

A Sacred Conversation on Race

Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16-20

May 18, 2008; Tim Devine

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On April 11, 2008 the national setting of the United Church of Christ ran the following full-page ad in the USA Today newspaper:

Let's talk about race.

On Sunday, May 18, many pastors across our church, the United Church of Christ, will be preaching on race in hopes of beginning a sacred conversation, a dialogue that is needed in our pews, our homes and the hallways of power across our country.

Sacred conversations are never easy, especially when honest talk confronts our nation's painful past and speaks directly to the injustices of the present day. Yet sacred conversations can, and often do, honor the value of diverse life experiences, requiring an openness to hear each other's viewpoints.

Over the coming weeks, as we prepare to speak from our pulpits and organize follow-up conversations with our 1.2 million members, we pray this effort will be an important step toward a holy and reconciling dialogue within our church and for our nation.

We invite all communities of faith to join with us. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, your voice is needed – now.

God is still speaking.

Over Labor Day weekend of 2005 this church gathered for its annual retreat with Broadview UCC at Camp Pilgrim Firs on the Kitsap Peninsula with a theme of looking at racism and white privilege. The immediacy of this topic was made clear by the unfolding of Hurricane Katrina, and in particular the situation in New Orleans, only days before.

In response to that learning experience, in January of 2006 our St Paul's Annual Meeting adopted the following statement, written by Jason Boyd:

Racism is complex and difficult to address.

We recognize that God is calling us to reflect on ourselves and our role in it.

We agree to focus, to listen, and to be respectful.

*We promise to God and one another that we will challenge ourselves
and that we will not let uncertainty or discomfort deter us,
because God's children deserve no less than that from us.*

We will sing a new song.

This week I was shopping in the hair products and the nail-polish/make-up sections at K-Mart. Now, before you get too interested in this fact, I was needing to buy 52 combs and

52 nail clippers to complete the 239 hygiene kits that were assembled at our conference annual meeting recently. And with the gift of 52 toothbrushes from Rich Voget's dental office, these were mailed to Church World Service on Friday. Whether they go to Myanmar or China or wherever, they will offer tangible help to someone in need.

I'm not sure I have ever been in these sections of K-Mart before. But when I am mulling around whatever the sermon idea is for the coming Sunday, I often see things differently or maybe even notice something new. For example, I didn't know that hair products for African-Americans were sold in a separate section called "ethnic" or that hosiery that was advertised as "flesh-colored" was light in color. I don't think that these are monumental injustices by themselves, but they are examples of the stream of things in our culture that we experience every day that separate us into those who are normative and those who are not. Someone – in this case African-Americans and other people of color – is labeled as different. And it is my understanding this is part of what white privilege is all about.

But race and racism are much deeper than what one might experience shopping in an aisle at K-Mart. Last Sunday the newspapers carried the obituary of Mildred Loving. She isn't as well known as other black women – Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat, or Coretta Scott King carrying on the work and legacy of her murdered husband, or contralto Marian Anderson singing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday of 1939 because she was denied the right to sing in Constitution Hall.

Mildred Loving, and her husband Richard, were arrested, convicted, and banished from their home state of Virginia in 1958. Their crime was in violating the 1924 Virginia Racial Integrity Act – which outlawed marriage between whites and non-whites, and imposed a five-year prison term including those who married out-of-state and then returned home. Mildred was black and Richard was white. They married in Washington, DC in June of 1958 and then lived together in Caroline County, Virginia. One night in July of that year they woke up in their bedroom surrounded by the county sheriff and several deputies and were arrested. Their jail sentence was suspended if they would agree to leave Virginia and not return together for the next 25 years. They did so, but used that time to raise awareness of this injustice through the courts. In 1967 the US Supreme Court ruled 9 to 0 in favor of the Lovings, striking down those remaining laws anywhere they still existed.

In a 1967 segment of ABC News, Mildred Loving was interviewed and shared that she thought the issue was always very simple. She stated: *"I think marrying who you want is a right no man should have anything to do with... It's a God-given right."*

Those words were prophetic then, and no less prophetic now, as yesterday we celebrated the marriage of Jason and Juan Carlos – two men legally wed in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and blessed by this congregation – the first such service in our sanctuary. And the parallels between all of the different –isms and –phobias are many. All four UCC churches where I served in a pastoral role are now Open and Affirming – Bethany in Montpelier, Vermont; Village in Wellesley, Massachusetts; Plymouth in downtown Seattle, and here. In the first three settings I heard comments from time to time – either

in the process itself or in the aftermath of taking a vote – “I don’t have anything personally against gays or lesbians, but…” and then inevitably an amazingly offensive and homophobic comment would be shared.

