

First Parish Unitarian Universalist, Bridgewater, MA
“Black Lives Matter”
Sunday, January 17, 2016 - 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: “Black life is cheap, but American black bodies are a natural resource of incomparable value.” Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Reading “Between the World and Me” Richard Wright, *Partisan Review*, 1935¹

AND one morning while in the woods I stumbled suddenly upon the thing,
Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly oaks and elms.

And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves between the world
and me. . . .

There was a design of white bones slumbering forgottenly upon a cushion of
ashes.

There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt finger accusingly at the
sky.

There were torn tree limbs, tiny veins of burnt leaves, and a scorched coil of
greasy hemp;

A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat, and a pair of trousers
stiff with black blood.

And upon the trampled grass were buttons, dead matches, butt-ends of cigars
and cigarettes, peanut shells, a drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick;

Scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the lingering smell of
gasoline.

And through the morning air the sun poured yellow surprise into the eye sockets of a stony skull. . . .

And while I stood my mind was frozen with a cold pity for the life that was gone.

The ground gripped my feet and my heart was circled by icy walls of fear—

The sun died in the sky; a night wind muttered in the grass and fumbled the leaves in the trees; the woods poured forth the hungry yelping of hounds; the darkness screamed with thirsty voices; and the witnesses rose and lived:

The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves into my bones.

The grey ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into my flesh. The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth; cigars and cigarettes glowed, the whore smeared the lipstick red upon her lips,

And a thousand faces swirled around me, clamoring that my life be burned. . . .

And then they had me, stripped me, battering my teeth into my throat till I swallowed my own blood.

My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices, and my black wet body slipped and rolled in their hands as they bound me to the sapling.

And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, falling from me in limp patches.

And the down and quills of the white feathers sank into my raw flesh, and I moaned in my agony.

Then my blood was cooled mercifully, cooled by a baptism of gasoline.

And in a blaze of red I leaped to the sky as pain rose like water, boiling my limbs.

Panting, begging I clutched childlike, clutched to the hot sides of death.

Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in yellow surprise at the sun. . . .

Sermon “Black Lives Matter” Rev. Paul Sprecher

The New Yorker, “Shouts & Murmurs,” JANUARY 11, 2016:

“Day of Judgment,” SIMON RICH

The Messiah floated gently down Eighth Avenue, His arms spread wide, as if to hug mankind. . . .

His throne came to a stop above Times Square A pair of cherubs sat on his shoulders, playing silver trumpets. . . .

“I am the Messiah,” the deity announced. . . . “And I have come to bring you all salvation.”

Some reporters had assembled

“Feel free to ask me what you wish,” “Chris Matthews, you can go first.”

“Thank you [Matthews] said. . . . “What, exactly, do you mean by ‘salvation?’”

. . . .

“All suffering will cease,” . . . “And Earth shall be turned into a heaven.”

The crowd cheered wildly. Strangers embraced. The elderly danced like children. . . .

“O.K., who’s next? How about you, Al Roker?”

The cheering stopped.

“What’s wrong?” the Messiah asked. The cherubs whispered something into His ear.

“Oh,” He said, turning pale. “I’m sorry. I meant Al Sharpton.” [Clear throat, forced smile....] “Go ahead, sir! ”

“O.K.,” Al Sharpton said. “I guess my question is: Why did you confuse me with Al Roker?”

“Look, I’m sorry....,” the Messiah said. “It’s just that you’re both named Al, and you’re both on TV.”

Sharpton raised an eyebrow.

“Are you sure it’s not because we’re both African-American?”

“It’s not that! ” the Messiah said. “I’m just really bad with faces. Ask anyone.”

....

“Look, this is crazy,” the Messiah said. “It was an honest mistake. I’m the Messiah—I love all mankind! I’m not racist, O.K.? I’m not racist! ” “I have black friends. I’m a fan of black culture! ” “I love Kanye West! ”

Times Square fell silent.

“O.K.,” the Messiah murmured. “Let’s just stop for the day. I’ll come back tomorrow, and we’ll try again. Or something. Sound good?”

[Back in heaven,] The Messiah paced back and forth on His cloud, [Googling himself] on His iPad.

“This is ridiculous,” He said.... “If you type ‘Messiah’ into the search box, the first thing that comes up is ‘Messiah racist.’ Not ‘Messiah salvation’ or ‘Messiah to end death.’ ‘Messiah racist! ’ ”

.... “This is crazy! ” He nudged one of the cherubs in the ribs.... “You guys think this is crazy, right?”

