

**Service from UU Montclair
February 28, 2021
“What Would Egbert Ethelred Brown Do?”**

Introduction to Hymn - Markus

Welcome! My name is Markus Grae-Hauck, I am the Director of Music Ministries here at our congregation. My pronouns are he, him, and his. We are about to sing our gathering hymn, joining virtually, together in song. And in a moment we will join together for our chalice lighting, where we will invite everyone to light your own flame, at home. To prepare for this, perhaps you will want to find a chalice or a candle, as we sing. Our hymn leader is Kate Conroy.

Welcome and Chalice Lighting - Rev. Anya and Rev. Scott

RA: Whoever you are, wherever you come from, whatever age, ability, history, identity, gender, or sexual orientation, you are welcome to bring your full self here.

I am Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael, she, her, hers.

RS: And I am Rev. Scott Sammler-Michael, he, him, his.

Grounded in faith, we come together to nurture the soul, inspire hope, and bring into being a more just and loving world.

RA: Today's service is titled, What Would Egbert Ethelred Brown Do? This service will explore the ways in which Rev. Ethelred Brown worked to build Beloved Community in his churches in Harlem, NY and in Jamaica, and how the American Unitarian Association built relationships with Rev. Brown. Rev. Ethelred Brown was a Jamaican man who overcame many adversities to become the first Ordained Black Unitarian Minister. The American Unitarian Association and Meadville Lombard Theological School sometimes acted as gatekeepers, people who presented boundaries for Rev. Brown and tried to dissuade him from answering his call to be a Unitarian Minister. We will learn from the past behaviors of these institutions in hopes of improving upon our present and future.

RS: If you have school aged children, please register for our innovative Children's Religious Education program.

RA: We also would like to remind you that we are in the middle of our pledge drive. Thanks so much to those of you who have already responded. Please, if you have not yet pledged, respond today.

If you are not sure how much you can pledge, make your best guest; you can always change it later with a message to me, our administrator Danielle Carlo.

Pledging is easy. Simply Use the [Pledge link](#), now in the chat, which will take you to where you can set up your pledge.

You can Send an email with your pledge amount for the year to Danielle Carlo, at admin@uumontclair.org, Or if you are a member and received our pledge brochure, you can fill it out and send it in.

Help us “Reunite and Rise Together: Creating the Community of Tomorrow Today.”

If you are joining us at 10am, please continue with us for a virtual “Connection Cafe” beginning at 11am.

It’s time to light our chalice, a beacon to guide us through these times together. Perhaps you have a chalice or candle at home... anything that you can illumine.

Let’s light our collective chalices as we share our chalice lighting affirmation.

Chalice Being Lit

Invocation and Remembrance Info - IA

The invocation comes from Rev. Ethelred Brown’s Sermon, (the first Black Unitarian Minister). “What Has Unitarianism to Offer”. Rev. Brown preached this sermon at the Harlem Community Church, a Church that he founded in 1920. The reading is adapted to reflect an inclusive expression of gender that was not used in the time that Rev. Brown wrote this document.

Ethelred Brown

What Unitarianism Has To Offer

[reading]

Rev. Anya:

As we consider the priceless gifts that we have in our congregation lets us not forget the gift that we have in joining together...

Called, now, by this invocation into worship, we turn to seek a soft meditation, a deep reflection, an ardent prayer. ...Each as we are called, yet, mystically, all together.

And we enter into this space by hearing the lamentations, the requests, and the remembrances of our community -

Let us hear one another to heal one another.

Candle Lighting -

Laura Thomas lights a candle acknowledging and requesting good thoughts for a student Nailea (or N) from Texas whose family huddled together for warmth for days during the failure of the Texas power grid. With this and her challenge of finding reliable internet, this student still fought to get to class. Wishes for strength to her and all suffering Texans.

Judy and Rebecca Lutzy light this candle for Judy’s Aunt Rita Ehrlich who died this past week. Judy’s mother’s younger sister, she was only 16 when Judy was born and was

always more like a big sister. Later in life, living near one another, they became even closer and she and her husband were like surrogate grandparents for Judy's three daughters. She was 90 years old.

Becca Seibert Nast shares, "I light this candle of remembrance for my aunt, Gladys Shaw, who passed away Sunday morning February 21st after living many years with dementia. Aunt Gladys was the picture of resilience. She taught me so many ways to make art and to see beauty in the world. Her loving, funny, creative spirit will guide me for the rest of my life. She is so deeply missed."

