

Sunday, October 11, 2015 ~ Unitarian Church of Hinsdale, IL

First Reading: Excerpt from “A People’s History of the United States” by Howard Zinn

Video –[Doctrine of Discovery](#)

Message You Matter Rev Pam Rumancik

The title of today’s sermon is “you matter.” What does that mean to you? To matter? Does it mean to make a difference? Does it mean that your opinion counts, that your needs are important? Does it mean that people will remember to include you in things or that you have agency in your life?

You matter. It’s a simple phrase but I believe that the absence of believing this is true is the underlying cause of most of the harm and pain in the world.

Coming up to this weekend I was aware that yesterday was World Mental Health day and that tomorrow is what has traditionally been observed as Columbus Day. But, because Christopher Columbus was actually someone who “discovered” a country already inhabited by millions of people, more and more cities across the nation are renaming this holiday Indigenous Peoples Day.ⁱ Berkeley, Seattle, Portland, OR, Minneapolis, Lawrence, Kansas among others have changed the focus of the day.

In 2014, after the city voted to change the name, Seattle City Councilmember Kshama Sawant said:

"Learning about the history of Columbus and transforming this day into a celebration of indigenous people and a celebration of social justice ... allows us to make a connection between this painful history and the ongoing marginalization, discrimination, and poverty that indigenous communities face to this day."ⁱⁱ

We are beginning to recognize people who have traditionally been seen as less than, who have not mattered in our societies, in our laws, and in our country.

For indigenous people this injustice began with a document known as the doctrine of discovery. Initiated by a papal bull by Pope Nicholas V in 1452, we trace the beginning of systemic, legal, devaluation and hierarchical ranking of human beings to this document. There had always been inequity, but this was the first time that inequity had been justified by faith and set into law.

It began as a way to devalue non-Christians & to justify genocide to claim their land and gold. In time, it became the idea that some people are less *human* than others, less deserving of respect and value, and so can be treated without inherent worth and dignity. For a long time, women had been perceived as ‘less than’ men, but now whole categories of human beings could also be discounted for something that **others** said was essential about them.

Women didn't count. Children didn't count. Indigenous people didn't count. People with dark skin didn't count.

It proved very helpful in supporting chattel slavery in the first 4 centuries of this country. Declaring dark skinned people to be only 3/5s of a human being allowed untold atrocities to be visited upon them and gave people with lighter skin a way to feel superior in the process.

Today we see it in other ways as well:

People with mental illness don't count.
Immigrants don't count.
Transgender and gender queer folk don't count.
Until very recently – and still in some places – gay people don't count.

A few weeks back we talked about intersectionality. The idea that devaluing one group of people or beings actually supports the devaluing of all beings. The example that stuck with me was that of slaughterhouse workers. They had to shut down a part of themselves to be able to live with the violence of continually killing animals. This in turn showed up as an increased rate of violence in their family lives – a rate significantly higher than similarly situated industries.

We see it in the way victims of abuse can often become perpetrators of violence. If my humanity is not respected, then I will not respect others. When we turn off our humanity, our ability to empathize and have a co-feeling with one group, we diminish our capacity for love, for empathy in general.

I started down this line of research because yesterday was World Mental Health day. The World Health Organization has chosen "Dignity in mental health" for its theme this year and their website has a great deal of information around why this is so needed.

They help people suffering from mental illness live with dignity, through human rights oriented policy and law, through training of health professionals, by respecting their need for informed consent to treatment and inclusion in decision-making processes, and by public information campaigns.

Why do we need this day? Because people suffering with mental illnesses are often not treated with the respect and dignity. They can be locked up & isolated from society and subject to inhumane and degrading treatment. Matrika Devkota from Nepal writes:

“We, persons with mental health problems, are facing high levels of stigma and discrimination. When tagged as having a mental health problem, we experience social deprivation - losing our jobs, losing social prestige and becoming isolated from family and society.” ⁱⁱⁱ

Many others are subjected to physical, sexual & emotional abuse and they are often denied the right to make decisions for themselves. They can lose custody of their children without due

process and completely ignored by society. In this country funding cuts for mental health services have been so deep that in way too many places the first line of defense – the first line – is jail. Behavioral Health sections of hospitals have been closing all across the country with nothing being created to replace them. Additionally, many of our police organizations are not trained in recognizing manifestations of mental illness and often react in exactly the opposite way from what would be helpful and calm down tense situations.

While in Chattanooga I found out about a line of training called ^{iv}Mental Health 911. It was training on how to recognize and respond to emergency mental issues like psychic breaks. But here in Chicago a story on WBEZ reports that when callers are sent to mental health emergency phone lines, there often is no help available. People in emergency situations can be put on waiting lists for up to 5 months and so many services have been cut that some of the waiting lists have been closed entirely.

Do people with mental health issues matter? If funding for services equals respect, then no – they don't.

But does anyone actually feel like they matter? Our explosion of gun related massacres by twenty-something young men seems to be a cry out that they don't. They need to show the world that they matter. Even if is by causing pain and damage in other lives. They get the world to pay attention to them, by whatever means possible. I am grateful that the authorities in Roseburg, OR, where our latest national tragedy took place, decided they would not give notoriety to the killer by using his name frequently – they would not encourage other troubled young men to pursue their moment of attention by causing death and destruction.

Was the Roseburg tragedy a failure of gun laws or a failure of our mental health system? A failure of society, of the education system, a failure of family?

Yes.

So many different failures come together to form a tragedy of this magnitude that it's impossible to point to only one. But in the end, it seems this young man, like all of the other ones before him, wanted the world to know he mattered. It's kind of ridiculous in some ways – being that he was a white male. Compared to so many other groups of people in this country, he mattered more in society just by virtue of his birth. And it still wasn't enough.

