

Reverend Colin Bossen
May 24, 2015
Theme: Heroes
Sermon: Breaking White Silence

CALL TO WORSHIP

Memory,
enduring,
slippery,
ever present,
ever changing,
sparked by smells,
sights,
the mind's internal universe,
infinite,
expansive,
particular.

We gather this day
in a community of memory
remembering that our holiday,
Memorial Day,
began as a celebration of the end of slavery
and a commemoration of the Union soldiers
who fell to abolish it.

Let us honor memory
and all of those
who fell dreaming, struggling, hoping for a better world
be they abolitionist, soldier, war resister, feminist martyr,
gay icon, indigenous activist, or environmentalist guerilla.
Come, friends, let us worship together.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Join me in the spirit that some call prayer and others call meditation.

Close your eyes,
open your ears,
open your minds,
open your hearts.

Hope begins
with dreams and memory.
Dreams of what might be.
Memories of what was.

Dreams of future freedom,
honest work,
words spun together
like gossamer glass,
wood worked
into chairs,
cabinets,
tables,
fields planted
for generations to come.

Memories of hands clasped
together in peaceful prayer.

Memories of sunshine
in particular moments
when the presence
of the divine
sparkles in the smallest electric flower.

Memories of better times,
better places,
avenues now desolate
filled with shuffling crowds,
unkind words unspoken.

Dreams and memory,
they fuel our hope,
today,
on this holiday,
let us open ourselves
to their intertwined power
and begin again
in our seeking of what should be.

Amen and Blessed Be.

READING “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” by
Audre Lorde

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood... Some of what I experienced... has helped elucidate for much of what I feel concerning the transformation of silence into language and action...

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?

...My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.

SERMON

It is fitting this morning, on this Memorial Day holiday, that I offer you a sermon on breaking white silence. Most people forget that this holiday began in May 1865. The formerly enslaved community of Charleston, South Carolina gathered to honor the Union war dead and celebrate the abolition of slavery. This morning's sermon is perhaps doubly fitting because I offer it here, in Follen Community Church. Organized and named after the great Unitarian abolitionists Charles and Eliza Follen, your congregation was proclaiming black lives matter in 1830s. The work your congregation, and so many others, began in distant years remains urgent today.

The death of Freddie Gray and the resulting riots in Baltimore made this clear, yet again, just a few weeks ago. The events at the end of April and the beginning of this month meant that for one brief moment, the first Sunday of the month across the United States, sermons wrestled with the same issue. In Boston, in New York, in Dallas, in Detroit, in Chicago, in Atlanta, in Los Angeles, in Washington, DC, and, yes, in Baltimore, ministers talked with their congregations about race and racism, white supremacy, demonstrations, riots, and police violence. There were sermons on the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movements. There were sermons on the necessity of action. They challenged us to seize the urgent moment. There were sermons calling for healing. They reminded us that whatever the color of our skin we are all living members “of the great family of all souls.”

Most of these sermons had same general features. They began by declaring the death of Freddy Gray a horrid tragedy. They made some observations about the protests in Baltimore and linked those protests to the events in Ferguson. They might have mentioned Michael Brown, Eric Garner, or Tamar Rice. They might have celebrated Marilyn Mosby's decision to charge the police officers involved with Gray's death. They have might described the national epidemic of police violence; 448 people have been killed by police since the start of the year. Perhaps they referred to the vast

disparity between white and black wealth. The average white family has twenty times the assets of the average black family. The unemployment and poverty rates for African Americans are twice those of whites. Maybe they admitted to the racist nature of our criminal justice system. African Americans are incarcerated at six times the rates of whites.

The majority of these sermons, I suspect, invoked Martin King. The moderate preachers probably quoted from safe texts like his famous “I Have a Dream,” “Let us not wallow in the valley of despair... my friends.” A bolder few, perhaps, cited his sermon at the National Cathedral. They deplored, “We must face the sad fact that at eleven o’clock on Sunday morning... we stand in the most segregated hour of America.” The bravest clergy may have invoked his speech “The Other America” to observe, “a riot is the language of the unheard.” They quoted him to assign blame for the nation’s racial problems, “riots are caused by nice, gentle, timid white moderates who are more concerned about order than justice.”

