

## **Racism Today**

As you are probably all aware, I have chosen to talk about race and racism this morning. Most of this sermon has to do with facts and figures and how we might create change. Most of what I offer today is information rather than theological reflection. However, I want to be clear from the beginning, this is not a lecture. This is a sermon about how our faith calls us to respond to the scourge of racism today.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith leads us to respond to racism in two ways. Most obviously it calls us to act. Throughout our history, Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists have been prophetic voices for change. We have been on the ground and in the academy struggling for a more just world. True, our history has not been perfect. There were those who failed to join the cause of abolition. There were even those who agreed to slavery as an economic and social necessity in the United States. But, those historical embarrassments do not erase a long tradition of acting against injustice. From the very first Principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, our faith demands that we seek a more just world for all creatures. Together “we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

While our faith calls us to act, it also calls us to do what for some is a much more frightening task. Our faith calls us to listen, to open our hearts and minds to truth, even when that truth is ugly or scary. Critical thought is the hallmark of liberal religion and critical thought requires an honest confrontation with facts. Our fourth principle is a commitment to uphold “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Our faith demands that we open our hearts and minds to the frightening reality of racism. With that in mind, I plan to spend a good deal of this morning talking about racism today.

To have a role in listening and responding to racism, you do not have to be waving a confederate flag. You don't have to be from the South. You don't have to have friends who are people of color and you certainly don't have to be a person of color to claim responsibility. You simply have to be human. You simply have to recognize that today, a large portion of people are disadvantaged unfairly, simply because of the color of

their skin. You simply have to recognize that racism limits each of us in different ways. It degrades our full humanity while it divides us from one another.

Before you say “I can’t do anything, I don’t have any power,” I promise you, we will get to action in a minute. We will talk about some specific things you can do to fight racism. For now, let’s simply try to hear the difficult truth of racism in our society.

Racism is alive and well. The past year many of us were stunned by the case of racial intimidation and judicial bias in Jena, Louisiana. While news media fed that particular story of one small southern community to rapt audiences, it failed to tell a much larger story of racism across the country. While a particular instance of racial hatred occurred in the South and drew our attention there, an outbreak of noose-hangings covered the country.

In a January 24, 2008 USA Today article we hear that “The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission says it is filing several racial harassment lawsuits a year involving hangman’s nooses in workplaces, a trend agency officials say coincides with rising numbers of racial harassment complaints.” And “Since fiscal year 2001, the EEOC has filed more than 30 lawsuits that involve the displaying of nooses on the job.”

In discussions of justice, I think it is important that we not completely numb our senses with numbers and theories. It is important that we consider what happens to real people, to real bodies. We must remember that while nooses are symbols, they are also tools. The noose was the tool of choice used to hang and humiliate the bodies of our African American brothers and sisters. But, the noose is not a relic of the past. It lives on as a powerful and affective symbol of hatred and violence across our country.

And today’s racism doesn’t just take the form of language or intimidation. Today there exist significant inequalities between white people and people of color in our country. Any number of different reports can point to this inequality. Health statistics and life expectancy take on a clear racial bias, reflecting the fact that some groups have more access to health care and safe housing than others.

As I researched this topic, the statistic that really resonated with me was about housing. According to Census 2000, homeownership among White householders was 71 percent, significantly higher than the home ownership rate for people of color. In contrast, 46 percent of Blacks owned homes, 45 percent of Native Hawaiian and other

Pacific Islanders and 46 percent of those identifying as Hispanic owned their homes. In our country, white people are more able to own the home where they live and raise their families. Still today, white people are more able to own property in the United States.

(<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/census/historic/ownershipbyrace.html>)

These numbers raise all sorts of questions. Isn't this more a question of class and wealth? Is this a question of access to education? Is this a question of cultural difference? All of those are good questions, but the fact of the matter is, there is significant inequality in our country and it runs along racial lines. Some folks are granted a step up, or a step down by the sheer color of their skin.

Now we have heard that society is racist. We live with a history of racism. We are surrounded by people who are racist. Most of us come out of families who hold profoundly racist beliefs. We are swimming in it. This metaphor may be trite, but we are swimming in racism. Just like fish don't recognize the water that they swim in, I fear that we often don't realize the racism that we swim in, the racism that we breathe, the racism that eventually becomes a part of us.

As good liberal folks we often believe that racism is something that exists out there. It is something that bad people do and believe. Racism is something that exists in society yes, but considering that we might be racist ourselves is painful and a little scary. Let's remember that society, that thing that we have just clearly identified as racist, is made up of people. Society is not something over there, as we sometimes would like to think. Society is within us. If we take a minute to honestly critique some of our own beliefs, we can see racism raise its ugly head in us sometimes.

One member of my congregation recently shared with me how she had experienced racism well up in her. As she opened the door of her home to an African American man, expecting another scam artist as she had experienced in the past, she was curt and rude. As it turned out, he was not a scam artist, but a professor at the local University and he was there to pick up his daughter who had been playing at the house with this woman's grand-daughter all day long. Of course apologies followed and the relationship was mended.

