**The Unitarian Church of Montreal**

**Sunday Service: June 14, 2020**

***Jubilant Spirituals***

**with special guest Floydd Ricketts**

**Chalice Lighting: Now Is the Time**

Rev. Diane Rollert, Camellia Jahanshai, Shoshanna Green

Rev. Diane: My name is Rev. Diane Rollert, and I serve the Unitarian Church of Montreal. With me are Shoshanna Green and Camellia Jahanshai. Welcome to our service for June 14, 2020. We are so pleased to welcome you and our special guests Floydd Ricketts and his wife Alexandra Asher as they share with us the tradition of the African American spiritual and its call to freedom, resistance, and hope in the face of slavery and oppression.

We offer these words for our chalice lighting today, written by Rev. Qiyamah Rahman. In 1999, she became the first African American woman to hold the position of district executive for the Unitarian Universalist Association in the United States. Over the years, she has served several UU congregations, most recently in Atlanta, Georgia, as well as having served as the director of contextual ministry at Meadville Lombard Theological School.

Camellia: Now is the time. Now is the time to call on the memories of the ancestors who thought they could not walk another step toward freedom—and yet they did.

Shoshanna: It is that time and place to call on the memories of the ancestors who, when the darkness of their lives threatened to take away the hope and light, reached a little deeper and prayed yet another prayer.

Rev. Diane: It is that time and place to remember those who came through the long night to witness another sunrise.

Camellia: It is that time and place to remember the oceans of tears shed to deliver us to this time, to remember the bent knees and bowed backs, to remember the fervent voices asking, begging, and beseeching for loved ones sold off.

Shoshanna: Time to remember their laughter and joy, though they had far less, and little reason for optimism, yet they stayed on the path toward a better day.

Rev. Diane: Time to hold to the steadfast hands and hearts and prayers of the ancestors that have brought us this far.

Camellia: Time to make them proud and show them, and ourselves, what we are made of.

Shoshanna: Time to show them that their prayers and sacrifices and lives were not in vain and did not go unnoticed, nor have they been forgotten.

Rev. Diane: Did you not know that this day would come? Did you not know that we would have to change places? Did you not know that just as our ancestors were delivered that you would also be delivered?

Camellia: Have you not seen the greatness and power of the Creative Energy in the Universe called God that moves and has its being through human agency?

Shoshanna: Have you not seen God in your neighbours’ faces? in the homeless? in the battered woman? the trafficked child? the undocumented worker? the dispossessed? It is that time and that place to know that it is our turn, that we must leave a legacy for our children—and all the children.

Rev. Diane: It is that time and that place. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for! For that, let us be eternally grateful.

Amen and blessed be.

**Gathering Music**

“Great Day”

Floydd Ricketts, Alexandra Asher, Eleuthera Diconca-Lippert, and Sandra Hunt

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UBeIxOWMoo>

**Time for All Ages**

Katherine Childs

Good morning. My name is Katherine Childs, and I serve the Unitarian Church of Montreal as our director of Religious Exploration. And this morning I am very excited to tell you a story.

Our story today is about a boy named Nicholas, and on rainy days when it's not nice enough to go for a walk, Nicholas's grandmother goes into the living room after lunch. Sometimes she reads; sometimes she does the crossword puzzle, but Nicholas's favorite is when she opens up the big cabinet and plays some of her records. Nicholas loves the way they sound coming from the record player, and he loves those afternoons because he and his grandmother sit and talk.

Today she's listening to a song that Nicholas is sure he's heard before. Her eyes are closed, and Nicolas is quiet and slow as he climbs up onto the couch with her. “Will you tell me the story of this song?” he asks.

His grandmother sighs. “This song was written more than seventy years ago,” she says, “but the story of the song goes back more than 400 years.” Nicholas thinks for a moment and starts counting backwards. Four hundred years ago is the 1600s. And this song certainly doesn't sound like it was written by a knight in shining armour.

“Four hundred years ago is when the first African people were enslaved and brought to North America,” Nicholas's grandmother says.

Nicholas nods. He knows a little bit about slavery. “Slavery means when you have to work for someone else for no pay.”

