

OUR SOULS PETITION

A sermon given to commemorate Black History Month

by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason

at UU Wellesley Hills on

Sunday, February 3rd, 2019

Every February has a national designation as Black History Month; it is time dedicated to honoring the history of African Americans and the countless contributions they have made to this country. My earliest exposures to Black History Month were glancing; it included a bulletin board in a school hallway, a public service announcement on the local television station, maybe a bookmark at the library listing recommended books by celebrated Black authors. All these things felt fairly perfunctory in the largely White towns in New England where I was raised, but were educational nonetheless. These days, though, when outrageous racial disparities remain glaring instances of injustice, it seems imperative for all of us to survey a heavier legacy of race in America, from slavery through today.

In his powerful book, Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America, the Rev. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson contends that “if we are to understand America, we must understand Blackness” and the crushing burdens imposed upon it by this nation. While having an African-American President serve two terms in the Oval Office seemed to signal significant progress, it was followed by tremendous backlash. The man elected to succeed him as Commander in Chief was the same one who publicly and perversely question his citizenship

and by implication, the legitimacy of his presidency. Eight years later, we did not find ourselves, as some had rather naively hoped, in a post-racial era, but rather in a time of inflamed racial tension and hateful racist rhetoric. White supremacists feel emboldened to march and rally, intimidate and terrorize, even to kill, as they did in Charlottesville in 2017.

Responding to our dire present reality, Dr. Dyson calls upon us to learn a new “language of moral repair... moral and spiritual passions can lead to a better day for our nation,” he contends in his homiletic work. A prolific author and Professor of Sociology at Georgetown University, Dr. Dyson started his career as a Baptist minister steeped in the Black church tradition. But he maintains that people of several different religious and spiritual affiliations and none at all can easily grasp the ethical imperative around combatting racism and quickly discover “our common ground... and yes, our inspiration for repentance, our hope for redemption.” Addressing what he calls “White America”, Dr. Dyson asks: “How can we possibly persuade our society that we deserve to be treated with decency and respect?” This question is not a rhetorical one on his part. How can we?

This entire church year, we have been discussing what we Unitarian Universalists believe and using the Rev. David O. Rankin’s classic ten-point outline as our guide. In his sixth point, Rev. Ranking declares: “We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty and justice – and no idea, ideal, or philosophy is superior to a single human life.” If all people on earth have that claim, all people in America do, too. What’s increasingly clear is how tenuous this claim has been, and tragically,

continues to be for African-Americans — and just how often their humanity has been denied, cruelly and systematically. Part of our being faithful these days is recognizing the staggering human costs of racism, even as they continue to mount before our eyes.

For a long time in liberal religious circles, racial integration was the highest ideal; people in those circles worked hard “not to see color”, as they said, or to be race-blind. Yet a stubborn problem in this country has been “the blindness of white men and women who are so deeply invested in their own privilege that they cannot afford to see how much we [Black Americans] suffer”, Dr. Dyson argues. What has started to change that are the horrifying videos and photographs that have flooded media outlets, documenting how lethal it can be to be Black in America today. In a 2016 opinion piece he wrote for the New York Times titled “Death in Black and White”, Dr. Dyson declared: “Whiteness is blindness. It is the wish not to see what it will not know.” But faced with a constant stream of footage graphically depicting senseless shootings and brutal beatings and violent deaths of persons of color at nearly every age and of every gender, White Americans such as myself can no longer stay blinded.

We need to confront what we do not want to know. “Whiteness has privilege and power connected to it, no matter how poor you are,” Dr. Dyson explains. “Of course the paradox is that even though whiteness is not real it is still true... White or black identity is nothing without the people and forces that make it true.” Unless we begin the work of actively dismantling racist power structures in American society, we will simply reinforce them.

Before he began his doctoral program at Princeton, right as he was approaching graduation, Dr. Dyson reports, he was expelled from his predominantly white college in Tennessee. That was the end result of series of nonsensical, clearly discriminatory disciplinary actions that started after a chapel service on campus. In a worship service commemorating Black History Month, aptly enough, Dr. Dyson led a prayer to “help defeat racism in our midst”, not understanding how controversial a figure he would cut. “When it comes to race, the past is always present,” Dr. Dyson concludes. “What Jim Crow achieved in the past... continues to this day”, only it assumes shifting forms and contemporary expressions. The form it takes these day are legion; it may be the technical divide or predatory lending or voter suppression or foster care or urban blight or substandard schooling or low wages or healthcare disparities or police brutality or hate crimes or a justice system that sentences without mercy at the same moment it criminalizes poverty itself. Yet the disturbing dynamic of White domination and Black subjugation persists. There’s no mistaking that, once the blinders are off our eyes.

In fact, much of “American history is the history of Black subjugation”, Dr. Dyson states. He challenges those of us inhabiting White America to own our disordered thinking about that, one he dubs “Chronic Historical Evasion and Trickery”, or C.H.E.A.T. for short. Black History Month is one possible corrective for White amnesia, Dr. Dyson contends. “The historical erasure of blackness strengthens this racially blind version of American history,” the one that refuses to see the backs upon which much of our current economy was built.

Dr. Dyson recounted the recent public gathering where the President of Georgetown University issued a formal apology for the 1838 sale of 272 slaves, the youngest of whom was a baby just a couple of months old. This is the same University where Dr. Dyson proudly sits on faculty, and he grapples with the knowledge that its illustrious future was financially secured by the human trafficking of enslaved African Americans, including one infant. “Beloved, truth is rarely neat. It is often messy,” Dr. Dyson acknowledges. “Black truth in White America is especially inconvenient, often not on the program, yet insisting to be heard.” The challenge for all of us now is to keep our ears and our eyes open.

