

RESISTING AMERICA'S RESURGENT RACISM

MARTIN LUTHER KING SUNDAY

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
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Reading Before the Sermon:

From a recent report from the Southern Poverty Law Center, about a spike in racist incidents here in America associated with the November election results

[Since the November 7th Presidential election, there has been] a national outbreak of hate, as white supremacists celebrate Donald Trump's victory. In the ten days following the election, there were almost 900 reports of harassment and intimidation from across the nation. Many harassers invoked Trump's name during assaults, making it clear that the outbreak of hate stemmed in large part from his electoral success.

People have experienced harassment at school, at work, at home, on the street, in public transportation, in their cars, in grocery stores and other places of business, and in their houses of worship. They most often have received messages of hate and intolerance through graffiti and verbal harassment, although a small number also have reported violent physical interactions. Some incidents were directed at the Trump campaign or his supporters.

Of course, hate crimes and lower-level incidents of racial or ethnically charged harassment have long been common in the United States, but the targets of post-election hate incidents report that they are experiencing something quite new.

"I have experienced discrimination in my life, but never in such a public and unashamed manner," an Asian-American woman reported after a man told her to "go home" as she left an Oakland train station. Likewise, a black resident whose apartment was vandalized with the phrase "911 nigger" reported that he had "never witnessed anything like this." A Los Angeles woman, who encountered a man who told her he was "Gonna beat her [private female parts]," stated that she was in this neighborhood "all the time and never experienced this type of language before." Not far away in Sunnyvale, California, a transgender person reported being targeted with homophobic slurs at a bar where "I've been a regular customer for 3 years - never had any issues."

In his *60 Minutes* interview that aired on November 13, President-elect Trump claimed that he was "surprised to hear" that some of his supporters had been using racial slurs and making threats against African Americans, Latinos, and gays. He shouldn't have been. In his November 23 interview with *The New York Times*, Trump claimed he had no idea why white supremacists – the so-called "alt right" – had been "energized" by his campaign. Again, it's no mystery. Both the harassment since the election and the energy on the radical right are the predictable results of the campaign that Trump waged for the presidency – a campaign marked by incendiary racial statements, the stoking of white racial resentment, and attacks on so-called "political correctness."

At this point, it is not enough for Trump to look in the camera and say "Stop it!" to the harassers, as he did on *60 Minutes*. Nor is it enough for him to simply "disavow" the white supremacists who see him as their champion, as he did at *The New York Times*. If he is to make good on the first promise he made as the president-elect – his pledge to "bind the wounds of division" in our

country – he must repair the damage that his campaign has caused. Rather than feign ignorance, he must acknowledge that his own words have opened "wounds of division" in our country. Rather than simply saying "Stop it!" and disavowing the radical right, he must speak out forcefully and repeatedly against all forms of bigotry and reach out to the communities his words have injured. And rather than merely saying that he "wants to bring the country together," his actions must consistently demonstrate he is doing everything in his power to do so. Until President-elect Trump does these things, the hate that his campaign has unleashed is likely to continue to flourish.

Here ends the morning's reading.

The Sermon

"Dear God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight." Psalm 19:14

This is a sermon, dear friends, that I hoped I would never have to preach. For the longest time (the last several decades, really) as an optimistic Unitarian Universalist and hopeful social progressive I had regularly persuaded myself that racism – while an obviously persistent, pervasive and painful American problem that always requires our moral vigilance and attention – was nonetheless slowly but steadily receding "into the rearview mirror" of our shared American experience. Clearly Americans should take real pride and hope in the undeniable truth that over recent decades, so many blatant, institutional forms of racism have been dismantled – in government, in the work place, in housing, commerce and education. Furthermore, ugly personal prejudice against racial minorities seemed (at least on the surface of things) on the decline...and the younger generations of Americans, who have grown up in a decidedly richer multi-cultural and racial context, seem to be much less susceptible to racial prejudice and discrimination than their parents and grandparents. So while I have never been blind to the many ways that racism in all its pernicious forms persists in American life, I did believe (optimist that I am) that it was slowly but steadily being eradicated from the American heart and soul.