His grandmother nods. “Yes, that's true,” she says. “But what was worse was that, for more than 200 years, it was allowed by the law for white people to own the African people that they had enslaved and also to own any children that were born into the families of enslaved people. Slavery was a terrible, terrible thing,” Nicholas's grandmother says, “and people who were enslaved were treated very badly. They were not allowed to learn to read or write in English, and they were not allowed to speak their native languages. They were not allowed to practice their religions or their culture. But they were introduced to stories from the Bible, and they started to use the names, places, and images from Christian stories, combined with the rhythms of their African culture, to make a new kind of music, one that we call *spiritual songs,* or just *spirituals*.” Nicholas nods again.

“Spirituals were a way for enslaved people to communicate with each other. While it may have sounded to white people like they were just singing stories from the Bible, enslaved people used those stories to express the pain and sorrow of slavery, especially the pain of being separated from your family, but they also used those songs to spread the message that it was possible to escape from slavery and to imagine a better life in the future.”

“So, what does that have to do with the song that we just listened to?” asks Nicholas.

His grandmother hums a little bit of the song again. [*Hums a line from “**We Shall Overcome.”*] “The song we just listened to was written at a time when many people were protesting for their rights,” his grandmother says. “It was sung by factory workers who were on strike for better working conditions, but it was based on a song written by a man who grew up in part of the United States where slavery was allowed, and whose father was enslaved. His name was Charles Tindley, and he wrote a song called ‘I’ll Overcome Some Day.’ By the time the song was written, slavery was technically illegal, but Black people were still being treated very badly, and laws were still being written in ways that meant that white people could do things that Black people couldn't. This song isn't exactly a traditional spiritual song, but like spiritual songs, it uses the stories of the Bible to imagine a better world. And for his Black congregation who would have sung the song, it definitely would have reminded them of the better world they were hoping for, where they could be treated equally.”

Nicholas thought about that. He and his grandmother sat in the quiet for a long time. “Can we listen to it again?” Nicholas asks.

His grandmother lifts the needle on the record player and the song begins again.

We shall overcome.

We shall overcome.

We shall overcome some day.

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe

That we shall overcome some day.

Nicholas and his grandmother sit and listen to the song, all the way through. Nicholas turns to his grandmother and asks, “You said people sang this song when they were protesting for their rights. Is that like what's happening now?”

Now it's his grandmother's turn to nod again. “Yes,” she says. “Sixty years ago, when I was your age, Black people got fed up with asking nicely for their rights to be respected, for unfair laws to be overturned, and for Black people to have the same rights as white people, just like right now, so lots of people of all skin colours came together and protested, rioted, to show the government that what they were doing was wrong and needed to be changed. Just like right now. And just like the spirituals did for enslaved people, this song made them feel like they were united and like they were working together towards a better future.”

“But if people were protesting back then for Black people to be treated the same, why do we still have to say ‘Black lives matter’?” Nicholas asks.

His grandmother pauses for a moment. “Some things were changed, but the racism underneath the laws and decisions and the policies which go all the way back, 400 years, wasn't solved by people singing ‘We Shall Overcome.’ There's still work we have to do now. Two hundred years ago, enslaved people weren't fighting just for things to be a little bit better than they were, and right now, people are protesting not so that things can only be a little bit better than they are now. The people who created the spiritual songs, and the people who are out there protesting right now, are not just fighting for Black lives to matter. They're fighting for a world that celebrates Black joy.”

“I wonder what they're singing out there right now?” Nicholas wondered.

“I don't know,” said his grandmother, “but I can't wait to sing it along with them.”

**Conversation, Part 1**

Floydd Ricketts and Rev. Diane Rollert

Rev. Diane: This is Reverend Diane Rollert, and I'm so pleased to introduce Floydd Ricketts, director of Ensemble Noir, and professor and expert in the African American spiritual. This is part one of our conversation.

You said the other day—only yesterday—that you were grateful for this theme. I have to say, when we said—you know, we looked at the calendar like, oh, the theme of the month is Joy. Oh, great: coronavirus; and oh, great: George Floyd murder; oh, my gosh—joy? Nobody feels any joy right now.

Floydd: It feels like that, yeah.

Rev. Diane: But you said that you’re grateful for the theme.

Floydd: Yeah, you know, I am grateful for that theme. Because right now, with everything that is happening: the economy, with COVID-19 and the health situation, with the George Floyd protests that are happening throughout the world, the Black Lives Matter protests and the Indigenous protests and . . . you know, the global situation right now feels a little a little bleak. But there are things, there are silver linings.

You know, I can't speak for everyone. I don't know. My personal situation is completely different than the next person's, but, you know, I think of COVID-19—man, it has allowed me to slow down a little bit, that I didn't even realize that I needed. I see more of my son. My son is going to be four years old next month. These are the times that I really treasure. I'm really treasuring this time, and getting to know him, and him getting to know me better and having time to play.

