“The Consequences of Forced Busing*”*

Worship Service for

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Tippecanoe County

West Lafayette, Indiana

February 11, 2024 – 10:30 a.m.

The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Settled Minister

The Rev. Emily Manvel Leite, Minister of Religious Education

Pianist: Richard Maddux

Worship Associate: Don Gresham

Producer: Gary Fowler; Sound Technician: Kim Smith

**Gathering Music Bethena, by Scott Joplin [Richard]**

**Prelude Lift Every Voice and Sing, by James & J. Rosamond Johnson [Richard Maddux]**

**Opening Words by Marty Meehan [Rev. Jennie]**

“Black History Month must be more than just a month of remembrance; it should be a tribute to our history and a reminder of the work that lies in the months and years ahead.”

**Chalice Lighting Words** **by the Rev. Jonalu Johnstone** **[Don]**

We shall overcome.

When we can truly celebrate the diversity of contributions and talents offered by all people, we shall overcome hatred and prejudice and oppression.

When we can truly extend our hands to one another in loving acceptance, we shall overcome the past that haunts us now.

Living in peace and freedom, we shall overcome the wrongs that have happened and the debts left unpaid.

Let us join together in that commitment to overcome.

**First Reading from, “How the 1963 March on Washington Changed Me,” from a collection of interviews published by Cambridge College in August of 2023 [Don]**

Lyda Peters was nineteen years old when she attended the now famous March on Washington where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I have a dream” speech. She recalls the event, especially the emotions and energy of the event, vividly.

Neither she nor anyone in her family were activists. “My mom and my aunts, we were just working people in New York.”

Her aunt received two tickets to the March from a friend who couldn’t go because of work. She asked Lyda if she wanted to go. Lyda recalls the train ride from New York to Washington, "There was such excitement. People were even sitting on the floors. They started singing. They were happy. People were talking to strangers, telling stories. And at every stop more and more people got on the train.” She joined in the singing.

When the train stopped in D.C., they disembarked. She was awed to see the flood of people getting off other trains and buses. “They kept coming and coming and coming,” she explains. “It was very crowded and people were singing outside too. We were all holding hands with people we didn’t know. It was almost like a religious experience. You never forget a moment that touches you like this. I began to feel like I was part of something special…”

“Being at the March moved me into a direction that stayed with me for years,” says Lyda. “It was foundational and was added to all my previous life experiences of being Black and raised by a single mother in New York.”

“When we moved to Boston, I saw all the storefront community agencies where some of my friends volunteered. They were working on justice in the education system,” she recounts. “As I continued to process all my life experiences, I felt compelled to get involved. I wanted to be involved in civil rights and social justice and improving the world. I began working for Ruth Batson and I became part of the movement in Roxbury that was changing the schools.”

Ruth Batson was a civil rights activist who challenged the Boston School Committee over racial segregation and inequalities. She held many impressive roles over her lifetime. In the mid-60s, she was chairwoman of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination and she helped launch the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) voluntary desegregation program. As a member of the leadership team, she helped grow METCO from transporting 225 black urban children to several suburbs to 1,125 children to 28 communities.

“Ruth was a profound person. She pushed to make things right for under-served groups,” says Lyda.

Ruth was recruited to run a consultation education program at Boston University Division of Psychiatry. She took Lyda with her as director of training.  Lyda worked nights teaching at Cambridge College, along with this full-time job. Cambridge College was known as an innovative college that was helping people in the community get degrees.

“I shared my philosophy with them of a rock in a lake. You can throw a rock in a lake and the ripples will extend out a good distance. But if you work as a group and throw 100 rocks in a lake, your impact will be much greater. It’s important to join with like-minded people to protest, to gather money, to help other people. A *group* can have a major impact on society.”

Bringing it full circle, Lyda states, “If you have a belief that things can change and that there’s a greater good, an experience can change your life. The beginning of that change for me was the March on Washington.”

**Second Reading [Rev. Jennie]**

the words of South Boston Author Michael Patrick MacDonald, from an interview with Brian Lamb on C-SPAN:

"I didn't get in trouble because, I think at a young age  --this is something that I figured out while I was writing the book--  at a young age, I--  I was able to kind of step outside of the chaos with one foot, even while keeping another foot there. I'm still from that neighborhood. I'm still from my family. But I was always able to be kind of--  to--  to see that world from the outside and to see the bigger picture so that I wasn't trapped in it. I never felt trapped in it. I never felt like my life is going to be determined by this. That's a common factor that you see in a lot of what teachers and psychologists are calling resilience in young people. It's a common factor, that ability to step outside of any kind of situation, a chaotic situation growing up and to say, 'That's not necessarily me. That's not going to determine who I am.'  And my only goals in general are to tell the truth and to help kids live. I just want kids to live."

