



THE DOCTRINE OF OUR CHURCH

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16 | REV. T. J. FITZGERALD

Who's been to the Statue of Liberty? Raise your hands. Oh, man. This is going to be fun. I went in the '80s for the first time. I went after they had refurbished it, remember, and they were selling pieces of it, metal in a little pouch. Who's with me? Yeah, okay. You're my people now. All right.

I got up there fine. This was in the day when you could climb to the top of the Statue of Liberty. I got up fine. But when I had to go back down, I was terrified. I started to cry. I wouldn't move and I gripped the handrail, so afraid. But the only way down, the only way out was down. I was coaxed down by my family and the very kind guide, and random other people who were crowded up there who I was preventing from going down. Who maybe had to use the bathroom, or something like that. I made my way tearfully finally to the ground.

To all those people who have ever wondered why you cannot ascend to the dizzying heights of the crown of Lady Liberty, let me say to you, my bad. Sorry. My bad.

Once you've had that intimate experience with a statue, crying your eyes out behind her own eyes, stuck inside her head literally, you've just got a special bond with her after that. Now it might only be a trauma bond, but that's fine. My fascinating with this colossus in the harbor, I call her by her given name, Liberty Enlightening the World, because we're like that. For me, for us, this fascinating is deep. I've preached about her before, I will do it again. I'd happily spin out here for a while about what that colossus represents, how utterly French a gift it was. And how choked up I get whenever I read that poem.

The statue was always, was always a way to remind you to remind me to remind this nation from its sibling France that the institution of bondage and slavery was a moral wrong and that there is no freedom until all are free.

Many who were in this country hear this, many who are here and whose ancestors had been, for centuries before the arrival of that statue, watched new people arrive daily who were granted the freedoms that allowed them to flourish while those people watching were bound by Jim Crow laws, kept from access to economic means in this country and opportunity in the very land they built. That chain on her ankle, broken in mid-stride, was not about an act completed. It really was not. It was about an act that had only just begun and is now ongoing, breaking chains of oppression, chains of want, chains of fear. Do you hear me?

People think she's standing still. They think it's a statue, but she's not. She is on the move. Maybe not this much. But she is there in her sensible Birkenstock sandals, holding a book with a flashlight, like a good Unitarian. Oh, how I love her so.

Now since mid-January, it's been busy in the world, has it not? It's been busy in the world of faith especially, of faith that is liberal and loving like this one. Now one thing we try to do as a church is to listen first and most to those persons who are being directly impacted by what is happening in society, who are being targeted directly by orders flung from the high places of power and how those orders are impacting real lives.

One of the most immediate impacts of those orders has been upon Spanish-speaking people who are being targeted nationwide regardless of nationality, immigration status, or age. Horrifyingly. The opening of detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay and the mobilization of military force against civilians in US borders and abroad in lands the US controls is a danger not only to those being treated this way, but to us all. When the military is being used to police civilians, we speak up.

I don't know about you, friends, my mom raised me to be a lot of things but quiet was not one of them. Lest you wonder what that has to do with us all here, without disclosing any individuals' confidence, you need to know that these orders and the very real harm they cause are, they are impacting every person whose function touches this church. They are. It's not a thought experiment, friends. This is not a hypothetical situation.

I read Emma Lazarus' poem in Spanish. I think I did it better at the first service. I'm sorry about the pronunciation. First, because we ought to remember what that promise says. Second, because listening to other perspectives in other languages is good. And third, because I love, I love, I love the Spanish language. I want the people I love to know that I hear them and I love them, and that this church will defend civilians from inhumanity with all the resources it can muster. What is the doctrine of this church?

Congregation:
Love.

TJ:
What is it that can push back hate?

Congregation:
Love.

TJ:
What is the true root of justice?

Congregation:
Love.

TJ:
What is always worth fighting for?

Congregation:
Love.

TJ:
What makes this little freaky life worth living? And chocolate, that's fine. That's fine.

"They fear love because it creates a world they cannot control. They fear love because it creates a world they cannot control." George Orwell in 1984. What do they fear?

You have heard it said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Oh, TJ, it was going so well right up until that point.

That is from the Sermon on the Mount. From the fifth chapter of Matthew in the Christian scriptures. It's common that parts of that Sermon on the Mount are read between Christmas and Lent in this time we call Epiphany. Isn't that appropriate?