Dr. Dyson calls on White Americans such as myself to demonstrate “a genuine desire to know and understand just what it means to be black in America”, complete with its routine terrors and indignities. “Terror and shame go hand in hand,” he explains. “There is a fear in realizing that we are helpless to persuade others that we are human... We are ashamed that there is nothing we can do from making you see as worthless.” That is indeed a pernicious legacy of slavery, institutionalized in our United States Constitution, which did not consider a black man a man at all but a fraction of a person; it counted three-fifths of slaves in tallying the population for a given state. The American attitude that has prevailed since then is obvious: “White life is worth more than Black life,” Dr. Dyson concludes.

There are innumerable statistics that bear this out, of course, but perhaps the most astounding figures are local ones. In a Spotlight investigative piece published in December 2017, the Boston Globe reported that the median net worth of African American households

was \$8. The Globe then had to follow that article with a non-retraction. “That was no typo,” the paper declared: “The median net worth of black Bostonians really is \$8.” This figure came from a 2015 report issued by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. According to that same report, the median household net worth for Whites in the Boston region is \$247,500, nearly 31,000 times as much as their Black counterparts. If you run the math, as I have done in my own mind, repeatedly, you will find that it leaves many Black Americans exactly zero margin for error in their lives.

The Globe went on to explain that since net worth is determined by subtracting debts from assets, African-Americans in this area “owe almost as much as the combined value of what they own — if they own anything at all.” That account testifies to a structural inequality and racial disparity of massive proportions. A sizable underclass has formed along racial lines, with Black Bostonians being as almost dispossessed as their enslaved ancestors were. Ironically, over the Martin Luther King holiday weekend, the Globe published an opinion piece on the decline of racism in the city. What it cited, though, was the extent to which racist attitudes had diminished over time. Individual attitudes are quite literally immaterial in a situation so inequitable and unjust. While we here in the Northeast take a certain pride in not having any monuments to the Confederacy, as they do in the South, our commonwealths are implicated in the slave trade, beyond the shadow of a doubt, and we have devised our own de-facto segregation.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King once said, “America is a dream, a dream as yet unfulfilled.” That open acknowledgment at least

provides us with the options that a dream might someday be fulfilled. Only promises that we call broken can be repaired. Dr. Dyson here returns us to that “language of moral repair”, underscoring the need for national repentance before any possible hope for our redemption. One requirement in all this, he insists, is a recognition by White America that reparations are due Blacks in this country — long overdue, in actuality. By demonstrating our commitment to them, he maintains, “we can protest and somehow defeat the forces that threaten the soul of our nation”, all the forces that subjugate, oppress, and dispossess Black America.

In his collection titled Prayers for a Dark People, author W.E.B. DuBois said: “The prayer of our souls... is a petition for persistence; not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living.” African Americans emerged from barbaric centuries of slavery with a collective vision “stayed on freedom”, as that old spiritual proclaims, but that got impossibly clouded over scores and scored of years, compounded by disappointment and betrayal and heartbreak.

Too many basic freedoms have been denied for too long for any inhabitants of White Americans to imagine themselves as innocent bystanders. We need to commit our own resources in the struggle for racial justice. “It is my faith that helps me see how whiteness has become a religion,” Dr. Dyer contends. “The idolatry of whiteness and the cloak of innocence that shields it can only be quenched by love, not a private, personal notion of love, but a public expression of love that holds us all accountable.” What might that look like, exactly?

For more than a year now, friends and members of UU Wellesley Hills have joined with lay leaders from our Advocacy and Witness team in gathering for a monthly vigil testifying that Black Lives Matter. In comments she made at the World of Wellesley MLK Day Breakfast, the current Chair of our Standing Committee Elaine Mittel told the crowd:

As we stand with our placards on the sidewalk in front of our prominent Washington St. location, we receive many affirming beeps and thumbs up. We hope that we are sparking meaningful conversations among passersby about why such a vigil is needed in our community... The mission of our vigil is to actively campaign against the oppression of people of color through our public witness. We protest against silence and complacency. We are inspired in our small effort by the famous MLK quote: ‘The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice’... We...focus our collective energy on bending that arc.

Some of you were there that January morning and heard her give these comments. Some of you are regular participants in the monthly vigil yourselves. Some of you may still join the vigil, perhaps for the first time this afternoon. Trust that your collective silence out on that sidewalk speaks volumes; it speaks to a strengthened sense of solidarity in White America. Consider making it a spiritual practice of yours.

In her “Litany of Restoration”, the late Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatly maintained, “If we join

as brothers and sisters, the pain of our aloneness will be lessened, and that does matter. In this spirit, we build community and move toward restoration.” Moving toward restoration means defending affirmative action, confronting discriminatory health care, challenging the criminalizing of Black poverty, and so on. We uphold our belief in the worth and dignity of our fellow human beings and live our faith more fully when we publicly proclaim that black lives matter, very much. We can claim a corner of White America for that testimony, at least, here in this New England town.

Gradually, year by year, we are demonstrating our increased determination to make Black history not a sidebar or a footnote to American history, not a cursory civic observance in the shortest month of the calendar year, but a core part of a larger and unvarnished truth about who we have been in this nation, perhaps as a prelude to a newer tale of repentance and redemption, perhaps as a prelude to meaningful action, “deed on deed,” as Dr. DuBois said, “and thought on thought”, so that a better shared future is possible. In the end, the souls we save may be our own.

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