**Sermon “The Consequences of Forced Busing in Boston” [Rev. Jennie]**

The Doonesbury cartoons that are inserted into your Order of Service this morning are very personal for me. I recall them vividly from when I was a young teenager in the Greater Boston Area in the 1970s. Their creator, Gary Trudeau, is editorializing the high conflict and controversy of the Boston School Committee’s failed attempts at desegregation of some of Boston’s inner-city public schools, in neighborhoods where residents were extremely poor. The four cartoon strips are funny and cute. But they are also chilling, because they focus in on how the forced busing debacle affected young children, both white and black. It traumatized them. As you can see in the cartoons, a young white boy named Bobby, who would have been from South Boston, which we call, “Southie,” is being bused to a black neighborhood, either Roxbury or Dorchester. A slightly older black boy, named Rufus, boards the bus, says hi, to the black bus driver, and sits down amiably beside Bobby. Bobby immediately exclaims, “You aren’t going to hit me, are you?” Rufus says, “Of course not,” and asks Bobby why he would assume that. Bobby reveals a note written for him by his mother that says, “My name is Bobby Matthews. I am seven years old. Please don’t hit me.” In the next strip, when Rufus gets on the bus, Bobby is sitting beside a black boy his age. Rufus smiles and says to Bobby, “You found a new friend?” Bobby says, “Yup! This here’s Malcom. We’re in the same grade. We met when he showed me this note from his mother.” Rufus reads Malcolm’s note aloud: “My name is Malcolm DeVeaux. I am seven years old. Please don’t hit me.” Bobby then announces, “We’re partners in fear!”

The forced busing in Boston in the 1970s put my city on the map in the worst possible ways. There were riots, there was hateful speech, there were physical injuries and deaths. That conflict and violence went on for years. It was, to some extent, traumatic for me to grow up in the midst of all of that conflict. Yet some of the consequences of desegregation were positive, with beneficial effects that are still rippling out today. That time in my life came back to me suddenly and stunningly in September when I was watching my PBS channel, which is WTTW. They showed a trailer of an upcoming episode of, “American Experience” called, “The Busing Battleground – The Decades-Long Road to School Desegregation.” It was all about Boston. Seeing those film clips, I had a physical reaction. I was amazed that what had been going on within a few miles of radius near me was now a PBS “American Experience” documentary. When I was a kid, I did not have a full understanding of the racial and class conflict in Boston and I did not have power to do much about it. But now I do have the ability to better understand these issues in our history and as a minister I can educate others about them. The reason people in my home city and state, and people all over our nation, had to confront our racially segregated schools was because of Brown v. Board of Education, which became the law in 1954. But people in political power in Boston didn’t want to address segregation in their schools. They were white, and they didn’t want anything about their lives to change. Historian Matt Delmont says, in the documentary: “The battle over busing in Boston exposed the important truth that the majority of white Americans didn’t actually support civil rights if it meant they had actually to address racial inequality in their own cities.”

Much of this information is directly from the “American Experience” documentary which is fact-based, with interviews with people who had direct experience, including archival footage of people who are no longer alive. One of those people is author Michael Patrick MacDonald, whose words were our second reading this morning. He grew up in South Boston during the 70s; his beautiful best-selling memoir is, “All Souls – A Family Story from Southie.” He became a peace activist, an activist against crime and violence. Also interviewed was Ruth Batson, a black woman and mother from Roxbury who is lifted up in our first reading this morning. Ms. Batson was one of the fiercest and most effective advocates for high quality public education for black children in Boston. And she started the METCO program through which white communities around Boston volunteered to host black children from the city in their schools and homes. My family was part of the METCO program, which is still going strong today.

One of the things the documentary makes clear is that the Boston School Committee was corrupt. They were political appointees with higher political ambitions. They didn’t care about the black children in Boston who were poor. But they didn’t care about the white children in Boston who were poor, either- because their children went to private schools. A minister from that time said:

**“**Boston had literally a two-tiered system of high schools. There were the district high schools, like, East Boston, South Boston High School, Charlestown High School. Charlestown High School, you might only have two or three kids that graduated and went to a four-year college. Then there were the exam schools, there was Boston Latin for boys, there was Girls Latin and Boston Tech. And those schools were elite, and mostly white.” And a teacher said:

“As a student in training to be a teacher and visiting Boston schools and then visiting as well schools in the suburbs, the differences were extreme. So, in the suburban schools, I would see these beautiful new school buildings, modern science labs, modern auditoriums. And I’d go back to visiting a school in Boston and I’d say like, ‘Are we in the same world, the same planet, the same state?  Why are schools in Boston underfunded and disgraceful looking?’”

And so, as writer Jim Vrabel wrote: “The Racial Imbalance bill filed originally in 1964, said that any school district that had schools with more than 50% of its students as minorities had to adopt a racial imbalance plan to address the situation. [He said] I think the impetus for passing it in 1965 was for the state to do something when the Boston School Committee and the city obviously were not doing anything. And Michael Patrick MacDonald said:

“In phase one of the busing plan, South Boston High School and Roxbury were paired. South Boston's lower end, which is where I'm from, held one of the highest concentrations of white poverty in America. We were not working class. We were poor. To focus on a school that had so many students on welfare, that's not really the place to get equity.”

