

Why We Need a Sacred Conversation about Race

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**United Church of Rockville Centre
Rev. Robert W. Gunn, Pastor**

Last month, in response to the furor and uproar instigated by the media around the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, our denomination called on all our churches to initiate a Sacred Conversation About Race. For us in the Metropolitan Association, it began at a town hall style gathering at our sister church in Manhasset. With some 200 people in attendance, we had a conversation that represented a spectrum of attitudes and consciousness about race. Following that, May 18 was designated as the day to bring that sacred conversation to our individual local churches. Since I was already planning to be out of town, we put off our own initial conversation until today. This sermon will be followed by an open discussion at our coffee hour which will pick up the theme and offer an opportunity for everyone to have a hearing.

For now, I want to address the following questions: 1) why do we need a conversation on race now?; 2) what do we mean by a “sacred” conversation about race? 3) What do we mean by racism? And 4) how do we begin? In our sermon talk back, I hope we can address the question, 5) where do we go from here?

Why have this conversation now?

Have we not made great strides in race relations, overcome a lot of prejudice and in general have not conditions for racial minorities improved considerably since the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960's? Furthermore, is not the victory of an African American to win the Democratic nomination for President a sign of how far we have come? Doesn't that prove that this conversation is unnecessary?

My personal answer is, yes, we have made tremendous strides as a society in overcoming racism on both personal and institutional levels. And of that we may and should be rightfully proud.

But we are having the conversation today because some one—several someones—went out of their way to besmirch one of the contenders to the Democratic nomination on the basis of his race and his religion. We are having the conversation because our entire denomination was put on the defensive because someone somewhere decided that we had perhaps violated IRS guidelines as a religious organization because we had a member of our church who, after he was invited to speak at our national convention last summer, happened to become a candidate for his party's nomination for president. That suspicion has now fortunately been laid to rest and been entirely resolved. At considerable expense and huge effort...not to mention whatever muckraking of our church it may have engendered in the process.

We're having this conversation today because the media dug up several old sermons of Jeremiah Wright--- not because he himself was nationally prominent necessarily, but because he had a member of his congregation who was a presidential nominee contender. So the media came up with some

old sermons, set them up as anti-American, and linked them directly to the candidate, not to make Jeremiah Wright famous, but clearly to discredit the presidential nominee contender.

Let us not be so naïve as to think this was an innocent discovery of Wright's prophetic style introduced by disinterested, objective, well-meaning people. It was a calculated attempt to destroy a candidate's credibility by inference and insinuation. The quotes from Wright's sermons were the lead-in for accusing the candidate of being Muslim and not Christian....what an odd juxtaposition: using the sermon of his Christian pastor to then imply that he was Muslim. Had it been true, it would not have been a problem, except that the implication was that if the candidate were Muslim, he was lacking in American patriotism.

If you have trouble believing that this was a deliberate effort to besmirch this particular candidate, consider the following:

Rudy Giuliani's priest has been accused in grand jury proceedings of molesting several children and covering up the molestation of others. Giuliani would not disavow him on the campaign trail and still works with him.

<http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?>

Mitt Romney was part of a church that did not view black Americans as equals and actively discriminated against them. He stayed with that church all the way into his early thirties, until they were finally forced to change their policies to come into compliance with civil rights legislation. Romney never disavowed his church back then or now. He said he was proud of the faith of his father. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22273924/page/2/>

Jerry Falwell said America had 9/11 coming because we tolerated gays, feminists and liberals. It was our fault. Our chickens had come home to roost, if you will. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-> John McCain proudly received his support and even spoke at his university's commencement.

Reverend John Hagee has called the Catholic Church the "Great Whore." He has said that the Anti-Christ will rise out of the European Union (of course, the Anti-Christ will also be Jewish). He has said all Muslims are trained to kill and will be part of the devil's army when Armageddon comes (which he hopes is soon). <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/02/29/johun-haggemccain.html> John McCain said he was proud of Rev. Hagee's endorsement, and then later dissociated himself from him.

Rev. Rod Parsley believes America was founded to destroy Islam. Since this is such an outlandish claim, it needs to be said that he is not kidding. Rev. Parsley says Islam is an "anti-Christ religion" brought down from a "demon spirit." Of course, we are in a war against all Muslims, including presumably Muslim-Americans. But since Parsley believes this is a Christian nation and that it should be run as a theocracy, he is not very concerned what Muslim-

Americans think. http://www.huggingtonpost.com/2008/03/12/joyun-mccains-spiritual_n_91203.html. John McCain says Rev. Rod Parsley is his “spiritual guide.”

What separates all of these outrageous preachers from Barack Obama’s? You guessed it. They’re white and Rev. Jeremiah Wright is not. If it’s not racism that causing the disparity in media treatment of these preachers, then what is it?

There are other possible explanations. Perhaps the causes these preachers go after are more important than the race of the preacher. But if so, it’s one thing to go after gays, liberals and Muslims—that seems to be perfectly acceptable in America—it’s another to accuse white folks of not living up to their ideals.

There is another factor at play as well. The media is deathly afraid of calling out preachers of any stripe for insane propaganda from the pulpits for fear that they will be labeled as anti-Christian. But criticism of Rev. Wright falls into their comfort zone. It’s easy to blame him for being anti-American because eh criticizes American foreign and domestic policy.

If Rev. Wright had preached about discriminating against gay Americans or Muslims, there probably would not have been any outcry at all. That falls into the category of “respect their hateful opinions because the cloak themselves in the church.”

