

Define It Please

Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan
October 1, 2017
First Parish in Brookline

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you choir, and Keith; thank you Matt and Nanc Marks who walked with me through the creation of this service. Thank you Worship Associates and staff who have been with this; thank you Diversity Caucus.

Thank you to those of you who answered the video call and sent me your thoughts, feelings, concerns, hopes, history, and stories about the topics of Whiteness, racism, white supremacy, power, privilege. It was an honor to read each and every one of your responses. What you shared helped to shape the framing, or bedrock, upon which my message today emanates. I will not be using any of your responses verbatim today, not even anonymously, so you can let go of any concern about that. I may ask you if I can use part of what you shared for our service on October 15, which is about stories. We'll see. *Maybe, maybe not.* I am choosing to live with the ambiguity, the uncertainty. I do not know exactly what will happen this month; and that is perfectly divine.

Most of all, thank you for coming here this morning, for bringing yourselves to a place where indeed you might find—rather than comfort, rather than a quiet, safe space—a place where you might find pain. Discomfort. Challenge.

We'll see.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

One thing is for certain—if we come here, or anywhere with preconceived notions, defenses, protective mechanisms in place, what we fear is what we will hear.

If we come in fear—of being hurt, of discovering that this is no longer our community or that we do not belong—we will find reason, invent it even, to believe that to be true.

If we come bored, knowing it all, here to be sure that others learn, we will leave today unchanged.

If we come willing to be changed, open—*even just a little bit*—to what might happen, what you might hear over the next month—if we come with courage, I promise we will not be disappointed.

I did not walk alone to get here this morning. You brought me here. Someone asked me: are you just doing this because you are an interim—addressing whiteness, racism, power, privilege, white supremacy—are you just doing this because you know you will not lose your job?

Actually at first I chuckled at that, and then went to the fact, that I am doing this because this is who you are. First Parish in Brookline. You are a congregation committed to creating a beloved diverse, multicultural, multiracial community, and this is one, not *the one*, but an important one, next step. A step that we cannot sidestep because the time is not right or because I am your interim minister.

Whiteness. Racism. White supremacy. Power. Privilege.

The title of today’s sermon is, “Define It Please.” What do these words mean, and how do they connect with who we are called to be? I will share some of that in a few minutes, although I’m sure that many—if not most of you—can do a better, more thorough job of answering those questions than I can. I will also talk about why they matter, and how they are inextricably connected to being a Unitarian Universalist, or a person of good conscious.

First, I want to share with you my personal revelation that came about in my preparations for today’s sermon. I had asked many people to send me things to read, review, and look at. I wanted to learn more about these topics. Whiteness, racism, white supremacy, power and privilege. I am not an expert by any means.

People responded. Thank you!

As I poured over the materials, as I have been doing now for the last three and a half years, much less than many of you, something changed. I realized in my cells, that race is not about skin color, and that it is not about individuals, although it most definitely impacts all of us. Rather race is a social, economic, political system of oppression. In the most bizarre turn of events, I had to depersonalize it in order to get it, without being defensive or afraid.

For me, that changed everything. I began to play with things like: what if our mission statement read “to dismantle oppression” (it currently reads “to dismantle racism”). I am not suggesting that you change it, although maybe consider adding to it—regardless, stay with me—as our Vision guidelines for multicultural conversation encourage us: “try it on.” “Be willing to consider.”

Understanding racism as oppression means that I must respond. As a person of faith, ministering to a beloved community of people who are committed to the worth and dignity of all people, of justice, equity and compassion in human relations (our first and second principles). A congregation who covenants to work toward the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part (our 6th and 7th principles).

As that person, how can I not respond to racism, a political, economic, societal system of oppression that impacts people. Many millions of people. People sitting right here among us; and in this town and city.

Sharing my conversion experience with my spouse, he listened, as he always does so well, and said, “The word that keeps coming to me is artifact.” Artifact: “An object made by a human being, typically an item of cultural or historical interest. Something observed in a scientific investigation or experiment that is not naturally present but occurs as a result of the preparative or investigative procedure.”

Racism—a construct of beliefs and attitudes or “democratic racism” defined by Henry and Tater in 2009 as “the way in which racist behavior, actions, and outcomes are codified in society.”¹ All four forms of racism: intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic; all of them are created by humans because of a cultural and historical context and purpose. They are not natural—rather they are resultant of something that is prepared or designed to produce them. In other words, they are intentional.

Whiteness, which for many historical reasons is understood in America to be the dominant or superior world view or narrative, is used as the standard, the bar by which all other things are measured. It is used to oppress others who are non-white. And even that—who is white and who is not—changes over time and history.

We can learn all of that—there is much to read and discuss and understand. History that for many of us needs to be relearned.

Learning aside, what do we as people of faith do with this knowledge?

I can’t turn back. I must respond.

My faith and our UU principles call me to do that.

As I learn more about what white culture is, by the way, I am mighty happy to consider enlarging it, changing it, and for some parts of it just down right discarding it.

Tema Okun describes white culture as being focused on perfectionism, where mistakes are something bad and wrong. White cultural norms identify a person’s worth and value by their degree of perfection—perfection as defined by the white culture.

How are we to learn and grow and change if we cannot make mistakes? If mistakes are not seen as inherently inescapable and essential to development.

