

Let's Talk about Race
Genesis 1
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I was taught at a very early age that religion and politics don't mix. Perhaps so; but the political realities of 2008 do not allow leaders in the United Church of Christ, to ignore the intersection of these dynamic sources of power. In light of the national spotlight on UCC Pastor Jeremiah Wright and UCC parishioner Barack Obama, the leaders of our National church have called for a sacred conversation on race. Today's sermon is intended to be the beginning of a complex conversation that will change us all for the better. I hope you'll help that change happen in the weeks and months to follow.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote, "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." Sacred conversations are conversations grounded in hope and authenticity. They require a willingness to risk exchanging the simplicity of ignorance and fear for the simplicity of compassion. How often have you found yourself struggling to move beyond a difficult moment that requires truth-telling, only to find yourself stopping short of the conversation that will make a difference?

Unfortunately, human beings, fearing anything complex, frequently choose the false simplicity of silence over the deep simplicity that results from engaging their own truths, telling their own story, facing their own fears, and overcoming their reluctance to be fully human. Despite the oft repeated mantra contained in the acronym KISS- otherwise known as "keep it simple stupid" complexity embraced leads to simplicity received. I repeat, complexity embraced leads to simplicity received.

Paulo Freire, the renown Brazilian educator who helped millions of poor people transform their lives, believed that we "cannot be fully human apart from communication...to impede communication is to reduce people to the status of things." To be fully human, you and I must express our deepest selves. We must speak in order to know what we think and we must listen to one another to know who we are. When we risk being truth tellers first to ourselves and then to others, as Jesus calls us to be, we find ourselves on the other side of complexity where the simplicity of love offers us grace sufficient for all our needs.

"The simplicity of human conversation" according to Margaret Wheatley is the single most powerful way for human beings "to initiate significant change." In Wheatley's view, based on many years of global advocacy for change, "there is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about."

In 1994 our wise foremothers and forefathers, members of the Oaks and Shepherd of the Valley alike, developed 3 Core principles and 18 core values that would shape the common life of the new community they helped birth on January 1, 1995. These principles and values have guided this church through several significant conversations.

- 1) the conversation to become open and affirming of Gays, Lesbians, Bisexual and transgendered men and women.
- 2) The conversation to build a new building

- 3) The conversation to call their first pastor
- 4) And most recently, the conversation to become a New Sanctuary Congregation and offer sanctuary to Liliana and her family.

These conversations, engaged in by many of you present today, form the foundation for today's conversation on race. Your wisdom will be invaluable as we step into the abyss of confusion that marks the beginning of any effort towards deep and abiding change. Wheatley reminds us that change always starts with confusion. To be creative, to bring about the new, one must be willing to be confused. In the space of not knowing, where deep listening resides, we allow our fears to dissolve, we allow connectedness to overcome separateness, and we allow our selves time to slow down and think. When we give ourselves time to think, we give ourselves permission to change.

In the matter of race change is not an option. It may be an option for many, but for those of us committed to this loving community and grounded in the teachings of Jesus, change is an essential lifeline for transformation. Be ready then to consider new behaviors and rethink everything you think! Change does not begin with powerless people talking to those in power. Change begins with friends sharing their common stories and gaining courage for the long haul. In the sacred space of not-knowing we come to know one another as equals- we also learn that change comes when friends talk about what really matters. Messiness and uncertainty are necessary components of sacred conversation; that is why each of us must trust the foundations that underlie the courage of this community and the possibility of changing how we think about race today; and then again tomorrow. Now to the heart of the matter:

Last summer, Ann and I attended the 2007 General Synod in which Barack Obama spoke. Before he came on stage numerous instructions were given that this was not a political gathering but a religious one; a time for Obama to speak about his faith on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the United Church of Christ. Before Obama took the stage Jeremiah Wright introduced him via a taped video segment. If many of the 10,000 people in attendance that day had never heard of Jeremiah Wright before that is not the case any more. Thanks to the wonders of technology and the availability of You Tube, Jeremiah Wright is a phenomenon still evolving.

I had avoided the You Tube caricatures of him that have become so controversial, but this week I took the time to see them for myself. I also watched Rev. Wright's interview with Bill Moyer's and his speech at the National Press Club. Both the Moyer's interview and the Press Club speech show us an articulate pastor, theologian and historian steeped in black liberation theology. The question and answer section is another matter. Arrogance and rudeness on Wright's part clearly pop into view but they do not fill the substance of his remarks. In contrast, there is arrogance and rudeness aplenty on the part of those hanging Wright out to dry on Fox news and other conservative media outlets.

But that is not why we are here. If Rev. Wright's outspokenness is our starting point, he is not the focal point of our conversation. We are here because Barack Obama called all Americans, not just members of the United Church of Christ, to understand the underlying issues of race in his March 18, Philadelphia speech to refresh our memories listen again to his poignant and prophetic words

“...race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. We would be making the same mistake that Reverend Wright made in his offending

sermons about America—to simplify and stereotype and amplify the negative to the point that it distorts reality.

The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through - a part of our union that we have yet to perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education, or the need to find good jobs for every American. Understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point. As William Faulkner once wrote, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past."

