DO ALL LIVES MATTER?
A Sermon by Rev. Wayne Arnason and Rev. Kathleen Rolenz
January 4, 2015  West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church, Rocky River OH

First Reading:
The American Declaration of Independence is one of the most famous documents of moral and legal principle in human history. Its purpose when it was published was similar to a press release today. From the first paragraph, it is an announcement of intention to dissolve the political bands which have connected to American colonies to Great Britain, justified by a list of the beliefs and grievances which impel this separation. What follows after that first paragraph are the famous words which came to justify a revolution not just in one country, but a revolution in human values around the world:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. —That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, —That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

SERMON – PART 1  When the most famous Unitarian in the history of the world wrote the words for which he most is remembered, he thought he was stating a widely understood theological truth that supported his political manifesto. Legal scholar Pauline Maier has argued that for Thomas Jefferson “the assertion that men were ‘created’ or ‘born’ equal meant that all men were originally free of subjection, and so were all on the same level, because nobody had a title from God or nature to rule others.” From this justification for a declaration of independence, subsequent generations have parsed, promoted, and proclaimed that the true meaning of this phrase is that all human beings are inherently equal before anyone who has power, regardless of their race, gender, social class, or intellectual endowments.

When Rev. Kathleen and I decided that we would devote this year of preaching to examining commonly held “dangerous beliefs” we knew that the statement “all men are created equal” would have to be our focus for one month of services. It has so obviously been a “dangerous belief” when used in its broadest meaning to challenge those who have power to use their power justly and fairly or else relinquish it. It is also a dangerous belief if we take its meaning and challenge ourselves and our society to live as if it were true. What would our world or our country look like if we truly lived out a belief in the radical equality of all people?

The founders of the American democracy had no answer to that question. The contradictions that are widely known between the social beliefs and practices of all the founders, and of Jefferson in particular, are not used to dismiss the truth or the value of the statement, but as a caution against widespread hypocrisy in implementing it. I will only briefly recite the list of Jefferson’s sins, because this is not a sermon about him, but about us. Let us acknowledge, however, that the same Jefferson that wrote that “all men are created equal” owned, and bought, and sold slaves, saw people of color as somehow less than white people, saw women as less than men, saw people who were not Christian as less than Christians, and saw those who did not own property as less than those who did. In his world, the only people that really mattered were white Christian men of property. All the heroic statesmen of the American revolution, whose philosophical and political insights continue to be influential in the shaping of the society in which we live, were also men of their time, raised and educated and conditioned by the socially accepted prejudices of their day, especially those that supported their personal wealth and stature and that reinforced the social institutions upon which that wealth and stature had been built.

Most people do not read past the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, but even within the document itself if you read further down, you find some obvious evidence of those
prejudices that contradict the stated ideals of the second paragraph: the reference to “merciless Indian savages” and their “undistinguished destructiveness” on “our frontiers”. In no way did any belief in human equality before God make any difference in the way the founders viewed the warfare still waged against the original inhabitants of the land that their European grandparents had felt themselves entitled to simply because they were white and Christian. In the scholarly research has been published into how the Declaration of Independence was edited and finalized, it is clear that Jefferson initially had written a paragraph in the list of grievances against the King of England that condemned his government’s support for the slave trade, a paragraph that had to be deleted for lack of support. Yet the possibility that the existing slavery in America in which Jefferson participated might be so immoral that he would consider owning a different house or living a personal life that did not depend on slavery never occurred to him.

So what are we to make of this dangerous belief that “all men are created equal”. Clearly, it is a statement that has a life of its own, apart from whatever Thomas Jefferson might have thought it meant to him or to those who signed the Declaration of Independence. It has become a slogan as well as a theological or political assertion. As a slogan, it was cited over and over again in the 19th century to justify the social and political struggle that tried to bring these words to life and make them mean something real in law and in civil society. It is worth remembering that 99 years of suffering went by between 1776 when the founders affirmed that “all men are created equal” and 1865, when the Congress of the United States passed by two votes the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery in the United States. In the 20th century, the slogan was mocked by very similar social and political movements led by women and people of color who called on the county to go deeper than pro forma equality under the law, and to recognize that in the systems and institutions of our society there was still sexism and racism more hidden and insidious that had not been overthrown by extending the right to vote or by being allowed to ride in the front of the bus. These battles are still being fought fifty years after the civil right movement reached its zenith and forty years after modern feminism emerged.