“Oh, sweet and noble Messiah,” [one of them] said, in a honeyed voice. “The thing is . . . Al Sharpton and Al Roker look nothing alike. Al Sharpton has a mustache, and Al Roker doesn’t. Also, Sharpton has hair and Roker is completely bald.”

.... “So you’re telling me you’ve never made a mistake like that? You’ve never confused two black guys before?”

“No,”

“Not even once?”

“No.”

“O.K.,” He said. “Let’s fly back down. We’re doing my plan. ”

.... “I’m not a racist,” the Messiah said [when they arrived]. “But you don’t have to take my word for it. Instead, I ask you to take the word of . . . the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.! ”

The crowd watched ... as the Reverend descended from Heaven....

“O.K., Martin,” “Tell them that I’m not a racist! ”

The Reverend averted his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” the Messiah demanded.

“To be honest,” King said, “this whole situation makes me extremely uncomfortable.”

“You can go back to Heaven in two seconds,” the Messiah promised. “Just tell them, really quickly, how we hang out and everything.”

“But we don’t hang out.”

“What about that time we played golf?”

“We never played golf.”

“Sure we did! Remember? You told me all those crazy stories about growing up in Michigan?”

“Michigan?” “Are you sure you’re not thinking of Malcolm X?”

“O.K., I know that was bad,” the Messiah said. “That was bad....

“Martin and Malcolm both start with an ‘M’!” the Messiah shouted, as King and Sharpton exchanged a weary look. “And they’re from the same era! And they both did race stuff!”

Al Sharpton raised an eyebrow. “‘Race stuff’?”

The Messiah buried His head in His hands and groaned. When He finally looked up, there were tears in His eyes.

“O.K.,” he whispered. “I admit it. I never realized this before, but, I guess, the truth is, I’m a little bit . . . racist.”

A few days later, [he] appeared on “The Rachel Maddow Show.” His apology was eloquent and obviously genuine.

“I came to save mankind,” He said. “But, in the end, mankind saved me.”

“Where do you go from here?” Maddow asked.

“I’m taking an educational trip to Africa,” He said, “to improve my understanding of diversity.”

“Are you still going to bring salvation to mankind?”

“I’m not really focused on my career right now,” the Messiah said. “My goal is just to resolve my personal issues. I obviously have a lot of hatred inside me, which I was completely unaware of. Hopefully, though, with the help of therapy, I can unpack my white privilege and inspire others to do the same.”

“So when will you return?”

“I’ll return when all our hearts are fully purged of racism. When we see a man’s face and no longer notice the color of his skin.”

“And how long will that take?”

The Messiah shrugged. “We’ll see.”²

So, if even the Messiah can’t get it right....

The reality is that discussions of race, Black Lives Matter, and racism have become toxic, not only in the Republican race for the presidency of the United States, but in our own ranks as well. On the last day of our Unitarian Universalist

General Assembly last June in Portland, Oregon, an Action of Immediate Witness entitled “SUPPORT THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT” was debated and ultimately passed, but only after a “heated and complicated debate.”³ The debate is described by the article reporting on it this way:

Before they raised their voting cards in an overwhelming show of support for the AIW, delegates spent nearly two hours in a frustrating parliamentary process that left many feeling hurt. The debate aimed at clarifying the meaning of “prison abolition” in the draft AIW, which the Youth Caucus had written. Ultimately, delegates voted to suspend the rules long enough to allow an amendment that defined the term, even as some people of color and members of the Youth Caucus were talking about withdrawing support or leaving the hall. As passed, the AIW urges UUs “to work towards police reform and prison abolition, which seeks to replace the current prison system with a system that is more just and equitable.” After the final vote, delegates chanted, “Black lives matter! Black lives matter!”⁴

Last year at this Martin Luther King, Jr., service (and thereafter), Unitarian Universalists rightly celebrated the courage and determination of our members and leaders who went to Selma in response to the call by King to stand in solidarity with the movement to secure voting rights even in the heart of the Deep South – a struggle which resulted in the martyrdom of Jimmy Jones, Viola Liuzzo, and

James Reeb, the latter two Unitarian Universalists committed to social justice for all.