A good friend of mine, a Baptist colleague, Amy Butler, writes in her book that she has a practice of sneaking large portions of the Sermon on the Mount into her sermons around this time of year just to see what happens. She delights in the responses she gets at coffee hour where someone will pull her aside and say, "If you don't mind my saying, you were a little preachy today." There's a lot in there.

Now I heard it once said that Unitarians are not people of The Book, they're people of The Library. When I say I heard it once said, I said it in the 9:30. That's who I'm quoting. It just sounds more real if I say someone said it once. In my bedroom, "I said it. I said it."

When I read my history with my theology, and a little bit of George Orwell, probably too much Margaret Atwood, I am left with some grave concerns and I don't think I'm alone. Right, people? The power of loving those who hate you is real power. The power of making others fear you with threats is not real power, it is false power, and it will not last and it will not stand. It is the oldest lie, the oldest lie

that intimidation can control love. Ask Romeo and Juliet, ask Pyramus and Thisbe, ask people from legends and stories from all over this world. Since we could write down words, we have been telling that oldest lie, that love will win. It is bull, that lie. All it does is make love more and more powerful, and more important. More important in times like this when it feels so far from so many of us.

Now who here has been madly in love before? You can raise your hands, it's fine. Yeah, all right. You are my people. Like had it bad. All right. I know cooler heads and life coaches will tell you that it's just some kind of obsession;. But, friends, my friends, I am here to tell you that that madly in love state is what we need to be falling into now. I don't mind saying it. I am madly in love with this nation. I might have the hots for the Statue of Liberty, I get it. She's so statuesque. You all, you put up with a lot from me. Her mind, I just want to get inside her mind. Oh, wait. I did that once.

That's the love we need now. That's why these love songs and these tremendous musicians are with us in service today. To remind us of the Earth-shaking power of love. That power is in all of us. That power is why we are each here. That power is what we are made of, friends. But what do we do with it? Where do we take it? I am so glad you asked. So glad.

Here are some places to start. The halls of power, the courts of law, and the streets, your streets, of the people. Hear that? Let's start with the halls of power. Who has talked to your legislator this week, raise their hand? Nice. Good. Here we go. Do you know your legislators?

Now here's the question. Do you know which staff members of those legislators are responsible for which parts of that legislator's job? Oh, good. You've got some work to do. We're not all there yet. I'm just saying, why wait? These are your elected representatives. Figure it out. Just ask.

But if you want to make a louder noise than your cellphone in the halls of power, I invite you to maybe sing a few protest songs with us because I will see you at the capital with Reverend Aaron Walter and a few of our friends on March 16th, 17th, and 18th. We're going to go down to Austin. We're going to go with our neighbors from Friendship West Baptist Church, because going with company is that much more fun. We're going to show people what love looks like in public. And that we are the ones who love the people who are being targeted. That we are the ones who love our neighbors enough to come with them. That we are the ones that love ourselves, who love our faith, and we are not going anywhere soon.

Links to that registration are in the DU on the church website. Please register early because part of resistance is good planning. Also, that's how you're sure to get a T-shirt. Someone told me part of resistance is having the right T-shirt. I don't know if that's true. That is the halls of power, where to start.

Next, courts of law. Sue people. Not just because it's fun. Not just because it's fun. But because it's important for someone you love. Check. We did that this week. The Unitarian Universalist Association and it's 1000 churches joined other faith traditions as plaintiffs against the current administration to halt immigration enforcement actions in places of worship. Check. Yeah. We'll see you in court.

We are keeping closely advised on the progress of that case, but you could be a plaintiff, too. I'm just saying. I've already received some offers from some people around that if they need a good plaintiff for something that is happening to let them know. I am telling you, before you go off half-cocked, before you go get your own lawyer, let's have a talk. If there's something that's happening to you, speak to me, speak to us. I'm looking at two dozen lawyers in this room who would be happy to speak with you as well.

If your rights are being abridged and you are feeling ornery about it, speak up. I realize it sounds a little like a radio advertisement for legal services, except we are fixing to mess with people who really deserve it so that's good. Courts of law, number two.