A slogan is a not a bad thing in a political battle. It can be a rallying cry, a standard to gather around, and a simple summary of the heart of the matter. For those who fought for the 13th amendment, “all men are created equal” was such a slogan. But slogans can also be distractions, since they are only words and can have associations that are not intended. Well-intentioned men of the mid-sixties sixties who were certain that they harbored no prejudice or ill-will against women were amazed to be told that “all men are created equal” did not include women, that “men” is not a word that includes all people, that is unless you think that men’s lives, opinions, and views of the world are the standard by which all lives should be measured and valued.

In Unitarian Universalism, we have tried to work with words that can form simple summaries of beliefs that we hold in common. It’s amazing to me that in a religious community that enjoys debate as much as we do, that the seven slogans we call our principles have survived among us for now thirty years without being substantially changed. I’m not sure why – maybe we decided that they were close enough, and that no set of slogans is ever going to get it right. Maybe we decided it was more important to focus on building community and justice both within and outside our congregations, and that we’d rather devote our time to deeds and not creeds. In that spirit, we’re going to take a break in this sermon to devote our time to the weekly deed that makes all the things we say we believe in and seek to realize possible within the institution of this church, and that is our weekly offering for the work of the church. The ushers will now receive your donations and pledges with gratitude as we similarly receive David Blazer’s gift of music.

Second Reading: Sometimes Good slogans are discredited because it turns out that who said them was more important than what was said. If it turns out that the quote “The earth does not belong to us, but we belong to earth” was never said by Chief Seattle, even though that’s what thousands of printed posters say, should we avoid using the quote? The quote on the wall behind me, allegedly
from the great African American writer and social critic James Baldwin appeared on a sign at one of the protests in December and has circulated on the social media platform Tumblr. We have now seen it at protests in Cleveland in a slightly different form, but we haven’t been able to determine that Baldwin ever wrote it. No matter – this sentence is the second reading for our service today, in the form it has appeared at a protest rally in Cleveland:

“Because I love you, I have to make you conscious of things you do not see”.

Sermon Part 2:

Wayne: We are going through a time right now when short slogans that contain deep truths have become flags planted on a piece of turf that define some territory you want to defend. This fall, as a series of deaths of unarmed black men drew attention to long-standing tensions between police and the Black community, a slogan began to emerge on signs at public protests. It was a simple slogan: “Black Lives Matter”. In the social media world in which we now live, slogans have assumed even more importance than ever before because they can become a hashtag on Twitter and literally by the virtual banner that makes quick response protests possible. In the history of American political slogans, “Black Lives Matter” seemed pretty tame to me when I first saw it on signs. I was encouraged when it seemed to be the predominant message on signs at the Ferguson MO protests, overpowering a smaller number of other messages that were insulting or provocative about the police. As the protests spread and more white people started to show up at them, some well-intentioned white people started to be seen at rallies with a slightly different sign, that said “All Lives Matter”. Who could have a problem with a message like that? Well, it turns out a lot of black people did….for some of the same reasons that many women had doubts about whether “all men are created equal” was really making a statement that included them.