But events of the last couple of years – and we'll enumerate some of these sad realities in a moment – events of the last couple of years have made it painfully obvious to anyone paying attention that there is now a dangerous resurgence of racism in these United States. Actually, maybe "resurgence" is the wrong word...maybe the uptick in racist acts and racist speech that we are witnessing across America is not so much a "resurgence" as it is something old and ugly that has suddenly been "unleashed, unchained, and legitimized" – most recently triggered (as was spelled out in the recent report by the Southern Poverty Law Center which I read to you earlier in the service) by the racially tinged and racially divisive Presidential campaign waged so shamelessly by President-elect Donald J. Trump. But clearly (before we address the very real problem of Mr. Trump) some of America's "resurgent" – or at least "newly visible" – racism predates the recently concluded presidential campaign, doesn't it?

I'm referring, in particular, to all recent and sadly regular police shootings of unarmed Black males, killings that are, I believe, symptomatic of an underlying and persistent racism that is clearly buried deep in the very soul and soil of our nation. You may not realize that Police in America (and I must pause here to remind everyone of the truth that the overwhelming majority of these law enforcement personnel are honorable and responsible servants of the communities they serve) but nonetheless police officers killed at least 102 unarmed Black people – mostly unarmed young males – in 2015 (the last year for which complete statistics are available) nearly two questionable deaths a week...and every indication is that the statistics for 2016 will prove

equally deadly. Fully 37% of unarmed people killed by police in 2015 were Black, despite the fact that Black people are only 13% of the population...which means that unarmed Black people are killed at 5 times the rate of unarmed Whites...and I believe that is clear evidence of an underlying racism in our culture. Compounding this racial tragedy is the widespread and hostile backlash by many White folks that we witnessed all across America to the Black Lives Matter movement – a movement which arose in moral response to all these questionable killings. It was as if many White Americans who support the reactive Blue Lives Matter movement – that wants us to only pay attention to violence against police – refuse, absolutely refuse, to see that unnecessary police violence against Black males is common, racist and culturally unacceptable. Steve Bannon, the "Alt-Right...White Nationalist" media guru whom Donald Trump recklessly appointed as Chief White House Strategist...

...and let me stop right here and express my absolute moral outrage at this inexplicable and shameful appointment. Mr. Bannon is the former chairman of *Breitbart News* – an ultra-conservative website and radio platform – that regularly wanders into racist, anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rants. I listened to *Breitbart News* some on the radio this summer while driving to and from the Adirondacks...and believe me, their screeds against minorities and Muslims are unbelievably ugly! In any case, even Bannon himself admits that *Breitbart News* is "a platform" for white supremacists and white nationalists on the "alt-right." Because of these sinister, ugly and Un-American connections, Mr. Bannon has no legitimate or rightful place in the White House – or anywhere else in government – and I have written President-elect Trump urging him to revoke this unacceptable and un-American appointment.

Regardless of whether or not President-elect Trump will do the right thing and get rid of this sinister guy, let's take a look at what Mr. Bannon – again remember he has been appointed as the "Chief Strategist" for the White House – has to say about all the recent police shootings of dozens of unarmed young black males. Mr. Bannon (clearly revealing his racist tendencies) said this about all the recent deaths of unarmed young Black males at the hands of the police: "What if the people getting shot by the cops did things to deserve it? There are, after all, in this world, some people who are naturally aggressive and violent"...no racism here, right, unarmed young Black males who get shot are "naturally aggressive and violent"?

But back to my overall point here about America's resurgent racism. Between:

- all the recent police shootings of unarmed Blacks, and...
- the blatantly racist campaign rhetoric of President-elect Trump, and...
- the subsequent surge in racist-and-hate-incidences all across America that we addressed in this morning's reading)...

clearly there is now a resurgence of racism in America...a resurgence we as concerned American citizens and committed Unitarian Universalists must resist, reject and refuse.

And that resistance, dear friends, frankly must begin with our challenging and refusing to accept or "normalize" or in any way any racist proclamations or policies on the part of the incoming President and/or members of his administration. As Americans committed to the inclusive, equitable and race-blind principles upon which this nation was founded, we must hold Mr. Trump (and everyone in his administration who serves our nation on his behalf) accountable for everything they say or do in terms of race in America. And, after the divisive tone and tenor of the campaign Mr. Trump ran, we have every reason to be concerned about his racial attitudes and actions, don't we?