Ann Trip and Foxy (Sher) Pullen light a candle of remembrance for their close friend Christopher "Drenny" Wallace. Christopher died on Feb. 18. We wish to keep his spouse, Deanna, and their children in our thoughts. Whenever we see an image of a dragon, especially a sapphire one, we will think of our friend Drenny. May he soar high with the dragons forever.

Dionne Ford Kurtti shares, "I'd like to light a candle of remembrance for my friend Erik Pedersen who died on January 21st at the age of 84. Erik, a spiritual advisor to me, was the epitome of grace and generosity. He changed my life and he will be missed, but the gifts he shared with me will remain."

May this candle hold Dawn Coleman, our lead custodian, in the light as she undergoes knee surgery on her meniscus.

Joe Palka lights this candle and requests your prayers for Tim who will have colon surgery on March 8th. May the surgery go well.

We light this candle of Joy for the Equality Act, passed on Friday by the US House of Representatives. The Equality Act would amend the 1964 Civil Rights Act to protect people from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, housing, services and access.

We light this candle for the joys and sorrows that have not been spoken aloud.

And we light all of these remaining candles today, for the over 500,000 Americans that have lost their lives to Covid-19. We light these candles - transient sparks of light to speak our remembrance and our loss. And then we will hold silence together for a full minute, bearing witness to these flames that merely hint at the enormity of this tragedy. May we hold silence as this silence holds us.

May our listening bring forth acts of love.

Prayer -

When I rest and seek resilience in meditation I begin with two remembrances - First that life is an incredible gift, and second that life is impermanent, that all of it will pass away.

And the poet Mary Oliver shares:

To live in this world, you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

Will you pray with me.

God of our understanding, light that guides our journey from within and without -
Help us to love what is mortal,
To hold it against our bones, knowing our own life depends upon it.

Help us to trust life, even in its impermanence, and help us to trust dear ones, even in their imperfection.

Help us to love our kin, our spouse, our neighbor, the stranger. Help us to reckon with the impermanence and imperfection of it all, our relationships, and our very existence - even as we rest our weary heads on this earthly, this corporeal, this transient blessing.

May we never, may we never turn away in fear of what is mortal.

Dear god, let us know it is what we have been given. That it is good. That it is a strange and wondrous blessing.

And when the time comes, help us to let it go. Help us to let go. Help us to let go.

Amen.

Prayer Response: Somebody's Hurting My Sister

Offering - Ginny Crooks

One way that we trust life and help others is when we give to our offering. 80 percent of your gift will care for the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Montclair, and 20 percent will support our justice recipient.

Our February Sharing Our Riches recipient is UU FaithAction NJ. FaithAction is a social advocacy network representing the Unitarian Universalist Congregations of NJ, and has been supported and often led by our congregations members. Working for 11 years with coalition partners, FaithAction acts as a moral voice in the public square, supporting environmental justice, immigration rights, reproductive freedom, criminal justice reform and gun violence prevention, while recognizing that all issues must be viewed through an anti-racist, anti-oppressive lens.

You can text to give, mail us a check, or go to our home page and click on the donate button. This is a time of need.

All of your gifts are worthy and they are all received with love.

Reading - Ginny Crooks
The Price We Pay
Rev. Ethelred Brown

[reading]

Anthem: Stand Up - Cynthia Erivo, Joshuah Brian Campbell, sung by Ami Brabson

Homily

That's when I'm gonna stand up
Take my people with me
Together we are going
To a brand new home.

Rev. Egbert Ethelred Brown and Harriet Tubman, the person who the previous song was written about, had very different life stories; yet, they had a similar calling. Each of them felt called to freedom. Harriet's call was a basic and profound freedom of personhood, and Rev. Brown's a freedom of religion. Rev. Brown was born in Falmouth, Jamaica, West Indies, in 1875. He described himself as a child who was inquisitive and instinctually truthful.

These two traits led him to have a theological epiphany about the faith of his parents and the faith of his heart. When he was at church one Sunday he realized when he was reciting a congregational creed, that he was not a Trinitarian, someone who believes that Jesus, God, and the Holy spirit are three separate manifestations of the divine, yet somehow still just one God. He knew that he was Unitarian.

He was just a choir boy. It was Easter morning. In his writings he described it as a strike to his soul to have to declare something that seemed so "impossible a proposition" that three could also be one."

For Brown this clarity of conviction happened on Easter morning during a Sunday service.

I can remember for myself that clarity of conviction happening in so many different places in so many different times in my life. Isn't that how life is? You go along doing the things that you always do and then BOOM!