During the weeks after the Ferguson grand jury decision, Kathleen and I were struggling with what kind of leadership we might offer in our church and in the larger community. We used our e-mail communication abilities to send out some pastoral letters that showed an evolution in our thinking and feeling. We hope most of you read those, because time won’t allow me this morning to tell the whole story of the past tumultuous six weeks since the Ferguson grand jury verdict was announced. We began with ambivalent feelings about encouraging you to join in the street protests in response to Ferguson, but when Tamir Rice was killed in our own back yard, Ferguson came to Cleveland. We had to respond! Rev. Rolenz and April Stoltz organized a well attended community forum that was supposed to be a dialogue with police, but where we could understandably not find police participants. Fifteen West Shore members joined us at a March that began at Cudell Park where this child was shot. We asked you to come to a single evening listening session where we could talk about other ways of responding beyond street protests. The most widely suggested action supported separately by three of four small groups of church members that night was that we should hang a temporary banner that told our community that “Black Lives Matter to West Shore.” Our Board President took the lead in making it happen, and the ministers were willing to have the conversations with people in the community and church about six of them so far, about what it means. Over the holidays after two police officers in New York were murdered, we heard about would be a different kind of rally downtown, this one in honor of fallen police officers and in support of police and their families. We wrote to you again. We told you that we now felt it would be appropriate to suspend street protests, and although we did not say it explicitly enough our intention was to suggest until after the funerals of the two officers in New York. We also told you that we felt just as compelled to attend the rally honoring fallen officers as we did to attend the march protesting the death of Tamir Rice. I’m going to ask Kathleen to pick up the story from here.

Kathleen: So Wayne and I did go to the Sea of Blue Rally and stood together at Public Square with about 2,500 others, mostly white citizens who were there holding signs that “Blue Lives Matter,” and “All Lives Matter.” As the crowd started off on its short march to the officers’ memorial, that’s when I saw a group of about 25 persons, mostly young women and men of color, standing on the corner holding up the sign with the quote you just heard.
They were absolutely silent. There was no yelling, no chanting of slogans, just a respectful, watchful silence. Wayne and I, wearing our Standing on the Side of Love t-shirts, stood out in the crowd – two spots of yellow against the sea of blue.

The Blue Lives Matter group was respectful in their behavior as well – they weren’t taunting the youth of color although some deliberately waved their signs to the small gathering.

I was there to support the police officers and their families, yet as I stepped off the curb and moved closer to the small crowd across the street, I felt an incredible tension rising inside. I looked at the sign they were holding again, “Because I love you, I have to make you conscious of things you do not see.” And then, it happened. I got it. All the years of anti-racism work; all the struggle to understand white privilege hit me like a diamond bullet between the eyes. I realized why I was so uncomfortable with this particular group of white people. It’s not that I don’t support police, or the impetus behind the Sea of Blue March. What was missing from the speeches that day was a more introspective and incisive acknowledgement of the ways in which white people and black people have different experiences of the police and one big factor in that experience is race. The speeches at the Sea of Blue were heartfelt and compelling, but in a flash of insight, it was as if I could see the world not from the perspective of my white skin, but from inside the experiences of people of color. I not only saw white privilege, I felt it, viscerally.

Wayne was behind me, walking slowly with the crowd. I looked at him, at the group, at the sign, at the Sea of Blue all around me, and that’s when I made a decision. “Wayne, I can’t walk with you. I’ve got to stand with them,” motioning to the group across the street. Because I was in a bright yellow shirt, my breaking away from the crowd to join the small group of silent protesters must have been noticed by the majority. The walk from the curb to the small crowd felt like it took forever, as I wondered if the white people would jeer me or the people of color would reject me. Neither one happened, of course. So there I stood, with the group holding up the Baldwin quote, as hundreds of people walked by. Wayne and I waved and smiled to each other as he passed by. I stood silent with the small group on the corner until the last marcher from the Sea of Blue passed us. The group I was with then turned and started to walk the same route as the other, large group, again in silence. Unlike other protest marches I’ve joined, this one didn’t feel like a victory march. It felt mournful, like a funeral dirge. When we arrived at the memorial site, I broke away from that group too, looking for Wayne, that one small dot of yellow, amidst the sea of thousands.