You know, working as an artist, as a musician, you often find that you are not home in those evening hours. So that's one thing, you know. And even something like getting to eat meals together, getting to prepare meals together, the opportunity to learn new things—you can always learn new things, but the time, that’s sometimes the challenge. Like, I've been feeling for some time that my piano skills have been lagging a little bit behind, and now I'm having time to practice every day, you know, and that's pretty cool.

And, you know, the protests that are happening globally, the protests are what is bringing me joy. Look at these protest lines, and you look at the people that are out there on the streets and the people that you see on *Facebook* who are talking about how they feel. It's not just Black people. It’s not just Black people; it's people of every hue. And most importantly, there are white people in the in the mix as well, who are adding their voice to the conversation, saying, “We will not stand for this.” And that brings me joy because now it's no longer a Black problem. It is a human problem. A human problem we can fix all together. A Black problem, that is for the Black community to address; that's their problem. But a human problem is something that we can do all together, so I find joy in that.

The economy: that's a whole other thing. I am grateful to live in this country where the government, love them or not, is trying their very best to hold its citizens close.

There's just so much you can look at and say, hey, the situation is not great, but man, look at these beautiful things that are happening. To say nothing of the environment! That seems to be, you know, slowly healing itself. That is a lot to be thankful for; that is a lot to find joy in, and I hope that when we come out of this, that we don't go back to normal, but that we find a new normal that takes the best of what was and leaves the worst of it behind.

Rev. Diane: In this time, as you're watching what's going on in the world, is there a particular spiritual that keeps coming into your mind?

Floydd: Yeah, you know, it's—the spiritual is “My Lord, What a Morning.” And it's not a spiritual that had been, you know, on my favourites list for a long time. But when you listen to those lyrics talking about, you know, the people getting up and rising to the call: it's a song of action, and it resonates with me so much right now because there's so much to be active about. “My Lord, What a Morning”: it's an oldie, it's a favourite, and when you hear the words to that spiritual you’ll understand what I mean. It just it completely represents what our world is in the midst of right now.

**Song**

“My Lord, What a Mornin’”

Floydd Ricketts, Alexandra Asher, Eleuthera Diconca-Lippert, and Sandra Hunt

Floydd: You know, it's funny; the title of the song has at times been erroneously printed “My Lord, What a Mourning”—as in, like, after a loss. And I think that sometimes we have in mind that it's that type of mood. But when I think about this song, and I look at the lyrics, and I think about the nations rising, and “the stars begin to fall”—“the stars begin to fall,” for me, is things falling into place, so if we can sort of bring it that way, I wonder what energy we’ll bring to it?

Alexandra: Like, awe of the morning, and of what we’re capable of doing.

Floydd: All right. Let's do it.

Eleuthera: Sounds great.

Alexandra: Wake the nations.

Floydd: Waking the nations.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHcGQRC6Ey0>

**Share the Plate**

Caite Clark

Good morning, everybody! Thanks for joining us for virtual worship this morning. My name is Caite Clark; my pronouns are *she*/*her*, and I am a Religious Explorations teacher at the Unitarian Church of Montreal.

This month for Share the Plate, we are donating to the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal. The Native Friendship Centre is an important resource for Indigenous people here on Tiohtià:ke because it helps connect them to vital community services and gives a sense of kinship in an urban centre.

While we’re here, I'd like to acknowledge that this has been a difficult start to June. There are a lot of troubling things going on in the news, and a lot of people are feeling at risk. When we're in a position of privilege, one of the things that we can do to help is to donate. If you are in the position to give this month, I encourage you to check out local organizations in Montreal that support marginalized communities, such as the Native Friendship Centre. Any gift is welcome.

**Conversation, Part 2**

Floydd Ricketts and Rev. Diane Rollert

Floydd: The only way that you get through something like this, and that we move forward, is to start a conversation. To have that conversation and find your mutual resolution.

Rev. Diane: And I think also, not to be afraid to hear people's anger.

Floydd: Yes! I agree, because people are angry and people have been angry. You know, for so long I didn't really have any outward feelings about this. I sort of just thought, “Well, you know, it's really too bad that this is happening.” It felt like just a completely evil thing to have happened to someone. Nine minutes is a long mistake to make. It can't have been a mistake. Especially when you had people around him saying, “Get off of him!” and him saying, “Please get off of me. I cannot breathe.”