You realize that what you have always done no longer serves you. It has been rubbing at you for a while and you have noticed but it wasn't so bad and then it can no longer be ignored. That is how I imagine young Ethelred felt that day as the sun streamed through the stained glass windows. Three just can't be one. Three is three. That is how I am feeling lately in these pandemics, we can't just talk about loving each other, we can't just talk about beloved community, we have to act. We have to do it.

That's what Rev. Ethelred Brown did. He just did it.

What did he do? He became a Unitarian Minister. Just like that. It was easy. ~
I wish that was the story.

I wish that I could tell you that he just got his call at 32. Got on a ship. Went to Meadville. Finished school, got ordained, became a Unitarian minister, and got called to a church. Wouldn't that be great? That's just not how it happened. No, that's not how things happened to people like Reverend Ethelred Brown. People who didn't fit the mold of what Unitarians were supposed to be in 1912.

Ethelred Brown had a choice to make, as we all have choices to make. He knew he needed to be a minister.

He had two choices. One was to take the easy road and become an African Methodist Episcopal minister; he had already received acceptance from that denomination, or he could become the Unitarian minister. He knew that he was a Unitarian. Theologically, Unitarianism was the religion that fit what he believed and what he wanted to spread the message of to others. Except there was only one issue when he tried to become a Unitarian minister: When he wrote to inquire about becoming a Unitarian minister, he was ultimately told by the president at Meadville Theological Seminary that white congregations would only accept white ministers. Why do you think that the Meadville President, President Southworth would tell him this? The year was 1907. Maybe he was being benevolent and trying to be honest by telling Ethelred the truth, Unitarianism in America wasn't ready for a black minister. However, I believe that even if Southworth had the best intentions at heart, he was complicit in perpetuating a barrier to keep black people out of what was falsely being portrayed as a faith for white people. So what was he to do? What would you do?

He did what any inquisitive and instinctively truthful boy would do: he continued the conversation for a year until he was invited to attend Meadville in a special two-year program.

He then secured a job in America and set sail for Pennsylvania; however, he didn't make it to Meadville because his immigration status was deemed inadequate, and he was deported back to Montego Bay and not allowed to re-enter the country for one year.

In that time, Brown established a lay ministry, sharpening his tools of ministry until he could return to Meadville.

When the date arrived for him to start his trek to Meadville again, he was met with another surprise. Have you ever had a family member who loves you and has your best interest at heart? You know the one? The one who knows what's better for you than you know yourself?

Well, yeah. He did, too.

You see, Brown's dad was supposed to be paying for his ticket to get to Meadville, but Brown's employer convinced his father that staying in Jamaica was in Brown's best interest. The employer was even going to give Brown a raise. So his father withdrew the fare and could not be convinced otherwise. Not to be discouraged, Brown saved that money that he earned in his raise and finally sailed away to Meadville a year later.

By his report, the time he spent at Meadville was pleasant and filled with genuine camaraderie. My question is: how? When I read Rev Brown's report of his correspondence with Meadville and how there was no congregation for him to serve because he was Black, I was left wondering how students, faculty, and staff could be in genuine relationship with him without confronting their complicity in the oppression he faced.

I wondered if any of us can be in a genuine relationship until we start to confront and do the work to dismantle these thoughts and habits. Author Adrienne Maree Brown states that, "Where we are born into privilege, we are charged with dismantling any myth of supremacy. Where we are born into struggle, we are charged with claiming our dignity, joy, and liberation." Rev. Brown seemed to have claimed that joy, dignity and liberation at Meadville.

After his ordination at Meadville in 1912, he returned to Jamaica. Rev. Brown reports he unfurled the flag of Unitarianism after preaching at Montego Bay Town Hall.

In 1914, he moved to Kingston to start a Unitarian congregation for Jamaicans, but the American Unitarian Association unceremoniously withdrew funding one year later. It appeared that things were going well for Rev. Brown and others responsible for the church; however, the AUA disagreed. Brown went and spoke to the AUA and was able to convince them to re-fund the effort. They again withdrew funding the next year. An English Unitarian women's group tried to keep the church in operation, but without the funding from the AUA, the church could not be sustained and it closed. Unfortunately, a Unitarian, Universalist or Unitarian Universalist congregation has never thrived in Jamaica.

Of course, Rev. Brown didn't allow his calling to be shuttered when his church in Kingston was closed. He decided to take his family to America to continue to pursue his call.

At this point Rev. Brown understood that the American Unitarian Association wasn't investing in black churches and wondered if he should start an independent Unitarian church in Harlem? It was 1920 and he had thirteen years between the start of his correspondence with Meadville and the troubled relationship that he had with the AUA to know that American Unitarianism wasn't invested in Black Unitarians; the question became clear to him. Was it time to form a separate Independent Black Unitarian Church? This was the first time that this question was asked and answered, yet it would not be the last.