But one thing is indisputable: the enormous disparity in how the media has covered these white preachers as opposed to Rev. Wright. Have you ever even heard of Rod Parsley? As you can see from the list above, all of these white preachers have said and done the most outlandish and offensive things you can imagine—and hardly a peep.

If the disparity in coverage isn’t racist, then what is it?

So, we are having this conversation today because others, not ourselves, have brought politics into religion and religion into politics, with the express intent of discrediting the only racial minority candidate ever to get so far in the national nominating process.

I do not want to hear about bringing politics into religion from this pulpit. Others have forced us to this conversation, and I will not be silent about the issues. We as a denomination have been and are being attacked and slandered by one segment of the country and the motivation is completely political; it is disingenuous, disgusting and vicious, and we cannot ignore it, because, believe you me, it is going to get much worse if we do not start recognizing and identifying the attacks for what they are: racially and

politically motivated efforts to subvert the natural nomination and electoral process.

Fueled by this media frenzy, we have had some people already express their racial prejudice without shame, emboldened by the media slanders. It is essential that we as a Christian church as well as as a denomination make it clear that although racism may linger like a bad habit, it will not be approved of, nor countenanced by any householders in the church of Jesus Christ.

When I was just starting out in ministry, I was quickly overwhelmed by the conflicts I encountered in my little church in Gardiner, Maine. In this little congregation of some 39 (70 on the rolls, you understand!), was every kind of conflict between individuals, groups and within marriages that I have ever encountered. In this regard, all churches are the same, no matter the size, no matter the geography. So I began looking to psychology to deal with those conflicts and began training in transactional analysis—better known as “I’m okay; you’re okay.” Eric Berne, founder of the theory, wrote book you may have heard of called “Games People Play.” One of the games we learned to identify was called “Let’s You and Him Fight.” Person A would have a grudge against person B, and rather than confront B directly, would say to person B, do you know what person C has been saying about you? And then A would tell C, do you know what person B has been saying about you? B and C would then have a fight (directly or indirectly), wounding or killing each other, and person A could walk away, the innocent unwounded victor who set the whole thing up. Many of you learned about this process as triangulation.

This is what has happened with Jeremiah Wright as an effort to discredit the political contender. The media tried to set up a fight between the two of them, exacerbated by media fuel. Whether they succeeded in destroying the candidate’s viability or not remains to be seen—rest assured, in any case, those forces will return with even greater power, subtlety and shameless arrogance. The question is, will we as a country have wised up to the ploys and tactics of “Let’s You and Him Fight!”?

Some of you have been so outraged by Jeremiah Wright’s hyperbole that you have wished we in the UCC would disown him, kick him out or in some way, follow the rabble-rousing media in lynching him, organizationally-speaking. Not satisfied that the candidate has dissociated himself not only from Wright, but from Trinity UCC, of which Wright is no longer pastor, some would like to see a national level UCC disowning of Wright and his remarks.

How quickly we forget who we are. We are Congregationalists in polity: each congregation decides what it believes and how it expresses itself. New England in origin, we affirm the right of each person to speak his mind and though we may vehemently oppose what he is saying, we will fight to the end for his right to say it.

Why do you think there has not been a denunciation of Rev. Wright's remarks by our president or Board of the UCC? The first reason is because we are not in the business of censuring our pastors for their preaching: we are not Presbyterian, not Episcopal, nor Catholic. You can't join us for our value of individual autonomy and then take it away when you don't like what someone is saying. The second reason no action has been taken is because our national, conference and association level leadership understand very well the media's seduction into "Let's You and Him Fight," and they don't want to play the game. Fox news and CNN would love nothing better than to see our national leadership censuring Wright and disowning him, defrocking him. We will not play their game!

The fact that there are those who tried to incite a backlash among us against Wright is one of the reasons why we need a sacred conversation about race today. We have lain too long quiet while the forces of greed, hate, prejudice and fear have become mobilized. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said, freedom and liberation has to be re-learned in every generation. It cannot be given; it has to be earned. It is our turn to earn that freedom once again in this generation.

What do we mean by "sacred"?

We refer to this as a "sacred" conversation because we enter into it as we enter into worship, recognizing that each person is "holy", each person is made in the image of God, every human being is my brother and my sister in Christ. When, therefore, we engage in talk about race, we do so carefully, caringly, cautiously, trying to get at the truth of our shared experience, trying to take responsibility for each other, and expecting accountability to each other. We know of the deep wounds, of long history of suffering and destruction that racial relations have undergone, and we know that we often do not know just how we sometimes perpetuate old hurts. We call this a sacred conversation because we mean it to be from our hearts, from our basic core of caring and concern. We call it a sacred conversation because we want to be open to hear what we may not want to hear, and to speak secrets perhaps too-long denied. We call it sacred because we aim to lay aside egos, melt away defensiveness, and open ourselves to the truth of how things really are with each other and with others whom we greatly impact by our words and by our deeds, by our awareness and by our denial.

We call this conversation sacred because we aim for it to be built on the foundation of trust, the kind of trust that comes for people of faith from our experience of living under the all knowing eye of the one who made us in love, for love, with love: God, the source of all being, in whom and with whom we are all brothers and sisters, one human family.

We call this conversation sacred because we feel compelled to say "Yes!" to the question Cain asked of God after he killed Abel: Remember God came and asked where Cain's brother was, and Cain answered very defensively and

rhetorically, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” To that we are compelled by Christ to say, indeed, I am my brother’s keeper, and my sister’s keeper, and they are the keepers of me in a mutual interdependent family. Let us search and seek diligently to take care of each other well. For all our sakes. Amen.