I imagine that whatever quote from King the preacher picked the vast majority of the morning’s services ended on a note of hope. Maybe the minister decided to offer a prayer for racial reconciliation. Maybe the congregation joined their voices together in “We Shall Overcome.” Maybe the benediction summoned James Baldwin and finished with the encouraging admonition, “Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise.”

Taken together these sermons came close to a national conversation on race. For one hour, for a few minutes, the reigning white silence broken. White clergy like me preached about white America’s close to four hundred history of terrorizing, torturing, enslaving, killing, and imprisoning black and brown people. The brief rupture in white silence is over. Today I suspect that ministers are talking with the congregations about more pleasant matters: the purpose drive life, the religious value of laughter, the enduring importance of humanism, or approaching God through music. If we are ever going to

have any hope of transcending this nation's troubled racial history then the brief shattering of silence must become permanent. The great poet Audre Lorde challenged people to transform the silence that surrounds suffering into language and action. That is what we must do. White people need to learn to speak about race and white supremacy with the same frequency that brown and black people are violated by institutionalized racism. Pulpits like this one cannot succumb to white silence on those Sundays when racialized police violence is not in the headlines.

Breaking the enduring white silence requires clergy who are willing to preach about racism. More importantly, it requires congregations who are willing to listen to sermons that make them uncomfortable. Often pulpits remain in white silence because ministers are afraid of upsetting their congregants. Preaching is a privilege and a vocation. It is also a job. I am a sometime parish minister. I can attest that many congregants link their support of their church to their satisfaction with the minister's preaching. I know that too many unsettling sermons can cause some members pledging to go down.

We Unitarian Universalists like to uplift our social justice legacy. But I wonder how willing we really are to engage with the difficult work of transforming white silence into language and action. As an itinerant preacher I visit a lot of congregations. When I visit the settled minister of the congregations often asks me to preach about racial justice. What follows, unfortunately, is a scenario that has become familiar.

The scenario runs something like this. I deliver a sermon about how religious liberals should respond to this country's racist legacy. I use the word murder to describe the killings of black men like Freddy Gray, Amadou Diallo, and Trayvon Martin.

After the service, during coffee hour, a member of the congregation comes up to me and tells me that he was offended by my sermon. The member

usually fits the same profile. He is a straight white male over the age of seventy. He tells me that I was wrong to use the word murder to describe the violent deaths of black men and boys like John Crawford III and Sean Bell at the hands of the police.

His complaint appears in the form of a question, “Did you sit on the trial jury? Were you part of the grand jury? Do you work for the FBI?” This question is followed by a statement, “Because you are talking like you have some access to knowledge that the rest of us do not. It is the grand jury who decides if the police officers that killed Clinton Allen should be indicted for murder. It is the federal government who determines if the policemen who killed Dante Parker violated his civil rights. Your rhetoric is dangerous, incendiary and unfair.”

Perhaps that is true. I don't know what those juries know. What I do know is that in this country white police officers kill black men at the rate of two, three, or four a week. I know that the rate of police killings of African Americans now exceeds the rate of lynchings in the first decades of the twentieth century. I know that the decision of a state's attorney like Marilyn Mosby to charge police officers with murder is rare. I know that the conviction of police officers is even more rare. I know that in order for this to change white silence has to be transformed into language and action. All of the silence in the world will not offer protection from the institutionalized structures of racism. It is only by speaking, and speaking often, that we can begin to dismantle them.

A call to transform the enduring white silence is essentially a call to conversion. Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams defines conversion as a “fundamental change of heart and will.” Conversion brings about a change in perspective, a shift in a point of view. If you are white and relatively privileged try seeing the society from a black or brown point of view. Imagine that you are Freddy Gray. Imagine that you are arrested, handcuffed and placed face down on the sidewalk. No one answers your

request for an inhaler. You are put, head first, into a police van. The cops do not strap you in. They lay you on the floor. The van starts to move. It rattles about. It comes to a stop. You suffer a severe neck injury. You tell the police you need medical attention. They ignore you. By the time you arrive at the police station you are no longer breathing. A week later you are dead.