But it wasn't until—you have these choral concerts that are happening online, where sixteen people in different—it kind of looks like a Brady Bunch of people, all over, making music in their homes. I'm in the process of creating one of those myself for my ensemble. My partner Alexandra was singing her part in it, and we were doing a recording of “Precious Lord,” a really famous early gospel piece. The whole movement didn't really get to me until I heard Alexandra sing that song.

And I thought about my own experience as a Black person, and I thought about my son and what his experience will be. In Toronto, years ago, I was driving with Alexandra. We were having a passionate discussion, so our hands were waving. And I drove next to a police cruiser, and I didn't really look over because you're sort of, like, trained as you know as a Black person not to really make eye contact with police. Just keep your eyes ahead of you, and you'll be fine. And I remember, like, looking just slightly over and seeing that there were the police sort of looking back into our vehicle. I thought to myself, I think that this is going to be the one where I get pulled over. And, of course, a few minutes later there we are, and we're pulled over. And you know the police officer asked me for my identification. Not Alexandra, though, just me. It was angering, but I will say that Alexandra was way more incensed about it than I was. Because I think that you know, as a Black man, you're sort of conditioned to know that at some point this is probably going to happen to you.

It changed me. I saw the police then differently. And Alexandra certainly saw a completely new side of the police system that is there to serve and protect; it was not doing that but instead was intimidating.

The frustrating part about it is that as a Black person, you don't know which is which. You don't know who is out there to serve and protect, and who's out there to intimidate. And I think that not having the privilege of driving down the street, and having a completely harmless conversation turn into a police debate, it's a hard pill to swallow.

So, I really hope that this movement that's happening right now sustains. There's always going to be something else that's going to grab our attention. But I hope that we will continue to act, to invite change that will benefit everyone. Like I said, it’s not just a Black problem; it's a human problem, and if we can all find a way to move forward together, then that is a benefit to all of us.

I really hope that this movement continues to push people to think about what is happening in the world, what has been happening in the world, what could be different. And to really stop and think about privilege, about what it means to have privilege. You know, privilege is not a bad thing. It's a fact. You have privilege because of the colour of your skin. I have privilege, to be honest, because I'm a man, and that is a fact. It's not anything that either of us are loving, you know. We don't love that we have this privilege, and we would—I would—rather see a world where we are all equal, we are all thought of as not gendered, not our ethnicity, but just humans—human beings who are all breathing the same air. Who all have the same blood flowing within us. That's, you know, that's where I'm hoping that we get to.

Rev. Diane: There's this thing that a lot of white people will do, which is to say, you know, “Oh, I don't see colour! We're all equal.” But then they’re not seeing all the inequality and all of the injustice, and how they— I—we are perpetuating those injustices. So, the challenge we have is that before we can come to that point of not needing to see difference, we have to see difference. We have to recognize difference, and we have to understand how the very simple fact of our skin does give us privilege, in the same way that the very fact that you're a man gives you privilege. We're living through a time where people are really saying, “Wake up and look at how different people in our society are treated! You have to give up some of that power.” How do you convince people like that that—well, actually, life will be better for all of us! You won't hate yourself so much!

Floydd: And that's the question, and I think that that is why this is such a universal and long-lived struggle, is because there's no way to answer that. You know, like there's no way to answer. How do you convince someone who is so radically misogynistic, bigoted, to not be that way, to see a different side? When they believe that their line of thinking, their perspective, their point of view is ultimate? How do you compete with that type of narcissism? I do not know. I do not know. I think that part of the answer has to be people who are willing to have discussions and who are willing to see those differences and celebrate those differences, talking to those people, those narcissists and bigots and misogynists, talking to them and continually bombarding them—not to use a militant word, but bombarding them with new thoughts, with new ideas, with love. What we need to move forward is some empathy.

Rev. Diane: Maybe we are witnessing—you know, seeing people out there demonstrating—maybe we are witnessing a time of empathy.

Floydd: Yeah, I think so. I look around and I think it has to be.

