

Rev. Dr. Julia Burkey
Murmurations for Justice
January 23, 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be aligned with you oh God, our rock and our redeemed.

I must begin today with a mention of the wise teacher Thich Naht Hahn, who has influenced so many of our spiritual paths, who died two days ago, peacefully at the age of 95.

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.

Breathing in, I see myself as a flower. Breathing out, I feel fresh.

Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain. Breathing out, I feel solid.

Breathing in, I see myself as still water. Breathing out, I reflect all that is.

Breathing in, I see myself as space. Breathing out, I feel free.

From Touching Peace by Thich Nhat Hanh

He was a Vietnamese Monk and holy Boddhisatva, whose incarnation on earth was designed to help bring people into enlightenment.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. King and Thich Naht Hahn had a friendship that rubbed off on one another and the world in the late 60s. The two had breakfast together in Geneva Switzerland at the World Council of Churches in 1967, where they discussed peace, freedom, the beloved community, the potential for the world, what needed to be done to end the war in Vietnam. “We agreed that without a community, we cannot go very far. Without a happy, harmonious community, we will not be able to realize our dream.” Their friendship fueled King to begin to speak out about the war in Vietnam. Their friendship fueled Thich Naht Hahn to pursue further issues of justice and peace in his lifetime, for he coined the concept of “socially engaged Buddhism,” where mindfulness is connected to social movements, bucking the concept that Buddhists are meditating on a hilltop disconnected from the world.

Years later, Thich Nhat Hanh recalled: “I was in New York when I heard the news of his assassination; I was devastated. I could not eat; I could not sleep. I made a deep vow to continue building what he called ‘the beloved community,’.”

The beloved community has become for many a positive guiding image of the future- something Thich Nhat Hanh could work towards- a way to continue the movement without its main leader.

King was a charismatic leader, and when King was assassinated, the world was crushed, and it felt to many, that the movement was over too. And of course we know there were so many

leaders- many of whom are still alive. But this perception that the movement was over also influenced the self-perception of the movement itself.

When Jesus was killed, the early Jesus following movement was scattered and confused, but needed a way to go on. We are 50-60 years from the Civil Rights Movement, and the gospels were not written until 40-60 years after the death of Jesus.

Social movements since the Civil Rights Movement have been criticized for lack of a charismatic leader, or unified voice. Occupy Wall Street and the BLM Movement for example were and are replete with leaders, ideas, creativity, but so many felt “what are they really trying to accomplish here?” Without one single ask, one single leader, how can this work? But what if the beloved community, what if the body of Christ, do not need charismatic leaders, but creativity and adaptation of each doing their part?

Paul’s wonderful words about the body of Christ through Eugene Peterson’s translation *The Message* reads, “By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life.” And this idea that if we try to be independent, solo, we become monster like- a big scary hand walking around alone.

What Jesus and Paul are up to here is something that change theorists prove the importance of these days – we need positive guiding images of the future. It is so tempting to outsource our creativity to one charismatic leader, or on the contrary side, let the present despair, images of heartbreak, of death and prejudice and destruction become a guiding image. Remember how prevalent the image of George Floyd was with police officer Derek Chauvin’s knee on his neck, how much that was being passed around. I began hearing Black organizers saying STOP sharing this traumatic image, and began linking the sharing of this image to white folks sending each other postcards of lynching in the south- Black death is iconic, we are familiar with it, and tantalized by it- and part of sending it around makes us numb to it, normalizes it. YES we ought to lift up the tragedy and trauma, the “I can’t breathe” words of George Floyd and Eric Garner, but Black death cannot be the image that guides us into the future.

So how do we move forward? The urgency that says there is only one right leader or only one right response to particular Justice issue or crisis, is a trauma response, comes from scarcity. The idea that we can only look to one leader to tell us what to do, leaves people out, doesn’t reflect the brilliance and beauty of the diversity of human creativity and experience. We live in an abundant universe with parallel universes and co-creative energies that call us into brave experimentation, rather than one right thing.

In her book *Emergent Strategy, Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, adrienne maree brown talks about her change theory, of how movements of racial justice and social justice can best thrive in this moment. Adrienne Maree Brown lifts up another image, alongside the beloved community, alongside the body of Christ, to underscore the importance of each of us doing the work, becoming leaders in our own corners and families. We cannot look to charismatic leaders only, to show us the way. Adrienne Marie Brown talks about Murmuration as her positive guiding image for a Justice movement.

She quotes Sierra Pickett, in Emergent Strategy, “Starlings’ murmuration consists of a flock moving in sync with one another, engaging in clear, consistent communication and exhibiting collective leadership and deep, deep trust. Every individual bird focuses attention on their seven closest neighbors and thus manage a larger flock cohesiveness and synchronicity (and times upwards of over a million birds).”

Tyler Colbourne, Community Director builds on this, “Starlings reflect a way of being in systems leadership. Each bird in a murmuration is a participant and leader within a complex and ever-evolving system. Each has the power to shape the direction and shape of the whole system, each has the power to create entirely new constellations. I like to think that each of us has the capacity to be like starlings.”

Adrienne Marie Brown writes “My dream is a movement with such deep trust that we move as a murmuration.”

We do our best with the means we have. We say, yes, let’s have a racial Justice movie night, yes let’s focus on racial Justice on January, yes let’s talk about reparations, yes let’s call all our Justice ministries to think about the intertwined overlapping of issues, how care of creation can also care about racial justice, how immigration justice is racial justice, how caring for refugees is racial justice, how teaching our children critical race theory in the home, in the church and in school is doing justice. Let us hold space for anger and despair, and hope and transformation. Let’s immerse our children in a mission trip or Justice immersion, yes let’s talk about the brilliance of darkness during lent, yes let’s grapple with how to honor the dream of a dying beloved to have more literacy in Madison and adapt it with appropriate love and Justice, yes let’s create more tangible housing opportunities for low income and vulnerable families, yes let’s ally ourselves with different community organizing groups in Madison and beyond. We could ask local community organizers what their guiding image is of the future? What else? What next? What are the particular gifts church has to offer to the racial Justice movement? What are participants gifts this church has to offer to the racial Justice movement in Madison? We are each invited to take responsibility, in our own corners, in our own family.

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Benediction:

Final blessing:

Blessings to you each as we grapple together with the words of Pam Oliver that,
“We are responsible for our actions in the face of the sins of our father and mother, while we are living in cities that we did not build and wells we did not dig?”

How do we take responsibility?

May we each and together take risks. May we stay where we feel challenged. May we have humility and look to others for guidance. May we remember that we do not know everything and seek ways to listen. May we seek to ally ourselves with people of color.

May God illuminate for us what we are called to do now, may we join with others in the path of collective action to dismantle white supremacy. May we have hope together that Groups of people acting together can make changes. May we sing, dance, pray, and feel our connection to all of life.

What can this church at our best offer the racial Justice movement?

What are the unique gifts or ORUCC that we can offer to the wider community?