We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

[Obama continues] Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools; we still haven't fixed them, fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students.

Legalized discrimination - where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or fire departments - meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations.

That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persists in so many of today's urban and rural communities. A lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family, contributed to the erosion of black families - a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened.

And the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods - parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pick-up and building code enforcement - all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us.

This is the reality, [Obama continues] in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up. They came of age in the late fifties and early sixties, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted. What's remarkable is not how many failed in the face of discrimination, but rather how many men and women overcame the odds; how many were able to make a way out of no way for those like me who would come after them.

But for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn't make it - those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations - those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future.[Finally Obama notes...] Even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race, and racism, continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways.

Last week, I spoke about the importance of changing one's worldview. To understand the complexities of race we must first address the worldviews that shape us; whether your ancestry is European white, Asian, or Hispanic you, and I have work to do to understand why we view some people through the lens of compassion and others through the lens of prejudice. There is diversity in the UCC, particularly in Southern California with the presence of Samoan churches and Hispanic churches, but we have a long road ahead of us to fulfill the 1993 General Synod pronouncement which called for the United Church of Christ to be a multiracial and multicultural church.

In that same year, Cornel West's national bestseller *Race Matters* acknowledged the deep seated rage unleashed by the stunning verdict in the 1992 Rodney King case, in which Simi Valley played a distinctive part. The decision to acquit 4 police officers sparked the LA riots and did little to address the mistreatment that black people, particularly black men experience at the hands of law enforcement agencies.

West's analysis attributed the Los Angeles upheaval to a "silent' depression ravaging the country" that was provoked by the declining weekly wages of Americans coupled with the upward distribution of wealth. He also recognized the riots as an "an expression of utter fragmentation by a powerless citizenry that includes not just the poor but "all of us." West argued that what happened in Los Angeles in 1992 was "neither a race riot nor a class rebellion. What we experienced was instead a "multi-racial, largely male display of justified social rage" that transcended class. "Of those arrested only 36 percent were black, and more than a third had full-time jobs..." In West's analysis the fragmentation of human life that fed this upheaval had roots in social, economic, religious and political views that placed a low priority on our *common life*. "Race was the visible catalyst, he wrote, not the underlying cause."

His description of the political atmosphere at the time of the King verdict, however, is eerily similar to our own: an atmosphere where "images, not ideas, dominate, where politicians spend more time raising money than debating issues" ... Where ... "politicians behave less as thermostats that determine the climate of opinion than as thermometers registering the public mood."

The historic nature of this year's Democratic primary process between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton demonstrates we have come a long way towards addressing institutionalized sexism and racism. But we have not yet reached the Promised Land where, like God, we can see the goodness of every human being. Genesis reminds us that all human beings are created in God's image; yet living that truth without prejudice remains an elusive human goal.

Our task as a community of prophetic hospitality is to confront unconscious assumptions about race and class that lead us to disregard our basic humanness. This task is made more complicated by the transformation in racism that has taken place since the Civil Rights Act of 1968. Contrary to what most people think, racism transcends personal prejudices. Racism like every other ism- such as heterosexism, sexism, classism and ageism -results from combining prejudice with power. Racial prejudice combined with economic, political and social power becomes institutionalized through a society to the point where it becomes invisible to the naked eye.

Traditional racism produced direct strategies of oppression such as slave laws and Jim Crow laws that separated African-American people from the general population. Today's racism referred to as "neo-racism" is more indirect; it may appear to some to wear a kinder and gentler mask but the damage it does to the human spirit is no less kind that traditional racism Neo-racism blames the victim, not the systemic policies of oppression that are its foundation. Remember that when you hear calls for the elimination of affirmative action or when you examine our current immigration policies. The protesters outside our sanctuary every week have targeted Liliana, a classic case of "blaming the victim." They are not on the front-lines addressing our government's broken policies: a distinction they have already demonstrated they are not willing to make.

None of us are immune to the insidious nature of neo racism that seeks to deny its very existence. Golf Channel anchor Kelly Tilghman recently discovered this the hard way when she was suspended for two weeks for saying that young players who wanted to challenge Tiger Woods should "lynch him in a back alley." Tilghman's words hardly compare to the real life lynching documented in a contemporary book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching photography in America* published in 2000 by James Allen, Hilton the book is a stunning extension of the photographic exhibit which ended in February 2000 at the Roth Horowitz Gallery in New York City. At the same time Tilghman's words remind us how easily racism infects us all.

[Now, to truly make this a conversation, please turn to one another and take 4-5 minutes to share what you have heard and express where you think we need to go. After people shared their insights, the sermon resumed.]

As we continue this sacred conversation, let us remember the words of Genesis, as they speak of all humanity created and blessed in God's image. There has never been a scientific basis for race because it is a human construct. Though race is woven into the fabric of our being, and secured there by the social constructs in which we order our lives, it is never God's word. With God's help, may we come to see the power we have to make a difference and the challenge to do it soon. Amen.

Resources for this sermon include:

Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Return Hope to the Future by Margaret J. Wheatley, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. January 2002

Race Matters by Cornel West Knopf Publishing Group, January 1994

Weaving the Fabric of Diversity by Jacqui James, Judith A. Frediani UUA Resources