

Jeremiah's Right!
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Jeremiah 8: 4-7,11
Luke 4: 16-21

June 22, 2008
Binkley Church

We were a group of UCC clergy- women and men, black, white, and latino- sitting together in the assembly room of the Franklinton Center at Bricks, deep in eastern North Carolina farming country near Enfield. This peaceful setting amid the fields was formerly a plantation where slaves who were deemed to be especially resistant to authority were sent to be punished and broken in spirit. It later became a school for African American students known as Franklinton Christian College, and later still a retreat center and the programmatic headquarters for the UCC Commission on Racial Justice, now known as Justice and Witness Ministries.

It was a weekend at the end of May, a month or so ago, and I was attending a two-day event for pastors with the intriguing title, "A Sacred Conversation about Race". We were sitting together in the large gathering room, listening to one another talk about our earliest memories of racial differences, speaking candidly about the current media uproar surrounding another UCC pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, and wondering together about the role of the church today in addressing the problem of racism.

Rev. John Thomas, General Minister and President of the UCC, had issued an invitation to all UCC congregations to begin anew what he called, "a sacred conversation on race", after the Jeremiah Wright controversy had brought intense emotional reactions from congregations and the general public at large. We were meeting together as part of a practical response to that invitation.

Rev. Henry Simmons, pastor of St. Alban UCC in Queens, NY, spoke eloquently about his earliest memory of being four years old and finding himself forcefully pulled away from a "Whites Only" water fountain by his older brother. He recalled several incidents in later years that left lasting, painful scars, including being denied communion at a UCC congregation in Elon in the 1960's. He remembered how he almost left the church because of his sense of the hypocrisy of white Christianity. Since that time he has become a voice calling the church to work for racial justice. A soft-spoken man with white hair and a quick smile, Henry sighed as he told us that there has never been a time when he didn't have to think about race. He said that although it is so important to continue the conversation, personally, he was just tired... tired of talking about it.

Rev. Stephen Sterner, the Acting Executive Minister of the UCC Local Church Ministries Office, spoke of a much different experience while growing up. He attended school with fellow white students, rarely finding himself in settings with people of other races. His world was monochromatic, and society's unquestioned, unconscious perspective was always the white perspective. Only after he became a close friend of Henry Simmons in the turbulent years of the Civil Rights Era, did Steve find his worldview challenged and his eyes opened to what others experienced as an entirely different reality. He said that the insular nature of his world meant that he never had to talk about race.

Another person who told her story at the Franklinton Center workshop was Rev. Jill Edens, a friend of mine for over 20 years and someone known to many of you as one of the co-pastors of United Church of Chapel Hill. Jill mentioned that she grew up in Cleveland during the race riots of the 1960's. She remembered the fear, the violence in the streets, a world in upheaval.

Jill said that this experience in her childhood years led her to be initially reluctant in later life to talk about issues of race. She had seen how volatile this issue could be. She discovered that she was afraid to talk about race, because, even today, this was a subject that could cause emotions to erupt, feelings to be hurt, and relationships to be broken. Nevertheless, she has stayed committed to working for racial justice and has pushed herself to move beyond her initial timid approach to a place of honest and open discussion of an uncomfortable issue.

Three people, three different reactions to a conversation about race: “I’m tired of talking about it; I never had to talk about it: I’m afraid to talk about it.” I realize that I have experienced all three reactions within myself, sometimes in succession. I wonder if some of you have felt this, as well.

We long to believe that we live in a post-racial society, that the success of high-profile African-Americans, Asians, and Latinos are proof that the color line has been crossed; that this election season is positive evidence that our country has come a long way from the era of segregation and Jim Crow. Those of us who are white may now see our children in schools where diversity is the norm. They study racism in textbooks, but it may not ever become a topic for current events. Like some of us, our children may not have talked about race at this point in their young lives.

But, racism is not a disease that has been cured, and ignoring its insidious nature can harm all of us. The prophet Jeremiah tells of a God who has no patience for those religious and political leaders of Israel who minimize the severity of the sinful behavior that has infected their society. Jeremiah says that God complains: “They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace’, they say, when there is no peace.”(Jer. 8:11).