From the very first moment of his campaign:

- 1) When he came down that escalator at Trump Tower and called the Mexican people coming to the United States "rapists and murderers"...
- 2) To his repeated statements that America is "under siege" from "dangerous" Muslim refugees and Mexican immigrants...
- 3) To his indignant and completely unfounded accusation that the judge presiding over his "Trump University" lawsuit – highly respected Federal Judge Gonzalo Curiel – could not be fair or impartial because of his "Hispanic" and "Mexican" heritage, despite the fact that the judge is a native-born American from Indiana...
- 4) To his long personal history of saying and doing racist things against African Americans: beginning with his total refusal back in the 1970s to allow qualified Black persons to rent apartments in buildings owned by his family in New York City...
- 5) To his refusal – despite irrefutable DNA evidence – to accept the innocence of the so-called "Central Park Five" (five innocent young African American males falsely imprisoned for allegedly raping a White woman in New York's Central Park in 1989)...
- 6) To his recent refusal to denounce the support he received from the KKK and other White supremacist and nationalist groups...

By all these actions and more, Mr. Trump has repeatedly proven himself racially prejudiced... racially prejudiced especially against Blacks, Latinos, Muslims, and immigrants. Now Mr. Trump, of course, categorically denies that he has any racist tendencies, prejudices or beliefs. Even as over the course of his campaign he made numerous and explicit racist statements, he regularly boasted to reporters and others, "I'm the least racist person that you have ever encountered," as if repeatedly proclaiming this rather ridiculous statement somehow inoculated himself against all his patently racist rhetoric!

As a citizen of this increasingly multi-cultural, multi-racial society (which is – in my view – a positive social trend that surely no politician, not even the President, can thwart, reverse, or even slow), I nonetheless have great fears for the racial future of our nation under the influence of Mr. Trump. The sad but simple truth, dear friends, is that a President with clearly racist attitudes is being inaugurated next Friday, and his backward and discriminatory attitudes and policy proposals may well poison race relations in the United States for years, if not decades, to come.

So what can be done – at this critical juncture in American history – by those of us who know that we are called upon to resist racism, and help to create a society that is truly equitable, just, inclusive and race-blind? This might not be what many of you are expecting to hear from me right now, but the first thing we must all do, of course, is to have the honesty and courage to look inside ourselves, at our own attitudes and actions and be willing to face our own racial fears and prejudices.

If all we do right now, frankly, is focus on Mr. Trump and those blatantly racist people in America who think and act like him, we will miss the greatest opportunity we have to make America live up to its equitable and inclusive potential...which is to begin at home with our own attitudes! Even though we have every right to "call out" Mr. Trump for all his racist rhetoric and potentially racist policies, I believe in the end we must begin with ourselves, putting our own houses in order before we focus on and criticize others.

To this end, on the weekend of March 4 and 5, the Black Lives Matter Taskforce of the Social Justice Committee has scheduled a second weekend conference on Racism, which is designed to help its participants come to terms with their own racial assumptions and attitudes. I urge everyone here this morning to consider registering for this very useful workshop because even as (in these harrowing political times) we resist and refuse Mr. Trump's overt and ugly racism, we must at the same time be willing to work on our own hearts and minds – realizing that American racism is buried (to some degree...and often in more subtle forms) in every one of us, no matter how pure our intentions are as Unitarian Universalists.

Another thing we can do to begin to combat racism (beginning with ourselves) is to read – and if you are ready to do so, sign – "The Treasure Coast Pledge" which we enclosed in your orders of service this morning.

[THE FOLLOWING HANDS GRAPHIC AND YELLOW-HIGHLIGHTED WORDS ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

THE TREASURE COAST PLEDGE



Help End Racism One Person at a Time

Sign it! Live it! Share it!

The Treasure Coast Pledge is a grassroots effort, based on a pledge developed in Birmingham, Alabama and subsequently in Richmond, Virginia – to recognize the worth of every individual, by making a personal, daily commitment to remove prejudice from our own lives, and to treat all people with dignity and respect.

Recognizing that change starts with the individual, people on The Treasure Coast – public officials, individual citizens and members of various faith communities – are being asked to sign The Treasure Coast Pledge, to raise awareness of issues of racism in our area, and to commit to working together to solve those issues.