If only that struggle had resulted in equal justice and dignity for all, today's fractured conversation on race would be much simpler. But after that came the "Empowerment Controversy" of the late 1960's, a struggle that represented an embodiment of the Black Power movement within our ranks and gave rise to conflict powerful enough to cause many African American members – and also many political conservatives – to leave Unitarian Universalist congregations; a conflict that was not put to rest for over thirty years, and that still causes hurt and pain to this day. Twenty years ago, Unitarian Universalists began a "Journey Toward Wholeness" – as one of the training courses in anti-racism was called – on the way to declaring Unitarian Universalism to be an anti-racist, anti-oppression movement. And today many of our congregations – and the denomination as a whole – are in the forefront of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. The resolution passed at the General Assembly reads in part:

WHEREAS, Unitarian Universalists strive for justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

WHEREAS, Unitarian Universalists have a goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

WHEREAS, allowing injustice to go unchallenged violates our principles;

WHEREAS, the Black Lives Matter movement has gained powerful traction in conjunction with recent tragic events involving, in particular, police brutality and institutionalized racism that target the black community;

WHEREAS, Tanisha Anderson, Rekia Boyd, Michael Brown, Miriam Carey, Michelle Cusseaux, Shelly Frey, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, Kayla Moore, Tamir Rice, and Tony Robinson are just a few names of people who were recently killed by the racism that exists in the United States today;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the 2015 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association calls member congregations to action, to become closer to a just world community, and to prevent future incidents of this nature;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the 2015 General Assembly encourages member congregations and all Unitarian Universalists to work toward police reform and prison abolition (which seeks to replace the current prison system with a system that is more just and equitable); and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the 2015 General Assembly recognizes that the fight for civil rights and equality is as real today as it was decades ago and urges member congregations to take initiative in collaboration with local and national organizations fighting for racial justice against the harsh racist practices to which many black people are exposed.

No matter who you are, black lives matter, and a system of fair, transformative, and restorative justice that is accountable to communities is something to which each of us has a right. Unitarian Universalists and our greater society have the power to make this happen. Let's do it!⁵

Of course, this Action of Immediate Witness was adopted against the background of a much broader national awareness of the degree to which African Americans – especially young men – are killed in interactions with police. It was adopted as awareness of the existence of mass incarceration of African Americans far out of proportion to their population in this country, and to a growing nationwide awareness of the growing prison-industrial complex, including the spread of for-profit jails, prisons & detainment facilities. It was adopted just before the racist shootings of nine African Americans at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston and the removal of the Confederate battle flag and a number of other monuments to the Confederacy, especially in the South. And, finally, the race for the Republican nomination for the Presidency has included both attacks on “Political Correctness” and outright encouragement to racist beliefs and organizations.

So, a question for this congregation is whether we should consider putting up a Black Lives Matter banner in the same way a number of our other congregations have done. I would mention that we proudly fly the rainbow flag to signal our welcome to people regardless of race, sex, creed, or gender preference; so might

such a banner be an appropriate and more explicit expression of our congregation's commitment to anti-racism? We would of course need to do so only after due consideration and after noting that a number of such banners in our churches and elsewhere have been defaced or otherwise vandalized; that deciding to place such a banner has created significant dissent in some of our congregations and in our movement more broadly; and that neighbors of some of our congregations have reacted with hurt and condemnation.

We cannot and must not be unaware of the long history of oppression of African Americans in our nation. A number of you recently read the searing indictment of the racist prison-industrial complex in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander and participated in conversations about the book with our friends at Messiah Baptist in Brockton. Some of you are joining the discussion we're starting after church today about the searing indictment of the justice system, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stevenson. I'm proud that three of our other UU congregations on the South Shore (Plymouth, Duxbury & Kingston) are also reading *Just Mercy* and that all of us will be gathering at Messiah Baptist for conversation with our African American friends there in March. And a number of us have gotten to understand the system of incarceration that ensnares such a disproportionate proportion of African American men with our "Read to Me, Father" program at the Old Colony Correctional Center here in Bridgewater.

The struggle against the old Jim Crow in the 1950's and 1960's was long and hard and frequently resisted with violence. And we can never ignore the long shadow of brutality – especially lynching – represented by Richard Wright's poem – our reading this morning, "Between the World and Me." The same words were used by Ta-Nehisi Coates in his best-selling and highly regarded book of the same title last year, from which our Thought for Contemplation this morning is drawn. We cannot forget that much of the accumulated capital that is our heritage from the cotton industry here in Massachusetts was extracted as a result of the free labor of slaves; or that the White House itself was built with slave labor; or that African Americans have been in this country longer than almost all of the immigrants of many races who have arrived here since.

