

***What Love Looks Like***  
**January 14, 2018**

Every week it seems something happens that makes me wonder yet again, “How can I preach on X in light of Y?” This week it was “how can I preach on the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his dream in light of our president’s comments on the worthlessness of all people from Haiti and African nations. Clearly Martin Luther King’s dream is nowhere near a living reality. But even before President Trump’s words, our failure as a society to make real that vision was clear. And we focusing on the president’s words only distracts ourselves from the work that is ours. President Trump did not create the structures and views which perpetuate racism. His words are a symptom not a cause. And perhaps as in any illness, recognizing the symptom can help us diagnose and begin to treat the disease.

With Scituate being 96% white, the statistics I’m about to talk about may feel foreign to you. Though experiences like Joy’s may bring them closer to home. But until we understand these statistics are our statistics, until we understand the people behind the statistics as our people, nothing will change. This may not be your life but it must be our concern if we are to make real that world where all are valued regardless of the color of their skin.

You may already know the statistics: Black Americans are incarcerated at over 5 times the rate of White ones. Approximately 12-13% of our nation’s population are black, but they make up 37% of prison inmates. Black students are 4 times as likely as white ones to be expelled or suspended from school; expulsion rates are rising for pre-schoolers and, again, they are more likely to be of African-American descent: more than twice as many black pre-schoolers as white young ones. These statistics make you wonder about many elements of our society, not the least racial bias, and the Yale Child Study Center has released a study identifying implicit bias among educators – when shown videos of classrooms of young children and asked to spot “bad” behavior, educators focused their attention disproportionately on the young black boys and called them out for behaviors they overlooked in other children. My own sons used to talk to me about similar incidents when they were at Hatherly – they didn’t know what to do about them and neither did I.

But only children who live to make it to pre-school can face expulsion. African Americans infants are more than twice as likely to die as their non-Hispanic white counterparts, and their mothers were more than twice as likely to have

received late or no prenatal care. Black mothers in this country are also more than twice as likely to die following childbirth as white mothers. The lack of prenatal care may contribute to that number, but it holds across socioeconomic lines. There are many factors – some researchers have found that medical staff are more likely to write off the health concerns of black and Hispanic women. Some researchers point to the greater stress of African American mothers-to-be. A recent study asked pregnant women for their biggest fear during pregnancy. Non-Hispanic white women said gaining weight and having a healthy child. African-American women responded: Fear of bringing their child into this world. Fear that their children may be killed because of the color of their skin. Heartbreakingly, we saw the effect of these disparities of care embodied just a few weeks ago in the death of activist Erica Garner of a heart attack at the age of 27, four months after giving birth to her second child. In New York City, where she lived and died, black mothers die at 12 times the rate of white women. Even tennis superstar Serena Williams experienced the effects of racism when she gave birth last September. As *The New York Times* reported, she is prone to blood clots in the lungs and nearly died from that condition in 2011. So when she had trouble breathing the day after giving birth, she recognized the symptoms and alerted the nurse. The nurse told her she was confused by pain medication and not to worry. Fortunately she persisted, but only after going through other tests, did she get the CT-Scan and treatment she needed. What if she hadn't had the confidence to persist?

While in here in the Boston area, efforts to decrease disparities in care have narrowed the gap in health outcomes, the recent Spotlight series in the *Globe* describes how disparities persist in where we live, with whom we socialize, where we work, and how we govern. I encourage you to read the whole series, but especially the three articles we'll be discussing Thursday evening at the Unity Council: "Image & Reality," "Colleges," and "Solutions." And we'll be discussing them not as abstract studies of a city to the north of us, but with the questions: "How do these divides show themselves in Scituate?" and "What can we do about them?"

Though we'd prefer not to see it, racial discrimination and disparity are entwined in the history of our communities as much as in any part of our nation. In fact it was our Puritan ancestors who brought with them to New England the understanding that some people and societies are superior to others. It could be argued that it spread from here to other parts of the country. Think of John Winthrop's beautiful image from his sermon to the Puritans on the *Arbella* just before they disembarked in what would become Boston. Looking out at the hills of the new settlement – much higher then than they are now – he proclaimed, "We

shall be a city set upon a hill,” and went on to call the new inhabitants to show other nations what it means to be a “commonwealth” – a community that bears each other’s burdens, suffers, and rejoices together. I’ve quoted the words in other sermons, because of that call to love and care for one another, but today I read it differently – I notice that Winthrop doesn’t call the colonists to treat others who would join them under different circumstances with the same care. And the image itself, the city upon a hill sets these people above others. Although many Christian thinkers held up the ideal that all people whatever their birth, appearance, or beliefs were created in the image of God and should be treated with the same care, the Puritans were especially influenced by the Apostle Paul who saw slavery as part of the normal order. This is the world view John Lothrop and the Men of Kent brought with them to Scituate and to the founding of our First Parish. It’s not our world view any more, but it is at the root of our history, so it’s important to recognize and acknowledge it.

So what can we do? First, we need to stop celebrating Martin Luther King’s birthday as if he single handedly ended discrimination. As Unitarian Universalists, we don’t ascribe to the “great man” (or “great woman”) theory of history. We don’t believe that one individual, no matter how great, saves the world. Look at our celebration of Jesus’ birth. We celebrate Christmas as the birth of someone who went on to teach and embody new understandings of justice and radical, inclusive love. We remember him as someone whose life mirrored his teachings so powerfully that he was killed for his unwillingness to deviate from that path AND at Christmas we recommit ourselves to let that truth shine out of our lives. We do not celebrate Christmas as the once and done birth of the, a, or any savior. But at Martin Luther King’s birthday we tend to look back and celebrate all he accomplished – without recognizing the work of all the others whose efforts paved the way for his, whose efforts went hand in hand in his, and whose efforts have followed his. Yes, we need to celebrate the birth and life of this great human being, but not as an end point. His birthday, like Jesus’, should be a time to recommit ourselves to letting the light shine forth from our lives just as the light shone from Jesus and King, and so many others whose birthdays are not national holidays.

And we need to join with others who also doing that work, listening, supporting, and collaborating. If you’re free on Thursday evening, come discuss these issues with others in Scituate who are concerned about them. Then let’s build on whatever comes out of that discussion partnering with others in the community as well as with other Unitarian Universalist organizations. As a church we could work with UU MassAction on issues of incarceration and pay inequity; we could

give time as well as money to the UU Urban Ministry in Boston; we could .... – how would you like us to let our light shine here?

“Justice is what love sounds like when it speaks in public,” Michael Eric Dyson wrote in his *Sermon to White America*. How shall we proclaim our love?

- Pamela M. Barz

Readings:

From “Message to My Daughters” by Edwidge Danticat

From “A Christmas Sermon on Peace” by Martin Luther King, Jr. (December 24, 1967)