Tom Roberts, editor of the *National Catholic Reporter*, says he believes that race is the “third rail” in American culture. He writes, “If racism today usually doesn’t have the kind of high profile that it did during the Civil Rights era of the 1960’s, like the benign looking third rail, the one that carries the current along the electric tracks, racist outbreaks can still deliver deadly shocks to the body politic.” (*National Catholic Reporter*, January 18, 2000, p. 11).

Roberts goes on to say that which side of the color line one is on determines the severity of the shock. Folks with my skin color may only get a little tingle or even remain numb to how deeply white privilege and unconscious, overt, or institutionalized racism infect our culture. People with a darker skin hue usually experience a greater jolt, whether from racial profiling, job discrimination, or disproportionate numbers of their racial group affected by poverty, substandard housing, incarceration, or inadequate health care.

And then there are the “shocks to the body politic” that have been delivered recently by virtue of the political and media coverage of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, and how he may or may not have affected the presidential aspirations of the first black candidate fielded by a major political party. Whatever our political persuasions, the uproar of the past few months has caused anxiety, anger, and confusion. Reactions have been intense. Some of my white friends wondered aloud about the character of Jeremiah Wright and the nature of prophetic, African-American preaching. They were confused about his remarks, and fearful of talking openly about race. Like Jill Edens, many expressed honest concern that direct discussion of racism might lead to further misunderstanding and polarization.

I found my black friends to be divided. Some were eager to seize the opportunity to address what they have always known to be true: that we live in a culture where the combination of racial prejudice plus power continues to play out in our institutions, political arenas, and churches. Other black acquaintances told me they had a different reaction, the one expressed by Henry Simmons. They were cynical and just plain tired: tired of having to talk about this subject yet again, this issue that would always be with them, one they would never have the luxury of forgetting.

For myself, I agree with UCC President, John Thomas: we still need a sacred conversation on race. And the time is now. There are always excuses and reasons to put off the uncomfortable or delay what makes us fearful. However, Martin Luther King, Jr. said it well in his last book written over forty years ago: ““We are faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. . . . Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words, 'Too late.'”

Racism is still a deep wound in the body politic. Thomas points out that as a person who is white and who lives with the privileges afforded to whites, it is easy to be seduced by two factors that keep us from this sacred and important conversation on race. First, is the notion that we don't really need it. We believe things are much better now than they used to be and are getting better every day. We don't see the overt signs of segregation any more. There are no more TV images of beaten protesters or fire hoses and snapping dogs. Racial intimidation at voting places seems to be an artifact of the past. Yet, the problem with this rationale is that as whites, we often don't see other things, either.

We don't see the invisible legacy of years of racism writ deep in the fabric of American identity and culture. Eugene Rivers pointed out over ten years ago that several books (see—Alexander Saxton's *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness*, Theodore Allen's *The Invention of a White Race*, Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (Routledge)—have shown that 200 years ago, a need arose for some ideological justification to offer the Europeans coming to America in order to get them to move west and officially eliminate everybody else. Rivers goes on to say:

Girded with what were then new scriptural interpretations identifying America with the New Israel (and often peoples of color as the antagonists to God's chosen), many poor immigrant church people found their Manifest Destiny in further migration westward..... The name of God was invoked to justify white idols; the principalities and powers were given religious sanctification.

(Eugene Rivers, "The Idol of White Supremacy," Sojourners March-April 1997.)

As members of white society, we tend to forget that our country was built on hundreds of years of systematic attempts to justify the oppression of black people and Native Americans and to seize native land. Much of this justification was codified into public laws barring intermarriage, property and voting rights. The repercussions carry forward today, but may be invisible to many of us who are white and privileged, who don't see or experience the lingering effects.