But maybe that is part of the problem. He had bought into the myth of white superiority, but he wasn't experiencing anything that felt like privilege. This particular shooter was said to be prioritizing Christians, which the some on the right have touted as another example of hatred for Christians, but it would be easier to see it as anger with Christians not living up to their spoken values. If we are supposed to love one another as ourselves – where's the love?

We can't help him, or the ones before him, but we can look around us and try to figure out what the heck is going on in our world.

I believe it comes back to the idea of intersectionality. To that understanding that when we devalue one section of the population, we actually devalue ourselves. It's been going on so long now that we can't even see the structures of oppression which divide people into those that matter and those that don't. We can't see that taking away someone else's humanity erodes our own. Our society says that we are the land of the free, that we believe in justice, that we are a free and open democracy. But we can look around and see the opposite of these values being our lived reality. The experience of many is that of being silenced; of being ignored, of not mattering. This experience builds a tremendous amount of anger, which will eventually explode in violence.

So where do we begin? What do we do?

Video – [Why this world should end - Prince Ea](#)

The path to a new beginning is within you. I love this video because Prince Ea exactly grabs this moment. We feel like nothing, no one, matters. This world is falling apart. But the answer lies within us. Real love, true love, boundless love. It has always been the only answer.

All we have to do is revisit that teaching of that Jewish Rabbi, Jesus' of Nazareth.

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. — Matthew 22:35-40.

Love. Love is the greatest commandment. It is also the basic teaching of almost every sustained faith tradition in the world. It can be described with different words and illustrated with different actions, but throughout the centuries prophets and mystics of every age have called us to be in a relationship of love with one another to make the world a better place, to improve our experience of this reality.

I remember hearing a talk by Richard Rohr, a Catholic priest and teacher, who said that all human wisdom is actually inside of us. When he's giving a deep talk people are always nodding. They recognize the truth of what he's saying to them, it's nothing new. It lives in us. We already know at some deep integral level that this hierarchy of value in the world is wrong. We know that all people, all beings, matter. Living out of sync with that knowledge makes us anxious. We know, in our hearts, that we are part of a greater whole.

Last spring, when Thandeka came to lead us in a workshop she named it "love beyond belief." It's an experience that all humans have at some point in their lives – of being interconnected, of being an integral part of the whole.

I've shared before the experience I had in Colorado back in the 90's. I was literally on the side of a mountain, albeit in my house, when I experienced what some call a peak psychological experience, and what I name a mystical one. Having been suffering from depression and insomnia for quite some time, I went home from work early to try to sleep. There were a lot of things going wrong in my life at that time. I was exhausted.

But when I lay down to try to sleep my eyes were wide open. I erupted in an explosion of anger at God, yelling why don't you give me what I want?!! After what seemed like hours of sobbing, I finally opened myself, surrendered entirely to the immensity of the universe and gave up. I handed it all over to that which I named God at that time and was suddenly filled with a rush of light and love so strong it felt like a waterfall of light pouring down upon me.

In that place of being immersed in overwhelming love, I suddenly understood that I was ok – no good! – exactly as I was. Just being was enough. I was love and that was enough. But here's the other knowing that filled my awareness. So was everybody else. No one, or being, is left out of this entirety. We are part of a larger whole and cannot be separated. Separation, hierarchy of value, are illusions.

This experience set me upon a long journey of exploration – to understand, to live into that brief glimpse of unity, to share this orientation of love with the people around me for the rest of my life. It's my call story, my turning point from just existing to really living. I don't share it because it's unique. From my studies I found out that most every human experiences something like this in their lives – maybe with more or less drama around it – but it is actually common to have moments of feeling our interconnection with the larger whole of reality. That experience of connection is what we name love.

But we can forget. Many people lose the memory when they have nothing to explain it. No words to hang it on. It gets buried and lost until some other experience or trigger brings it up again. But it is real. It is real for every single human because it is an experience of our deepest reality. We cannot be separated out. We are each an integral part of this reality. We matter.

Remembering helps us feel whole. Remembering helps us see the people around us as experiencing this same truth. We don't remember because we will be punished in some after life. We remember because it makes our current experience of life richer, fuller, more nourishing, more complete.

You matter – because you are made of the stuff of stars.

You matter – because no matter who you are or what you experience, no one can take that away from you.

You matter – because there is no way for you not to matter.

And remembering that you matter allows us to remember that so does everyone else.
Everyone.

We live into our own understanding of our worth and dignity as people who matter by sharing that understanding. We share it by our love. Because we are people that matter, we are people that love. We reach out and make connections. We step beyond our fear and our discomfort, we reach beyond our limited vision of self, and we love.

Real love that breaks us open and makes demands of us. Real love, that allows the whole of ourselves to shine out into the world. When we can open to the entirety of what it means to matter, to count, to be of value in this world, the only way to make it manifest is to share and make it a lived reality for every single person.

This is our call as people of faith. You matter. What you do matters. How you love matters.

And when we are gathered together, we are a church that matters, making love visible and powerful, in the world around us. Amen & blessed be.

ⁱ <http://mic.com/articles/126522/even-more-cities-join-movement-to-rename-columbus-day-to-indigenous-peoples-day> collected 10-11-15

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.who.int/mental_health/world-mental-health-day/2015_infosheet/en/ collected 10-10-15

^{iv} <http://www.wbez.org/news/mental-health-911-areas-most-calls-have-fewest-services-112174> collected 10-10-

15