Then in April of 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. That really galvanized black people in Boston. They began to take their children’s education into their own hands by creating alternative schools in their communities that taught black history and culture. And there was an outpouring of volunteers and donations of books and supplies in support. These efforts were not legal and some of them were short-lived. But they had a positive empowering effect, especially on the children and young adults who were involved. And one of the leaders of that effort was Ruth Batson.

Jumping ahead to 1972, journalist Farah Stockman wrote: “So at this point, the black community in Boston has tried everything. They've tried the ballot box, they've tried direct action, they've tried the state house. And really it hasn’t worked. None of it has worked. And so some of them felt it was time to do the last option, which was the court system.” Activist Hubie Jones said: “In March 1972, lawyers for the NAACP on behalf of plaintiffs, 14 parents and 44 children, file suit charging the Boston Public Schools with de jure segregation, that you have intentionally segregated the schools.” And Tomiko Brown-Nagin, Professor of Constitutional Law said:

“After the NAACP achieves its monumental victory in Brown v. Board of Education, it's clear that the principle should apply in the North. The reality was that schools were segregated by race nationwide. So those lawyers litigate a series of cases in Northern cities that seek to establish that schools that are in fact segregated by race in Northern cities should be desegregated just the same as those in Southern cities*.*” [end of quote]

The judge was W. Arthur Garrity, a very thoughtful, reflective person. He took a over a year to issue his meticulously documented decision. It included exact words that Boston School Committee members had said in their meetings, from verbatim transcripts. Judge Garrity ruled that the School Committee had in fact intentionally created and maintained a system of racial segregation in the schools in the Boston area. So low-income people in Boston, black and white, were legally required to try to desegregate their schools through forced busing. And most of the adults didn’t know how to handle that.

As Journalist Bryant Rollins said: “If there had been a way for deep dialogue between blacks and whites, a lot of the conflict that arose during the ‘60s and ‘70s was avoidable. People were in a state of violent agreement. What we agreed about was the inefficacy of busing.  White parents didn’t want it for their kids, and black parents would have preferred not to have to have busing if they had quality schools. We did not slow down, take a deep breath, take a step back and ask ourselves what’s possible together. That’s a tragedy. Everybody has lost.”

As I look back on it, still thinking about those Doonesbury cartoons, it was the children who lost the most. Thousands of children, black and white, in that age bracket did not get the quality public education they needed and deserved. They dropped out or their parents kept them out or their education was too disrupted. For me, the most poignant footage in the film is when a reporter asks a black teenage girl if she thinks the busing will work out and she says: **“**I think it's going to be alright if everybody comes and stops being scared because, shoot, I don't think there's nothing to be scared of.” And then he asks a white girl the same thing and she says: “I guess things’ll work out alright. If the parents stay out of it all and let the kids work it out for themselves, it'll be all right.”

And even now, I am still thinking with concern about the children and youth in the Boston area getting the public school education they need and deserve. My concern has been heightened this winter because my sister and brother-in-law are there; my brother-in-law is a teacher in Newton, Massachusetts. Last month, the teachers in Newton went on strike. They had been working without a contract for 18 months. So, even though it is illegal for teachers to strike in Massachusetts, their union voted 98% in favor of striking- for fairer wages for them and all the teaching assistants and support staff, for paid family leave time, and, most moving to me, for social workers in all the schools. Our children and youth today are really struggling with a lot of issues, especially in this post-pandemic time. There have been delays in their learning and socialization, anxiety and depression have spiked way up, and they fear mass shootings. So during the strike, schools in Newton were closed for 11 days. The parents and community were hugely supportive. But the School Committee was apathetic and the mayor [who is on the School Committee] didn’t even attend the negotiations for the first several days. Then outside support arrived from the dynamic and expert President of the National Educators Association, Becky Pringle. And the Boston Band, The Dropkick Murphys also sang their support. And the teachers won what they asked for. There will now be a social worker with mental health support available in every school building every hour it is open every day. To me, this is a model for advocates for quality public education all over our nation. And when I looked into President Becky Pringle’s background, I found that, as a black child, she was affected by school busing, where she grew up in Philadelphia. She was able to test into a public school which was racially integrated and did give her a high quality education. And now she advocates for *all* children to receive the same, especially children who are marginalized or more vulnerable, including LGBTQ youth, children on the autism spectrum, and those with disabilities.

In closing, I hope that you will talk with each other, and with me, about your experiences of segregation and discrimination due to racial and class divides, from when you were young, from wherever you grew up, and in the ways that are right around us today. That PBS documentary made me realize that I have not spoken publicly about these issues often enough. So I thank you for listening to me voice the sores and scars and shames, but also the rays of hope that burst out of our nation’s dark past—rays of hope that can still enlighten and inspire me today.

**Closing Hymn** #169 We Shall Overcome

**Chalice Extinguishing by the Rev. Brian Kiely [Don]**

The Chalice is now extinguished,  
but its light lives on in the minds and hearts and souls of each one of you.  
Carry that flame with you as you leave this place

and share it  
With those you know  
With those you love  
and most especially, with those you have yet to meet.

**Postlude Deep River, by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** [Richard]

**Benediction by Howard Zinn [Rev. Jennie]**

“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.

What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places — and there are so many — where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.”