We cannot forget that the realities of African American lives in many of our inner cities result from years of oppression, from families wrenched apart, and from deliberate denials of human dignity. Nor can we fail to be aware that understanding the reasons for dysfunctional behavior and violent crime is not a basis for excusing violent and destructive behavior. We need to know that mass incarceration will not be ended overnight; that the destruction of inner-city neighborhoods cannot be reversed overnight; and that souls as well as bodies have been desperately damaged by police brutality, mass incarceration, and mass unemployment – and that we must find ways to focus on rehabilitation rather than

punishment if we are truly to build a just and equitable society “with peace, liberty and justice for all.”

We also need to be aware that “white privilege,” as important as it is, does not mean that all whites experience themselves as privileged. The bargain between rich whites and poor whites in the South during and after slavery didn’t confer wealth or privilege on poor whites – it just made them less inclined to object to inequality by allowing them to hold on to the fact that at least they were not slaves or subject to Jim Crow. The same holds true today and is at the root of the support for much of the demagoguery and racist rhetoric we are hearing today. Thandeka, one of our African American UU theologians, responding to the the anti-racism work undertaken some twenty years ago, notes that one of the problems in that era’s UU anti-racist strategies was:

... the errant assumption that white America works for white Americans. Any one who cares to look will quickly discover that it doesn't - at least, not for the vast majority of them. The privilege that, according to the anti-racists, comes with membership in white America, actually belongs to a tiny elite.⁶

Inequality affecting both African Americans and everyone else has only worsened since she wrote these words.

This is difficult work. As the piece from the *New Yorker* suggests, “it’s complicated.”

So what is to be done? A few thoughts:

- Pay attention; read, discuss, become aware, and above all listen.
- Turn down the volume; there is no one right answer or perspective or truth. We commit ourselves in our covenant to “speak the truth in love.”
Love recognizes that there will be differences of politics, of sensitivity, and of understanding. Accusations of racism serve largely as conversation stoppers.
- Get to know one another; find opportunities to talk to and listen to people different than you, in different circumstances and with different experiences. Practice recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of every person.
- Avoid self-righteousness. We are all broken in one way or another. We all suffer loss from time to time and none of us will ever be perfect. Listen long and hard before condemning.
- Call out scapegoating. The most toxic appeals offered by politicians create divisions among us. No one and no group is to blame for everything; all of us are accountable. Help to avoid making divisions among us worse by objecting to statements that start “All [blank] are....”
All Mexicans, Republicans, Conservatives, African Americans, prisoners ... the list is endless and should always be challenged.

So – should we put up a “Black Lives Matter” banner? That’s a decision only the congregation can make. If we choose to consider that question, let’s make sure

we do it in a way that doesn't increase divisions; that means having long and careful conversations among ourselves, with our neighbors, and especially with those who would oppose such a display.

We remember Martin Luther King, Jr., especially this weekend. Our prelude this morning was his favorite hymn, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" – a hymn that reminds us that the path he was walking to freedom was long and hard and full of sorrow – and of hope! We remember his life because of the high character, the courage, and the compassion he evinced. Echoing the words of the Buddha, King said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."⁷

Let love be our guide as we speak and as we act.

May it be so, and amen.

¹ *The Partisan Reader: Ten Years of the Partisan Review 1934-1944: An Anthology*, New York: The Dial Press, 1946, pp. 218-219.

² The New Yorker, Shouts & Murmurs JANUARY 11, 2016 ISSUE "Day of Judgment," SIMON RICH, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/01/11/day-of-judgment>

³ "Board expresses regret for 'enflamed debate' of Black Lives Matter resolution," ELAINE MCARDLE, *UU World Online*, 11/12/2015, <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/october-2015-board-meeting>

⁴ "Rejoice and struggle: An intense UUA General Assembly celebrates marriage equality, affirms Black Lives Matter," ELAINE MCARDLE, CHRISTOPHER L. WALTON, 9/10/2015, *UU World*, FALL 2015, <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/rejoice-and-struggle>

⁵ "SUPPORT THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT," 2015 Action of Immediate Witness, UUA General Assembly, Portland, OR, <http://www.uua.org/statements/support-black-lives-matter-movement>

⁶ Thandeka, "Why Anti-Racism Will Fail," *Journal of Liberal Religion* 1:1; available online at http://www.filmsforaction.org/articles/why-antiracism-will-fail/#.VcEcvI7417l.google_plusone_share

⁷ <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/martinluth101472.html#8Lk9d2gpfrCyb0Ux.99>