Third Reading: from No Name in the Streets by James Baldwin offered by Bobby Withrow

James Baldwin is not a source for our readings at church services all that often. His brilliant writing was often caustic, confrontive, and routinely offensive to those in positions of power. As a gay black intellectual, he stood outside and challenged all the usual cultural assumptions that people wanted to make about him. But journalist Juan Williams has written of him “The proof of a shared humanity across the divides of race, class and more is the testament that the preacher’s son, James Arthur Baldwin, has left us.”

Here is a paragraph from Baldwin’s 1972 book “No Name in the Streets”:

If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected — those, precisely, who need the law's protection most! — and listens to their testimony. Ask any Mexican, any Puerto Rican, any black man, any poor person — ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether or not the country is just, but whether or not it has any love for justice, or any concept of it. It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.

Sermon Part 3:

The irony about this reading is that your ministers haven’t been talking to as many people of color or poor people about the current crisis as we might like, because we’ve been busy talking to white people who want to tell us what they think of our banner! Whenever you find yourself being criticized from all sides of an issue, I’ve always thought that
there might be at least two things going on: The first thing that might be going on is that you haven’t stated your position clearly enough. The second thing might be you’re doing something right, if people on both sides of a polarized debate are in your face. If both of these things are true, we hope that in today’s sermon and the one that Rev. Kathleen will offer in two weeks on Martin Luther King Sunday, that we can offer clarity about the central focus of our public positions about the current crisis in trust among the police and communities of color, and the divisions among white people about how this crisis of trust is understood.

Let me speak first as simply and clearly as possible to what I think should be the focus of our public witness as a church in the current crisis. We live in Cuyahoga County, and we all either work, shop, or live in Cleveland. The Cleveland Police Force is one of our police forces, and for the second time in a decade the federal Department of Justice has described in detail a pattern of excessive use of force that is connected to systemic racism in the operation of our police force. The county sheriff’s office is going to investigate the shooting that happened in a neighborhood where some of our members live. These are our issues, and we need to stay focused on how our public officials handle the recommendations for reform. We can’t do anything directly about Ferguson or New York, but what we do in Cleveland can make a huge difference across the nation. Being on the streets in public protest is an important part of any reform movement. There has never been in the history of this country a movement for reform that would improve the lives of poor, or working class people or people of color that has not been met with resistance from the power structure that controls the economic and political system. Change does not happen without conflict. But change never happens just because of public protest. It happens because of organized power and organized money and that is the effort our church engages in through Greater Cleveland Congregations. So this month, through GCC, I don’t expect to be on the streets personally. Instead I expect this month to be at a table with the new county executive Armond Budish to talk about the role of the sheriff’s office in reform of the justice system. I expect to be at the City Club On Friday with the GCC Board to engage with County Prosecutor McGinty about the reforms in the Justice System that he can implement and has promised to implement. And we at West Shore will be one of three hosts for GCC sponsored teach-ins that will in part present research we have been doing on how other cities that have had consent decrees with the Justice Department have benefitted from the reforms they have implemented. That teach-in will be in this sanctuary on Thursday night January 29 at 7 PM.

Now let me speak first about whether we are in fact doing something right with the public statement that is represented by the banner in front of our building. When I told my sister in Canada that we’d hung this banner, I was shocked but not surprised when she told me when she sees a “Black Lives Matter” sign in news reports on TV she associates it with violence against police and looters. How sad it is that the focus of media and the attention of so many white people is drawn to the actions of a persistent irresponsible few instead of to the issue at hand. The people gathered at our listening session about how the church should respond to this crisis very clearly had a different understanding. They wanted to stand on the side of those whose perception of how racism operates in our society makes us suspicious about whether the justice system operates fairly, especially when it comes to adjudicating excessive use of force by police. By the time we gathered to talk, the specific circumstances of single incidents and demonstrations in Ferguson MO or Cleveland or New York had been accompanied and even overshadowed by the many press reports of other similar incidents of excessive use of force by police over the years that had not received national media attention. The issue for us became whether there is systemic racism in how the justice system operates, all the way from local police forces to the highest levels of the court system to the prison system. The slogan that has come to represent this broad concern is “Black Lives Matter” because it touches on the long standing justifiable belief that is widely held among African Americans that for 350 years and still today, that black lives don’t matter as much within the criminal justice system. The gap in perception about this between African Americans and white people is astonishing. Two thirds of
African Americans believe this to be true compared to a third of white people. Most white people respond positively when they see someone holding a sign at a protest that says “All Lives Matter”. Most of the people who have talked to us negatively about the banner in front of the church have asked us why it doesn’t say “All Lives Matter”. The reason is that “All Lives Matter” says nothing about the issue at hand – which is whether there is systemic racism in the justice system that makes it difficult for any black person or any other person of color be treated the same way that a white person does. Do all lives matter? Of course they do!! Who could argue with that? But holding up a sign or banner that says “All Lives Matter” is the moral equivalent of saying “Why can’t we all just get along?” It’s a deflection from focusing on the issue at hand, and it plays into the hands of those who just wish this issue would go away.

