

“Signs of Life” by Mike Ludwick

(an exploration delivered at the 1/18/16 Sundown Celebration)

We have in our sanctuary a sign that reads “Black Lives Matter.” At one time, however, there were three signs posted: “Standing on the Side of Love,” “All is Love is Equal,” and “Black Lives Matter.” I agree with all three sentiments and, personally, the signs did not arrest my sensibilities, but that’s me.

Our lead minister, Rev. Wik, gave an impassioned sermon regarding his decision to keep the “Black Lives Matter” sign up after taking the other two down, eliciting a standing ovation from many at the 11:15 service on January 3. He expanded his explanation in a bulletin article and in a blog post.

He indicated that while he can understand why some people would prefer that the sanctuary be a “place of peace” and “a refuge from all that is raging in the world,” he believes our “comfortable” congregation needs to be “afflicted” by the sign as a

reminder of the “many whom racism afflicts each and every minute of every day with no possibility of sanctuary or respite.”

I admire his heartfelt sentiment. I also feel for those who want to enjoy some “visual sanctuary” for an hour a week. As Rev. Wik noted in a blogpost, our congregation whole-heartedly supports racial justice and has over many years. So do we really need the sign to “afflict” us weekly to remind us to support racial justice? I’m not sure we do. We didn’t have such a sign up during the many years we performed the courageous work of rejecting segregation and supporting integration. Rev. Wik implied that by having the sign up we are choosing to not close our eyes and hearts to racism, but if the sign came down tomorrow would our eyes and hearts close? I don’t think so.

Apparently, some folks have trouble with the stark black and yellow colors on the sign. Perhaps an image like this one that Rev.



Wik once used on his blog would be preferable to those people. This graphic also has the benefit of incorporating the heart from the Unitarian Universalist Association's "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign to put our own faithful twist on the slogan.

For those who just don't like signs in the sanctuary, I truly sympathize. I don't necessarily like everything in the sanctuary or everything that happens in the sanctuary, but I like the vast majority of it and it feeds my soul. If the sign troubles you, I hope you can find a way to put aside your dislike of it, focus on what you do like, and rather than being upset, go out and continue to do the racial justice work or whatever social justice work that feeds your spirit where it can have an even greater impact: outside the sanctuary.

Speaking of "outside the sanctuary," Rev. Wik noted in his blogpost that someone noted to him that the sign is "not on the outside where we can walk past it, but in the inside, with us, where we have to

engage with it.” Another interpretation of having the sign inside could be that we are only talking to ourselves. It’s sort of like hanging a sign for a political candidate up in your house where only you and the people agree with you can see it. When the Rev. Walter Royal Jones of this congregation wanted to express his rage at the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, did he drape this sanctuary in black crepe? Did he drape the inside of the building? No, he draped the outside.

Currently we have a sign hanging outside the building in support of marriage equality. I have heard some people say that when they saw the sign, it moved them to visit us because they knew that because of the sign, they would be welcome here. In the same way, if we want to be more welcoming to African-Americans and other kindred spirits and “have a lasting influence on local, national and global programs that promote equity and end oppression” as we say we do in our mission, I’m

thinking a sign is needed outside the building to indicate that there are “signs of life” inside.

Of course, since we thrive on a “both/and” mentality here, we could have a sign inside and out. And actually I would feel even better about the sign inside, knowing that we are proclaiming our message to the world on the outside. It would then be not just about “us” in the sanctuary, but about all of “us,” inside and out.

When all is said and done, sign or no sign, sign inside or outside or both, I think the most important thing is that we do the best we can in our daily lives to resist racism in all its forms and support those for whom sanctuary is still just a dream, remaining committed to what a person of color described to Rev. Wik as the “hard uncomfortable work that must be done for us all to be free.”

Blessed be.