This was a pivotal moment. As important as mending this personal relationship was a moment of self-realization. For just a moment, she was brought to the awareness

that prejudice had affected the way she treated people in the world. In that moment she was aware of how racism had affected her ability to lovingly welcome a stranger at her home.

These moments I think come to most of us. If we are able to listen to our hearts, able to listen to some ugly realities, there is often prejudice there. It is scary, it is painful, but it is real. The most distinct memory I have of this sort of prejudice had to do with my surprise at a person of color driving a luxury car in the parking lot of a private school. My first thought was not about how nice the car was, or that this man was a particularly good or bad driver. No, initially I wondered why he was there. In my mind that has been so molded by society, there were no black students in private schools. My racist mind did not assume that he was there picking up his child just as all the other drivers were.

I was horrified by my reaction, and remain horrified as I write about it today. It is far enough in my past that I can talk about the moment honestly now. Against my will I had been trained to assume certain things about certain people based on the color of their skin. As each of us have in some way, I had been molded to be racist.

I share that experience with you, and the experience of internalized racism to make a point. As we talk about racism, we cannot be overcome with guilt in this discussion. Yes, all of us carry the seeds of racial prejudice in our subconscious. But these are not beliefs or ways of being that we have sought out. Against our will, society has molded us, and we are called to struggle against accepting that mold.

I promised you we would talk about changes we can make, things we can do. Well the first area of change I want to address is personal. While it is easier to place blame, the real challenging work of anti-racism begins with working on ourselves. As I have been suggesting, each one of us is capable of slipping into racist mindsets. If we know the possibility is there, and if we can open our hearts and minds to explore the underbellies, the prejudices, the fears, then and only then, can move toward healing and wholeness. Racism is, more than anything else, a question of attitude. The first step is to examine your own feelings and prejudices with honesty. The simple truth is, none of us is without prejudice.

Education is also a big step we can take to deal with racism from the inside out. One of my favorite books on the topic is “Learning to be White,” by the UU theologian

Thandeka. She writes about the historical creation of racial categories in the United States, and how white people are molded by society, and even by their own families as children. White people are shamed into perpetuating racial stereotypes and injustice. Thandeka explains how we are all limited by the horrors of racism.

Another book that I highly recommend is Ronald Takaki's "A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America." Although it can be tedious in spots, this highly respected book digs deep into American history to tell the untold stories of race, the stories that got us to where we are today. Our history, American history as Takaki explains is a fascinating interweave of forced migration, oppression and resistance.

Another area where we can work on racism is the interpersonal. This is a blunt question, but worth asking ourselves. How diverse is my network of friends? How many people of a different racial group am I close enough with to have a serious conversation about this topic? I'm not encouraging anyone to go seek out friends of another race as a personal project or campaign. I am encouraging you to make yourself more available to the possibility. After all, a little friendliness never hurt anyone.

The other area of anti-racism work to be done on the interpersonal level is simple willingness to talk about race. The conversation is so loaded with historical baggage and emotions, we hesitate to engage the question. But if we can't even talk about race with our friends, how are we going to change a wider world to be more just. And then there is the challenge of speaking up. This is honestly where I could do a much better job. We should speak up when we hear something that doesn't sound right. I know, no one wants to call their friend or family member racist. However, if we don't speak up, no one else is going to.

How about just raising the question? Instead of pointing a finger, try just asking someone to explain what she or he meant by the comment or joke. Making people explain the stereotype that they are reinforcing both removes humor from the situation and challenges people to take a second look at something that they may not even have realized was a racist comment.

Our tradition is also host to a cutting edge organization for people of color, DRUUMM. That's an acronym for Diverse Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist

Multicultural Ministries. The organization both celebrates the experiences of people of color and pushes for institutional change within our faith tradition.

That brings me to the last area of change. We can create change on an institutional level. This is probably what most of us think of when we talk about seeking justice in the world and in many ways, this is the easiest type of change to commit to. There are a number of national and local organizations that combat racism. The most common are the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. If you doubt that you belong with either of these groups, keep in mind that a white Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes was a co-founder of the NAACP. He also served as the President of the ACLU. There is space for you.

I say that institutional change is the easiest because there are so many opportunities. All of us are involved with institutions and organizations. This church is one for starters. Each organization or institution can take steps toward making itself more accessible and more justice seeking. Of course if no one raises the question of race within those organizations, no change will be made.

Racism is a deeply complex issue. Obviously there is far more to be said than I can possibly touch on in a short sermon. But I hope this sermon serves as an invitation to enter into the discussion. I hope that this sermon is an invitation for us all to listen to the painful truth of racism, to act toward stopping it, and to listen some more. Perhaps if we listen hard enough eventually we might begin to hear songs of hope.

-Amen-

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