We don’t argue with so many other talking points that are raised as relevant related issues involving our criminal justice system. Do the police have a very difficult job, and do individual police officers and their families need our respect and support. Yes of course!! Are there issues within the black community and family structure that have contributed to the high incidents of gun violence that police have to deal with in neighborhoods of color? Yes, of course! Does ready access to guns make every situation of conflict that the police must address so much more threatening and dangerous? Yes, of course. The interdependent web of issues involved here can all be part of this conversation, until they distract us from the heart of the matter – which is that black lives matter less than white lives in the criminal justice system. If you can’t say “yes of course” to that statement, then I ask you to look at the evidence. It overwhelmingly supports the claim that white people get a better deal for the same crimes as black people, and that officers in excessive force cases are rarely held accountable. To try to stay focused on those issues is a moderate position to take right now. On our left we have found people at the public demonstrations who want to raise all kinds of broader progressive issues, some of which we might agree with, and expand the scope of the public protests - but we’re not comfortable with that. On our right we have people who want to call for unity in support of police, something we could also agree with, if it didn’t seem to minimize the problem that exists – so we’re not comfortable with that. So are we doing something right by leaving that banner up this month while we focus this month why some lives seem to matter more than others in our society? We hope so, and we hope that the conversations that the banner creates continue. We welcome them.

In other sermons over the years that West Shore has explored what it means to have an explicit commitment to being an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and multicultural community as part of its ends, I have said before that part of the price of that commitment is to be viewed by other white people as race traitors. It is not an accusation that anybody who calls the church to complain about the banner explicitly throws at us, but it’s the underlying message. A church in Rocky River doesn’t do this. “Black Lives Matter” is the wrong message. “Black Lives Matters” somehow means that we are saying Black Lives Should Matter More -- more than a policeman’s life, more than my white life. The claim that a statement that “Black Lives Matter” somehow devalues white lives or is reverse racism only makes sense as part of a culture where subtle, even unconscious, white supremacy is still the norm, and anything that challenges that is treason. Let me be clear about what I mean when I use the term white supremacy. This is not rhetoric that accuses anyone who doesn’t like this banner of having attitudes similar to the Ku Klux Klan. White supremacy in our lives is the deeply ingrained unconscious presumption that white lives matter more important in the history of the world than anyone else’s lives.

This is the first time that we have gone quite this public as traitors to white supremacy. It makes me uncomfortable and I’m sure it makes most of you uncomfortable too. We hope you can sit with that discomfort during the month ahead, whatever may happen, see what feelings and thoughts it brings up for you. Do “All Lives Matter”? Of course they do, just as “all men are created equal.” But these are meaningless statements until and unless we go into the particulars of how they are applied to particular groups and situations. The process of reform within the Cleveland Police is going to go on for a long time, and not just while we have a banner hanging in front of the church. It
won’t be the ninety nine years it took to get from “all men are created equal” to the 13th amendment, but it might be five years. We need to keep our eyes on that prize, and five years from now, look back at 2015 and be able to say that this was when our justice system began to change, and among the reasons it did was that there were white people who were not afraid to say that Black Lives Matter