Rev. Brown asked this question in 1920. Black Unitarian Universalists involved in the Black Empowerment Controversy asked this question in the 1960's. Black Unitarian Universalists asked this question repeatedly in the 1990's and 2000's. Most recently it was asked in 2017 when the UUA's hiring practices were questioned for harboring white

supremacist ideology when an otherwise qualified southern BIPOC candidate was deemed not “the right fit for upper level UUA management”. She was passed over for a white man who didn’t even live in the region to be served.

This is a question that BIPOC Unitarians have been asking for 100 years! My question is, when will our congregations and association live into our principles and practice beloved community so that our BIPOC people don’t feel like the only space we have in Unitarian Universalism is outside of the association?

Brown and nine other people answered the question of forming an independent Unitarian Church with a resounding yes. Yes. Harlem Community Church was formed.

The church had a white friend, Rev John Haynes Holmes of the Community Church of NY. Today we would say that Rev. Holmes was on the side of love.

Rev. Brown’s church lasted for three decades. His church eventually became an affiliated Unitarian church. He often had to work two jobs to take care of his family and preach at his church every other week. According to Brown, when the AUA took interest in the congregation, it only took interest to discourage its existence. Yet Brown persevered. Eventually, the administration at the AUA changed and the Rev. Ethelred Brown was paid a small pension.

This pension cannot repay what happened during the years of strife that the association caused, but it did acknowledge his position as a Unitarian Minister. The success of his congregation came at a considerable loss for Rev. Brown’s family, for Harlem, and for Unitarian Universalism.

Because in 1920 the American Unitarian Association could only visualize community as a space for people who were more alike than different, they closed the doors to a wider, more encompassing beloved community.

Imagine for a second if Ethelred Brown had been welcomed to Meadville with the first letter? Our beloved community could only be even more blessed by the people of Jamaica.

Imagine if Ethelred had come to Harlem and his dream of building a congregation in Harlem was supported right from the beginning! Right now, we could have a thriving beloved community in Harlem that had been part of that community for 100 years.

We need to start thinking of Beloved Community as the community that lives within us and outside of us.

Expand our idea of who “we” is.

If we don’t, we will surely fail.

In last week’s service, three of our members invited us into their lived experiences in the world and in Unitarian Universalism, and told us why we need to build a Beloved Community. They told us how the 8th Principle would help us as a congregation toward that goal. Now, we have learned a little of our history. The history of our Unitarian faith. The history of what happens when we don’t widen the circle. The history of who we leave out, and who we leave ourselves separated from for generations.

The story of Rev Ethelred Brown is a complicated story in the history of Unitarianism. It's a story of striving, a story of determination, a story of resilience.

The story of Rev Ethelred Brown is, ultimately, a story of how hard it is to envision, build, and sustain a Beloved Community. It is a story of relationship: the relationships he had in Jamaica, the relationships the American Unitarian Association, which would be today's Unitarian Universalist Association had with him, and the beautiful Beloved Community that he built with his churches in Jamaica and Harlem, the relationships he had with his family.

The story of Ethelred Brown is the story of Unitarianism when white supremacy is allowed to rule unfettered, and yet, the story of Ethelred Brown is a personal story of resilience in the face of systemic oppression

The story of Ethelred Brown is also a cautionary tale. It reminds us to pledge ourselves to truly work to build the present that we need to live into now. Adrienne Marie Brown reminds us that, "We must be clear that caring for each other is a fundamental piece of any future we will build. This doesn't displace struggle, critique, or conflict, but rather deepens and softens these necessary human experiences, makes them part of belonging instead of a precursor to exile." We are each other's beloved community, in the difficult and the easy. It starts and it ends with us, all of us.

Reflection Question - Will you reflect with me ... ? Who comes to mind when we say "our beloved community" here at UUCM? Who is left out?

Hymn - I'm On My Way, Hymn 116

Benediction

Let us be on our way to building the Beloved Community for all who would be Unitarian Universalist. Let us be reminded of the persistence of Ethelred Brown when we falter in this journey, and let us not only atone for, but learn to avoid the mistakes of our ancestors, and build a truly beloved community for tomorrow today. Amen. May it be so. Let's make it happen.

Song: "Our Worship Has Ended, Let our Service Begin"

Sign-Off - Rev. Scott and Rev. Anya

Join us right after this for Connection Cafe

And register your children for our innovative Religious Education programs, and

Until we meet again,

Virtually or otherwise,

You are in our hearts.