a home

run. As uncomfortable as this

might be sound and hear, it is  
my assessment that we are  
bunting. We are not racist.

That is a good start, but is not  
enough. Our goal is to be  
antiracist and that requires  
some action beyond marching  
in a parade in January and  
sending a few dollars to  
community based program.

Let us leave the passivity of  
being not racist and do the  
work and sacrifice of being  
antiracist. It's time to radically

change our congregation's  
team strategy.

I am looking for someone who  
is willing to co-lead our Racial  
Equity Team. Someone who  
can move us from being not  
racist to antiracist. A heretic, a  
radical. Is that you? A Rosa  
Parks. Someone to support my  
ministry in teaching us to stop  
saying, "I'm not racist" and  
bring us to action. We need to  
avoid lip service initiatives and  
change our thinking from

black suffering to white  
inaction. The question we ask  
ourselves isn't, "how do we  
save the black community?"

The question of the moment is,  
"how do we bring white  
supremacy to a screeching  
halt?"

The difference between being  
non-racist and being anti-racist  
parallels the differences  
between activity and passivity.

To be non-racist is to be  
passive in issues of social

justice; it is to believe in the  
humanity of your black  
neighbors but to take no steps  
in achieving equality. To be  
anti-racist takes it a step  
further and requires some  
proactivity. It suggests that you  
are willing to do the work to  
destroy the structures that  
marginalize black people even  
if it means going out of your  
way to have tough  
conversations and dismantle  
oppressive systems - and feel

really uncomfortable along the way. As things stand today, non-racism equates to complicity in these systems. To be anti-racist means that you understand that a threat to the freedom of one of us is a threat to all of us. Passive non-racism (otherwise known as, "I'm not racist!") has no place in a progressive society that benefits us all, not just those of us who are white, able-bodied, cis-gendered, and

heterosexual. Injustice for one of us is an injustice for all of us. It's the responsibility of every American citizen to fight back against unjust systems.

This is not negotiable.

Like I said before, activism starts from within the self and moves outward to the world around you. There is a great deal of unlearning that must occur - specifically, unlearning the inherent biases that we have obtained from years

living within oppressive systems. On the bright side, after you've done the work of being receptive to the words of others and unlearning your personal biases, you only have one tiny item remaining on your to-do list: change the world.

The process of changing the world might seem overwhelming, but the real focus is much narrower than it seems. What we hope to

accomplish through active  
anti-racism is a truly equitable  
world that works for all people  
socially, economically, and  
psychologically. Transitioning  
to a society that is anti-racist  
and radically inclusive is going  
to require all of us to, as my  
manager, Katie would say,  
adopt a marathon mindset.

Racism is so deeply ingrained  
in our society that it will take  
all of us working from the self

outwards to topple white  
supremacy.