

And Justice for All
UUPF

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When was the last time you said the pledge of allegiance? I'm afraid to ask if you remember it because I don't want to embarrass anyone.

It goes like this: *I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*

There was a time I wouldn't say those words. I still have a hard time getting all those words out, in that order. I'm sure I'm not alone. There are people who object to school systems orchestrating young children to say the pledge of allegiance...many of whom have no real understanding of what those words mean. Others object to the words, under God, because they violate the sensibilities of atheist and others who don't believe in God. Others still believe it to be idolatry to pledge allegiance to anything but God.

While I understand and can support those objections, I object to America mouthing those words because I don't believe any government is specially chosen by God. I object because this nation is anything but indivisible. Just look around, there are places and people in this country today, who like 250 years ago are trying to gen up support to secede.

But more than that, I object to speaking a lie. This nation does not and maybe never has had liberty and justice for all. And we make the problem bigger every time we say that lie, because we perpetuate an untruth. And that untruth just sits there, in plain view, and goes unnoticed.

Let me clarify. It goes unnoticed, practically if not literally, by those who are not directly affected by the lack of someone else's liberty. Or worst still, by those who benefit from other's lack of liberty. And this lack of liberty, inexorably, leads to injustice.

Many want to believe slavery in America, a rather unique kind of slavery I might add, is old news, ancient history, a thing of the past. Many want to believe the fact that you needed to be a male land owner in order to vote in this country, is history, a thing of the past. Many want to believe that women not having the right to vote is ancient history, a thing of the past, with no relevance in today's United States.

Simply put, with all due respect to those who hold such beliefs, I think those beliefs are hooey. I believe they are hooey despite our public face as the land of the free, the home of the brave, the world's ideal democracy, built on Christian values.

Forest VA has been in the news of late. There is an eight year old girl there named Sunnie Kahle. It seems Sunnie likes to wear her hair short, wear boys' clothes, she has a knife collection and shoots a BB gun. The administrators at the school she attends, the Timberlake Christian School, recently informed her adoptive parents that the second grader's boyish ways were unacceptable and she'd have to start acting like a girl or find another school.

In *Requiem for a Nun*, Temple Drake wrestles with a violent and turbulent past. Against this backdrop, William Faulkner, writes one of his most famous lines. He writes: "the past is never dead, it is not even the past".

In public schools all over this country, transgender kids have to go to court to gain the right to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity. Some people are deemed suspect, or dangerous by their mere presence in some wealthy or gated communities. In New York City, some people, particularly black people, have been regularly stopped, frisked and interrogated about why they are on the street in front of their own apartments. They're asked where they've been, where they're going, do they have identification and what do they have in their pockets?

Lets talk about liberty and justice for all.

Liberty and justice for all does not and never has been a reality in this country of ours. These words are aspirational. They have to be, because that's the only way they can make any sense. The Pledge of Allegiance was first drafted by Francis Bellamy in 1892. The 15th amendment giving blacks the right to vote occurred in 1870, but black people were being lynched in 1892, and for many, many, years thereafter. And women wouldn't get the right to vote for almost another thirty years.

When congress formally adopted the pledge in 1945, the federal government had already helped to institute redlining. The Federal Housing Administration came into existence through the National Housing Act of 1934.

They worked with the Home Owners' Loan Corporation to create "residential security maps" of some 240 cities. These maps supposedly rated the degree of security for loan investments. The so-called high risk areas had a red line around them. Guess who predominately lived in those areas? Banks refused to lend in the areas that were redlined.

The GI Bill of Rights, passed in 1944, provided low-cost mortgages, low interest loans for new business, cash payments for tuition to millions of veterans. The GI Bill is what spurred the creation of the suburban lifestyle we seem to so value. The Levittowns, in many states were paid for by the GI Bill.

Because of redlining and outright discrimination, black veterans saw little of this money. Those low cost mortgages and low cost business loans have leveraged a tremendous amount of wealth. I would bet that much of America's family wealth today, has been passed down from these investments. And much of America's poverty has been passed down as result of the lack of such investments.

Because the past is never dead, we continue to have a tremendous amount of segregated housing. We continue to have blighted inner cities and public schools funded by limited revenue from taxes on blighted property.

And like the King in our story this morning, most people seem to only care about themselves.

This notion of only caring about one's self has become so popular of late, that its been enshrined in law. Since 2005, when Florida passed the first stand your ground law, more than 20 other states have passed such laws. There are now more states that allow one to stand your ground, even outside one's home, than those that require you to retreat if at all possible.

The net impact of these laws is to place the determination of justice in the hands of individuals. Each individual is now authorized to determine for himself or herself when deadly force is allowable, required in fact. All based on their own subjection beliefs of danger. Court cases have demonstrated that you don't have to get the facts right, all you need do is feel and believe you are threatened.

This has got to sound shocking to rational thought, where liberty and justice is foundational. But it's not a new concept. Cops have been killing people ...mostly black people and people of color ...for along time based on belief of seeing a gun or a belief that someone is reaching for a gun, even if it turns out they were merely reaching for identification.

My friends, there is something very wrong in our culture. Justice does not reside only in our court system. It must reside in our policies, our practices and in the laws our government passes. It must reside in our everyday activities. It must reside in our fundamental perspective on life.

We simply can not allow someone to kill another based on their subjective beliefs. We can not stand by when people are going to jail for decades because of non-violent drug use. We can not be silent when people pay their dues to society by going to jail, and still become disenfranchised from society.

We've accepted people going to jail and then becoming non-citizens. After people have paid their dues, many if not most can not vote, can not obtain any federal funding for food stamps or welfare. Many can not even live with their wife and kids if their families live in federally subsidized housing. And they are virtually unemployable because companies ask if they have ever been convicted.

There is something very wrong with our current state of affairs. And we must bear witness to this truth.

I've always been told, "when you preach, Walter, you have to share the "good news".

Sometimes the good news is hard to find. But the good news is this *is* America. The good news is we do have more liberty, freedom and justice here than in many parts of the world. The good news is gay people are not stoned, put in jail or killed like in Uganda and other parts of the world.

The good news is that we've broken another glass ceiling; we've elected a Black president. There is good news in his election and re-election, even if it is only symbolic. I can't tell you the impact it had on me when I first saw a black family, the First Family, in the White House. Just to know it's possible is such a boon to the psyches of so many people.

The good news is that Unitarian Universalists, have been in the forefront of many social and cultural changes. The good news lies in our identifiable principles...we have committed ourselves to a search for truth and meaning. We've covenanted to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations, acceptance of one another and to encourage spiritual growth. All these are built on our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

If not us, then who? If not us, who?

I want to end with words of James Baldwin

For nothing is fixed,
forever and forever and forever,
it is not fixed;
the earth is always shifting,
the light is always changing,
the sea does not cease to grind down the rock.

Generations do not cease to be born,
and we are responsible to them because
we are the only witnesses they have.
The sea rises,
the light fails,
lovers cling to each other,
and children cling to us.
The moment we cease to hold each other,
the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.
Don't let the lights go out. Hold each other.

Amen, and ashee.