You know, when I'm talking about the spiritual, a big part of what I do in my research is to just take this music that is born of slavery. And people will ask, who has the right to perform this music? And I think, well, you know, it was the music of enslaved people, and it has that history, but there's so much more to that genre than just the fact that it was slave music. There’s so much more to it. There's all the things that I mentioned before about, you know, being songs of struggle and resilience and joy and pain. These are all universal feelings, feelings that we all have had at some point or another, so it's a very empathetic genre of music. If you can push yourself into the mindset of what it would be like to be suffering for as long as the enslaved people did, then it not only helps you as a singer, but also it helps you to be more human, to find, you know, that empathetic side of the story. I wasn't a slave; my parents weren’t slaves; my grandparents weren’t slaves—but I can empathize; I can understand, you know, what that would have been like. And I think that the more empathy that we can get into all facets of life, it's just—it's just going to help.

**Song**

“Little David, Play on Your Harp”

Floydd Ricketts, Alexandra Asher, Eleuthera Diconca-Lippert, and Sandra Hunt

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HDBhlaZfms>

**Conversation, Part 3**

Floydd Ricketts and Rev. Diane Rollert

Rev. Diane: One other question: I was thinking, that, really, crying out to God—and then just wondering for you, where that sits with you—in terms of God and the spiritual.

Floydd: Yeah, I mean, I—I have. It's a great question. I mean, God is such an important part of my life; you know, God is the one that created us. God is the one that keeps us close to him, and when we are in the most trying times in our lives, God is the one that we reach out to. And the spiritual is all about that relationship—trying to figure out how to get through, how to move on. It’s, um . . . He's there for us, you know. Like, he wants to be there for us; he wants us to ask him for help; he wants to give us the help that we need.

This music has been around for so long, and I think that it was what got a lot of people

. . . . It saved so many people. Ultimately, you know, God answers. It's hard because we're still, you know, fighting a long, long fight. But God is there. God is trying to get us through. God is trying to open our eyes to all the different perspectives that lie out there, to all the different voices. It's a tough question to answer, but I do believe that God was there when the spirituals were created, and he stays with us even now.

Rev. Diane: I'm glad I asked you that question.

Floydd: Yeah, it’s a tough one. I haven’t been asked that question before, but it's— I’m going to think more on that. That's a really meaningful question. I thank you for that question.

Rev. Diane: It is at the centre, and it's hard because if you believe in a God who acts in the world, then why are we suffering in this way?

Floydd: Yeah.

Rev. Diane: You know, it's like God has a lot to answer for. And I mean, I don't know if I see God in that way. I don't know if I see God as, you know, a puppet-master. I don't know if I accept that. I think, for me, I see God more sitting and crying with us through these times. There's something that holds us—that's there—but I find it hard to believe that God would say, “These people are going to suffer. This person is going to suffer; this person isn't going to suffer.”

Floydd: I agree. Like I don't really think that, you know, God is up there just making every decision for us in life. I think that God has given us the power of free will and free thought and free expression and expects us to use those tools that he that he gave us, just as we use breath, you know, just as we use emotion, just as we use the muscles in our body. So, these are all things that have to be exercised and have to be used with conscience. I don't think of God as this huge man in the sky who is pulling strings, as you say. I think that there is God in all of us. You know, we all have a little bit of God in us. We are in control. He's given us the gift of being able to make decisions for ourselves. He's taught us what is right and what is wrong. Just as we teach our children what is right and what is wrong. And then our children, eventually, have to go out into the world and make good on those lessons.

**Music for Meditation**

“Deep River”

Alexandra Asher and Sandra Hunt (piano)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jLsT7gCM4c>

**Closing Song**

“A Little Talk wid Jesus Makes It Right”

Floydd Ricketts, Alexandra Asher, Eleuthera Diconca-Lippert, and Sandra Hunt

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDgXjGu_ZXU>

**Closing Words: Conversation, Part 4**

Floydd Ricketts and Rev. Diane Rollert

Rev. Diane: As you think about your son, growing up in this time. Is there anything that you would want to tell him right now?

Floydd: I think that what I would want to tell my son right now is that this is a time of change, and we are fortunate to be alive in this time of change. Because I think that there are so many good and bad things that are happening in the world right now, but I think—I really believe—that the good outweighs the bad. He doesn't understand racism as of yet. He's starting to understand race, you know. He says, “Dadda, you're brown. Mama, you're white,” and now he says, “I’m golden.” I think that that's perfect because he sees that he's not either of us: He is his own being; he’s his own person. so as he starts to experience the world differently and as he gets to a time where he has to experience racism—as we all do. We all at some point will have to encounter this. You cannot . . . There's no ostriching that will get you out of that situation. It's going to be around you. So, for him, I just hope that all that’s happening right now will soften what the future has in store.