Such an act of imagination can be unsettling, even slightly traumatizing. It requires that we admit that ignorance of the racialized nature of our society is kind of privilege. We who are white can insulate ourselves from the reality that surrounds us. We can choose to be ignorant of the white supremacist nature of our society. We can surround ourselves with people who look like us. We can pretend the vast disparities of wealth between whites and people of color are accidental, not intentional.

Paul, or someone writing as Paul, reminded us in Ephesians that there is a price to be paid for such willful ignorance, “Their minds are closed, they are alienated from the life that is in God, because ignorance prevails among them and their hearts have grown hard as stone.” The author of this passage had in mind knowledge of God when he wrote it. I invoke it to suggest that choosing deliberate blindness and closing our eyes to the racist nature of our society will harden our hearts.

Softening our hearts requires that our pulpits are not silent on racial issues. Softening our hearts means that white Unitarian Universalists continue to talk about race next Sunday, next month, next year, and until we have finally overcome the racist legacy of the United States. It means that we have welcome words that trouble us. It means that we have to imagine our religious communities as sites for conversion.

Many of people come to Unitarian Universalist congregations seeking some kind of personal transformation. Breaking white silence means that we learn to link our personal transformation to our process of social transformation. To quote David Carl Olson, the minister of the First Unitarian Church of

Baltimore, it means understanding, “my liberation is bound up with yours.” Religious communities are uniquely positioned to teach us this lesson. What other institution in our society can prompt us to both examine our hearts--to ask us how we are seeing the world--and to challenge us to stand together to do something about the pain that we find there when we do?

I am practical person. And so, before I close I want to offer you a few simple suggestions that might prompt you on your way to conversion and becoming more comfortable with breaking white silence. Maybe you already do these things. If you do, keep doing them. If not, consider starting.

For a conversion to happen, you have to expand your perspective. And that means getting to know people who have different perspectives than you do. The Washington Post reports that three quarters of European Americans have no African American friends. Zero. None. Now, I admit that making friends is difficult. Most people I know tend to fall into friendships, they meet people through work, in their neighborhood, or at their church. If you are white and you work at a predominately white workplace, live in a largely white neighborhood and go to a mostly white church then chances are most of your friends will be white.

My suggestion? Get out more. Nurture an interest in cultures other than your own. Read books by African American authors. Start listening to hip hop, jazz, afro pop... Attend cultural events in African American neighborhoods. Visit a black church.

In addition, to expanding your perspective you have to ask questions and you have to commit to actions. You have to transform your previous silence into language and action. Ask yourself why you are comfortable or uncomfortable in certain situations and with certain people. Ask yourself how and why you benefit from our current social system. Ask yourself who the criminal justice system works for. Ask yourself why police officers so often get away with murder. And as you ask yourself questions think about

how you can act. What can you do as a congregation? How can you support your minister to break white silence? How can you mobilize your resources to transform the racist, white supremacist, criminal justice system? Can you urge your lawmakers to spend money on schools rather than prisons? Can you imagine a world without prisons?

If we are to accomplish anything, if we are to truly end white silence, it will require action as a religious community. It will mean that congregants come to expect their ministers to speak about race not only when there has been a riot, or on Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday, or during black history month, but often. It will mean recognizing that the time for conversion, the time for a change of heart, is now. It is time to say not one more. Not one more unarmed black child shot and killed by a police officer while playing on a playground. Not one more unarmed black man shot and killed while shopping in a grocery store. Not one more unarmed black man suffocated in the back of a police van.

May words like things ring across the land. May pulpits stand silent in the face of racial injustice no more. May we say not one more, not one more, not one more, until we truly transform silence into language and action.

Amen and Blessed Be.