Number three. Your streets, their yours. Join demonstrations. Bring friends, bring a sign if you want, bring plenty of water, bring a chair, memorize your lawyer's number. You can join in, or you can support the people who are going. You don't have to go. People need support. I saw on Realm, there's some people organizing for a demonstration tomorrow. I won't get too much into the details, I see some of the people who were talking about it here. If you have questions about that, go right to Realm.

You can also attend a Know Your Rights workshop. There is one being held tomorrow hosted by DAI and some other partner organizations. There are flyers about it in the back. They asked us not to post it on social media for security reasons. This is an important workshop if you want to understand more about the Fourth and Fifth Amendment, you can go do that. We also have a sleeve of about 1000 Know Your Rights red cards. I would love to run out of them today, people. Hear me? They're on the way out the door, you can get those. That is part of what we need to do is to learn the skills to get the help to the people who need it. Know your Fourth and Fifth Amendments. So the halls of power, courts of law, and your streets, you can start here.

Someone asked me earlier this week what the sermon was going to be about. I wasn't quite sure yet and I said, "It's going to be about throwing myself on the gears of tyranny but with love." I hope you're picking up what I'm putting down. The revolution will not be televised, friends. It will be emblazoned and emboldened in the fire across our days, and it will take a cool and calculating answer drawn up from the cool ancient wells of our being and our understanding that is unbroken, unbowed, untenable by time and by tyranny to put it out, to put out that flame. The revolution will not be televised.

I feel for those people who did and may have a great faith in these government institutions that now seem to be failing them, I do. But maybe check in with people who have never trusted those institutions, who have been the subject of derision, of discrimination, of disinformation for generations. Whose disenfranchisement is as pernicious as it is systemic. Who always yearn to be free in these lands, who have suffered the effects of anti-Blackness in these lands and in this nation for generations. Ask them how they have sustained themselves and do them a favor just listen.

We have got to listen. Then draw from your own story. Dig deep. I already said, my mama didn't raise no quiet child, and I can tell you this. That my grandfather who settled in Brooklyn not far from that harbor guarded by my crush, Lady Liberty, who spent part of his youth in an airplane dropping bombs

on Nazis in World War II would not let me sit idly by as tyrants gleefully make profits of the principles he risked his life to defend.

What in your story has given you life? If you don't feel at home in this country right now, if you feel like a stranger in a strange land, you might have more in common with an immigrant that you thought. If you don't like people telling you what they know better how to raise your child, that what books ought to be in the libraries you go to and what you can do with your body, you might have more in common with trans people, you might have more in common with people seeking abortion care. You might have more in common with parents who are trying to raise their children in peace when they have learning differences than you think.

If you think that diversity means beauty and strength, if you think that equity means flourishing for all, if you think that inclusion is the divine order of things, you might have more in common with people who proclaim the worth and dignity of all than you ever thought. Right? I'm on one now, but I might say that is the only kind of evangelical Christianity I want to hear about right now. Right?

You can hiss and you can boo on what I'm going to say next, I'll let you. You can tell me if it's too soon. But if our faith, if our love means anything at all, it's got to be bigger, it's got to be stronger, it's got to be fuller and sturdier than the hate that is in the hearts of our adversaries, of our enemies who do not wish us well. It's got to be bigger.

I'm not talking about disagreements or differences in political philosophy. I'm talking about the hate that is out there. The answer isn't tolerance. I'm sorry. It isn't ignoring it and hoping it stops. No. It isn't apathy. The answer is loving bigger. Of praying even harder for those who wish us ill. And for the strength to build and rebuild what we must. That is what an evangelical faith is to me. That is what a faith with love of our neighbor and our enemy is to me. It is what is real. It is what true freedom feels like. It is what Dr. West says love looks like in public. That is what it is.

Because my parents taught me at my bedside, to the tune of my father's little guitar, that when you've got a song, you sing it in the morning, you sing it in the evening, you sing it all over this land. You sing out warning. You sing out danger. And you sing out what?

Between all my siblings all over this land. And with enough singing of that song, the tears of a fearful today as we feel them going down hard in these paths will transform into fire, I promise. Fire in the eyes of liberty, fire in the eyes of with we hold holy that will, that have, that must light the way forward for us for our children and for those yet learning, yearning to breathe free. [foreign language 00:22:31] If you feel the Earth shaking, it's only because we're just getting on the move. May it ever be so, blessed be and amen.