And this is an important point for racism as well. We are all exposed to these prejudices that are part of our world, and we all carry them with us to varying degrees. When we deny that possibility and think that we are above and beyond these things – that’s when we get into trouble. We are more afraid of the label than in addressing the problem.

In addition, these various causes and responses to injustice are linked. In the years just before he was assassinated, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. became somewhat unpopular because he was public in his criticism of the Vietnam War. Many people at that time were not ready to hear that message. In some circles he was labeled as unpatriotic. He was not. Former President Jimmy Carter has written about the current status of Israeli-Palestinian realities as very much like apartheid. Again, many are not ready to hear this comparison and during a recent visit to Israel he was not given a meeting with current leadership nor was he provided the customary police protection of a visiting – former or current – head of state. In some circles he has been labeled as anti-Semitic. He is not.

In her graceful and straight-to-the-heart-of-the-matter way, Coretta Scott King is quoted to have said: *“Freedom and justice cannot be parceled out in pieces to suit political convenience. I don’t believe you can stand for freedom for one group of people and deny it to others. Homophobia is like racism and anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry in that it seeks to dehumanize a large group of people, to deny their humanity, their dignity and personhood.”*

It is a clear and unifying concept – “I am not free until you are free.”

This is different than the dangerous Biblical interpretations about “promised land” or “chosen people” or “city on a hill” or “slaves be obedient to your masters” or “wives be subservient to your husbands.” We all can find a line in the Biblical narrative to defend any prejudice we may harbor. The greater themes of the Biblical narrative, however, are about justice and faithfulness and inclusion. And it is all seen as good. In the Psalms we heard today this statement about humanity: *“Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.”*

Even though we may carry prejudice, and we are all capable of evil, we also all have the potential for great good, as well. And this is true for everyone. In some of Jesus’ last words to his disciples as remembered in the Gospel of Matthew we hear: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”* There isn’t a statement to talk to everyone but Iran and Syria. How we talk, and more importantly how we listen, matter a great deal. But the command is to *“make disciples of all nations.”* And making disciples isn’t about making money and imposing capitalism. It isn’t about feeling good about ourselves and imposing democracy. It isn’t about us at all. It is about worshiping God. And maybe that might just mean that we have to learn how to do that a little differently if everyone was truly included at the table of justice and peace.

This call to have a conversation on and about race and racism has come about due to the recent news and constant sound-bites of Rev. Jeremiah Wright when he was pastor at Trinity UCC in Chicago. I would like to give the last word on this difficult time to public television figure and UCC member Bill Moyers. He recently had this to say about race and racism and the story surrounding Jeremiah Wright:

“Behold the double standard: John McCain sought out the endorsement of John Hagee, the war-mongering, Catholic-bashing Texas preacher, who said the people of New Orleans got what they deserved for their sins. But no one suggests McCain shares Hagee's delusions or thinks AIDS is God's punishment for homosexuality. Pat Robertson called for the assassination of a foreign head of state and asked God to remove Supreme Court Justices, yet he remains a force in the Republican religious right. After 9/11, Jerry Falwell said the attack was God's judgment on America for having been driven out of our schools and the public square, but when McCain goes after the endorsement of the preacher he once condemned as an agent of intolerance, the press gives him a pass. Jon Stewart recently played tape from the Nixon White House in which Billy Graham talks in the Oval Office about how he has friends who are Jewish, but he knows in his heart that they are undermining America. This is crazy and wrong – white preachers are given leeway in politics that others aren't.”

Bill Moyers then states the obvious: *“Which means it is all about race, isn't it? Wright... doesn't fire a shot in anger, put a noose around anyone's neck, call for insurrection, or plant a bomb in a church with children in Sunday school. What he does is to speak his mind in a language and style that unsettles some people, and says some things so outlandish and ill-advised that he finally leaves Obama no choice but to end their friendship. We're often exposed to the corroding acid of the politics of personal destruction, but I've never seen anything like this – this wrenching break between pastor and parishioner played out right in front of our eyes.”*

And he concludes: *“Both men no doubt will carry the grief to their graves. All the rest of us should hang our heads in shame for letting it come to this in America, where the gluttony of the non-stop media grinder consumes us all and prevents an honest conversation on race. It is the price we are paying for failing to heed the great historian Jacob Burckhardt, who said, ‘beware the terrible simplifiers.’”*

Listen again to our church covenant on this topic:

Racism is complex and difficult to address.

We recognize that God is calling us to reflect on ourselves and our role in it.

We agree to focus, to listen, and to be respectful.

*We promise to God and one another that we will challenge ourselves
and that we will not let uncertainty or discomfort deter us,
because God's children deserve no less than that from us.*

We will sing a new song.

Sometimes it really is simple: “I am not free until you are free.” Amen.

Psalm 8

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."