Will you all please join me now in reading the pledge in unison? I would remind you that the decision whether or not to actually sign the pledge – and commit yourself to its anti-racist standards – is yours and yours alone to make at a later time. Let us read this together:

[THE TREASURE COAST PLEDGE IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

THE TREASURE COAST PLEDGE

I BELIEVE that every person has worth as an individual.

I BELIEVE that every person is entitled to dignity and respect, regardless of race, ethnicity or culture.

I BELIEVE that every thought and every act of racial prejudice is harmful, if it is my thought or act, then it is harmful to me as well as to others.

THEREFORE, from this day forward, I will strive daily to eliminate racial prejudice from my thoughts and actions.

I WILL discourage racial prejudice by others at every opportunity.

I WILL greet all people with dignity and respect.

I WILL commit to working with others to transform the Treasure Coast region into a place that treats people of all races, ethnicities, and cultures with justice, equity and compassion, and,

I WILL strive daily to honor this pledge, knowing that the world will be a better place because of my effort.

If, after reading and reflecting on this pledge, you are prepared to sign your name to it, please do so soon. Your signature (and I urge you NOT to sign this pledge unless you have seriously reflected on what it obliges you to do) commits you to do everything you can to end racism in our community and culture...not to mention in your own heart.

This Pledge will soon be made public and will go viral here on the Treasure Coast. Soon (in my regular column in *The Press Journal* – our regional newspaper) I will be inviting and challenging everyone on the Treasure Coast to consider signing the pledge, and will be looking for other venues – including, I hope the Compassion Vero Website – through which to share this pledge.

[THE TREASURE COAST PLEDGE COMES DOWN OFF THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

We must begin the work of resisting and refusing racism by working on ourselves. But this realization (that we all first must be willing to work on our own internal racial attitudes and assumptions) does not mean that we should refrain in any way from calling President-elect Trump to account for his overt and unacceptable racism. And this will be especially and urgently true for us if the Trump Administration attempts to impose any new federal policies or programs which would in any way support or allow racial inequality, injustice or discrimination.

Let me give one example of just such a policy danger.

[PICTURE OF DR. BEN CARSON IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

Dr. Ben Carson



As you all know, despite his almost total lack of qualifications for or experience with the duties of the post, Mr. Trump has selected Dr. Ben Carson – who happens to be African American – as his incoming Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. Under President Obama, HUD has required state and local governments that receive federal housing money to stop dumping subsidized housing in poor neighborhoods, and instead locate some of that housing in healthier neighborhoods where minority and other residents would have access to transportation, jobs and decent schools – making a good-faith effort to break down patterns of racial and economic segregation. But last year Mr. Carson (while running for President himself) accused this HUD policy of being dangerous "social engineering," implying that he would "put a stop to it."

I believe that any attempt to undo this requirement (that poor and minority populations be blended into healthier American communities) would lead to more racial segregation and inequality for minority populations – and would therefore be "a racist step backwards" for our nation. This is just one concrete example of how the White House can, in a hundred different, bureaucratic, "wonk-ish" ways, negatively affect the racial future of the nation. Surely there are many more possible federal actions and policies that President-elect Trump could attempt to enact that would be similarly detrimental to the welfare of racial minorities...most especially Latinos and Blacks. In the months and years ahead, all of us who care about racial equality and progress must be vigilant to preserve and protect Federal policies that have worked for years to ensure that all Americans have fair and equal access to "The American Dream."

[PICTURE OF DR. BEN CARSON COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]

Here is the bottom line, this morning, my dear friends...and you surely all know this. In so many ways, these are deadly and dangerous times in America. From the economy, to education, to health care, to world diplomacy and trade, to women's reproductive freedom, to the global environment, so very much is at stake with this new administration.

And one truly grave concern – a concern we must not fail to acknowledge on this Martin Luther King weekend – is that our great nation is about to be burdened by a president who has repeatedly proven himself to have racist attitudes and understandings. Now if Mr. Trump proves himself to be content to just ruminate on his private prejudices in the dark recesses of his own psyche, I will be content to leave him and his administration alone, and not (as a citizen) challenge him.

But if he attempts to in any way structure these prejudices and inequalities into the workings of our American life and government, I will resist him with every fiber of my being...and I pray you will too.

Amen.