Most of us don't ride the bus through the black and Hispanic neighborhoods of Charlotte or south Raleigh where foreclosure signs tell an evil story of poverty and predatory lending. We don't usually compare the schools of our suburban communities with those in poor rural areas to see first hand how unlevel the playing field really is for our youth. And we don't live every day in fear that our sons will be sucked into what Marion Wright Edelman describes as "the cradle to prison pipeline" for African American boys. We don't see this and so we wonder why we need another conversation on race in this country where "every day, in every way, things are getting better and better." (*John H. Thomas, Sermon, May 18, 2008, Writing Love on a Larger Board.*)

The prophet Jeremiah is right. Proclaiming a false progress denies the severity of the illness. "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace' they say, when there is no peace."

John Thomas believes that white Christians are lured by the seduction of denial and false progress on one side, and the seduction of despair on the other. He notes that many of us have had the experience of a well intended word or deed blowing up in our face with charges of racism and insensitivity. Fearful of saying the wrong thing, we say nothing. Fearful of doing the wrong thing, we do nothing. Many of us may also feel a paralyzing sense of collective guilt for a history of racial oppression. It is one that comes to us as an unwelcome but persistent legacy, something we didn't ask for but can't divest ourselves of either. (*Thomas, Sermon, ibid.*)

But the paralysis of despair and the false optimism which denies a darker reality should not be our only choices when dealing with racism. Honest, imperfect conversation takes risks and leans toward acknowledgement and action. One of the most refreshing things said at the beginning of our two day conversation in May at the Franklinton Center, was by Rev. Ervin Milton, our host and convener. He smiled at all of us sitting there and said, "Friends, this conversation is not going to be perfect. That's okay. We are not going to let fear of saying

the wrong thing keep us from saying anything. It is better to have a conversation together, even if it goes badly sometimes, than not to have a conversation at all.”

And he was right. Our time together did not always go smoothly; there certainly were rough spots along the way. Still, we left with a sense that our intentions shone beyond the inadequacy of our words, that connections of the heart were made, that we were able to see just a little more of another’s truth.

Here at Binkley, there are many of you who have taken risks in the fight against racism, many of you who haven’t let fear of doing something imperfectly keep you from acting in courageous ways. I am humbled by the stories of those who participated in sit-ins and marched in protests at personal risk. I am proud of the leadership of this congregation in speaking out for racial justice during the Civil Rights era and the turmoil of integration. I am grateful for the longstanding partnership between Binkley and Barbee’s Chapel, one that has been built on trust and which has weathered the ups and downs of imperfect human and institutional relationship.

But, perhaps we need to be asking ourselves anew what our conversation and work should be in this day and time. We need to look again to scripture and the still-speaking God for fresh guidance for the church in contemporary America. The Gospel of Luke reminds us that Jesus’ ethic is based in *Jubilee*. The Jubilee of good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind (or spiritual renewal), and the lifting of oppression, is offered to all willing to receive it. This account of Jesus’ visit to Nazareth and his proclamation of “the year of the Lord’s favor,” is the central motif of Jesus’ mission.

John Howard Yoder, in his book, **The Politics of Jesus**, points out that Luke’s Jubilee image offers the church an ethic for social justice ministry. Yoder says, “The Jubilee is not simply a theological concept providing insight into the nature of God; it is a guide for living which is to be observed in normal daily practice among believers. ...These Jubilee acts are not simply to be expected in the future; they are to be given concrete expression among the people of God in the present.” (*Yoder, The Politics of Jesus, Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 2nd ed., 1994, p. 74*)

Herbert Perkins and Margery Otto believe that Jubilee is also a way for the church to approach anti-racism work. They write: “A Conversation About Race needs to be a Jubilee act, proclaiming a moment of favor to the oppressed and the oppressor, an offer of grace to reconstruct relationships.” (www.ucc.org/sacred-conversation/pdfs/theological-perspectives.pdf)

And so, may the church step up again to proclaim this moment as one of Jubilee. May we seize this time, responding to “the fierce urgency of now”. May we create space where racism can once again be seen and acknowledged for what it is, where honest, imperfect conversations can happen in safe places, where grace can be found and plans laid for future work. And may we follow in the footsteps of one who proclaimed the lifting of oppression, recovery of sight and spiritual renewal, and good news to those who need it most! Amen.