What if we applauded every time a mistake was made and we asked each other and ourselves: What did we/I learn from that?

In perfectionism, we are frozen, hidden, and deemed unworthy. We hide our humanness and put on airs of false pretense that cannot possibly be true. NO wonder it is hard for those of us embedded in the supremacy of white cultural norms to admit that we have been mistaken.

And that is just one of the examples. Tema Okun goes on to write, as do others, about the sense of urgency that is upheld in a culture of Whiteness. As well as valuing quantity over quality,

¹ Carr Whitness article

worship of the written word, defensiveness and under it all, individualism. It’s all about me. Or even us. A small us.

The opposite of so many other cultures who make decisions focused on the impact of the long term—seven Generations from now.

Tema Okun writes that these attitudes are “damaging because they are used norms and standards without being proactively named or chosen by the group.”² They are damaging because they promote this White culture, which is a world view.

She writes that organizations that unconsciously use these characteristics as their norms and standards make it difficult, if not impossible to open the door to...being multicultural. Being able to identify and name the cultural norms and standards you want is the first step to making room for a truly multi-cultural organization.”³

So Whiteness is a construct. A human-made artifact that is deemed to be the best, superior to other world views. Whiteness is the dominant culture even if we personally understand it and are acting differently. Whiteness is the dominant, superior world view and that world view then dictates laws, social acceptability, economic decisions, and on and on. Each one that is made inherently putting Whiteness at the top oppresses other people with different world views. Black. Brown. Latinx. Indigenous People.

So that defines Whiteness, white supremacy and racism. What about power and privilege?

Kevin Phillips defines power this way: “What is power? It is the ability to tell people what the problem is, who is responsible, and what should be done about it. That’s what power is.”

Privilege my friends is being the one who has the power. Right now, those who are perceived as white in America have that power, have the privilege.

There is work to be done, and it is our work. Collectively. It must be done however with Love. Evil will not conquer evil. In fact when we demonize those around us, who are in fact, on the same team, in the same beloved congregation, when we demonize and separate from them, we demonize and separate from ourselves. We diffuse our collective power and we get stuck thinking about ourselves.

We must support one another, love one another, accept each other’s mistakes and errors. Paul Carr says about this work, “Accept that no one knows everything and that we can always learn.” In his fifteen proposals to initiate transformative change in this area he also says that, “history is

² Okam, Tema, White Supremacy Culture, DR works, based on the work of Daniel Buford, a lead trainer with the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond

³ Ibid.

not uni-dimensional, that humility is an unbelievable virtue, to consider the proposition that there is hope and to problematize war and fight for peace.”⁴

Why are we talking about Whiteness, white supremacy or dominant world view, racism, power and privilege? We are talking about it and acting upon what we learn because we are a people of faith. People of faith and conscious that covenant to work for the worth and dignity of all people, promote world peace, and honor the interdependent web of life of which we are all a part.

In our reading about world view, Matt reminded us of the story where, if you teach a man to go always through the back door, if there isn't a back door there then he will create it, rather than go through the front door. We must be path makers. Path makers toward dismantling oppression and creating worth and love. We must practice it first with ourselves, being compassionate, telling the truth, asking for help, being willing to change and identifying how Whiteness operates in our lives, then we practice in our relationships with each other, being compassionate and curious, forgiving and identifying with our common covenant and goals regardless of where we are on the path. At the same time we must do this—as best we are able—within the world. That is what we are really called to do—being path makers of human worth and dignity for all people.

So, my friends, here's my point: racism is not about skin color it is about oppression, and we as people of faith and moral conscious who are committed to our UU principles of peace, equity, and liberty for all people who uphold the truth that all people deserve worth and dignity cannot remain silent. We cannot remain the same. We must change and we must do everything in our power to end this oppression.

Amen and Blessed Be.

I invite you now to take a moment and to reflect upon what you have heard, maybe where you were when you came here, where you are now. Consider what it is that you can commit to in this process of being a path maker of worth and dignity, where we work to upend everything that oppresses and put energy and love into all that equalizes and empowers.

What is it that you need to do? Come to church every week this month, remain open, talk to someone, take a certain action, be open, ask for help. What is it that you commit to bringing and offering? Compassion, willingness, strength, open-mindedness love, healing.

Put the energy of your commitment into the stone you are holding. Your commitment of what you offer to this work and what you are willing to do. And yes, these are the stones that we have used in early rituals, they already hold your blessings.

We are going to stand as we are willing and able and sing our closing song. And one row at a time, you are invited to come forward and place your stone on this path. This path of commitment that has a long history and an unknown future. The path is not laid out my friends, it is ours to create. Place your stone touching the stone behind it, and then return to your seat.

⁴ WHITENESS AND WHITE PRIVILEGE:PROBLEMATIZING RACE AND RACISM IN A“COLOR-BLIND” WORLD, AND IN EDUCATION, International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, Vol. 7 No 1, 2016, pg. 51.

We are going to keep this path here, actually it will be spray-painted with white biodegradable marking paint once that arrives. Every time that you come here, whether on Sundays or during the week, take a moment and stop, look at the path, remember your commitment to ending oppression and tell yourself you are not.

Please rise as you are willing and able and let’s join in our closing song, “We shall not give up the fight.”

Please continue singing until everyone has placed their stone on the path.