

AMERICA'S NEW SEGREGATIONS

A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist

Sunday, January 18, 2009

The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Ancient Reading

from Acts 17

The apostle Paul comes to the city of Athens and finds, among the many temples and altars one inscribed "To an unknown God." He then says:

What you have worshipped rightly as unknown I now proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is fed by human hands, as though needing anything, having given to all us mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor having made all the nations to inhabit the whole earth . . . so that we would search and grope for God and perhaps find – though God is never far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our very being, as some your own poets have testified.

Modern Reading

The Religion of the Successful

James Luther Adams

We [in America] live in neighborhoods segregated from other neighborhoods in terms of education, occupation, and income; [often] also separated by class and pigmentation, that is, by race. The segregation of sexism cuts across all of these boundaries. In all too great a measure, the churches are a function and indeed a protection of these segregations. In this situation, we of the middle class are tempted, indeed almost fated, to adopt the religion of the successful. This religion of the successful amounts to a systematic concealment of and separation from reality -- a hiding of the plight of those who in one sense or another live across the tracks. In the end, this concealment comes from a failure to identify correctly and to enter into combat with what St. Paul called "the principalities and powers of evil." The religion of the successful turns out then to be a sham spirituality, a cultivated blindness, for it tends to reduce itself to personal kindness and philanthropy costing little. Thus it betrays the world with a kiss.

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Readings: from Acts 17; and from "The Religion of the Successful," by J.L. Adams

Let me begin with a story set in a Unitarian church, as the Civil Rights era was starting. Legal segregation was the problem in the South. In the North, it was *de facto* segregation. At the First Unitarian Church of Chicago, in the Hyde Park neighborhood that city, not far from where President-elect Obama and his family have been living, the minister was preaching about racial justice, and leading a public campaign for open housing laws. James Luther Adams, author of our second reading, was then professor of religious ethics at Chicago, a strong supporter of the minister's efforts, and a trustee at First Unitarian. But also on the board was a quite conservative man with substantial real estate interests in the area. He complained that the minister was meddling in politics, that he'd forgotten what a church was for, *et cetera*. So after a board meeting, when the minister had left, discouraged, Adams asked the others to stay. Then he addressed man who'd complained:

"Just what do you think the purpose of a church is?" he asked. "Well, spiritual matters."
"And how would you define those?" "I don't know, I'm no theologian. You tell me."
"But you're a trustee of this church; you have to have some opinion about its purpose. Every member should." "I suppose." "Would you say that its spiritual purposes include how we treat one another, whether we love our neighbors and want them treated as we would want to be treated?" "Well, I give to charity. Generously." "That's not the point." Other trustees joined in. According to Adams, they argued well into the wee hours. Finally, under the inspiration of either fatigue or the Holy Spirit, the man blurted out, "The purpose of the church, I guess, is to get hold of people like me, and change 'em!" Some led everyone in singing, "Amazing Grace . . . I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see."

This morning at 9:15, I did an adult education program on Unitarian Universalists in the struggle against the legacy of what's been called "America's original sin" -- slavery and

racism. Not all of our record is entirely flattering. It's easy for the privileged to take their privilege for granted. To forget that we too have been, and are still, implicated in structures that defend undeserved privilege for some and deny real opportunity to others.

Seven years ago, at the end of my tenure as President of our denomination, I realized that while almost all Unitarian Universalist leaders professed a strong commitment to anti-racism, there was a need for some serious dialogue about our theological pre-suppositions and our methods. So I assembled a group of thirty leading UU activists and theologians, including several from outside our movement. The three-day conference resulted in a little book called *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue*. Last Wednesday evening Lucas began leading a study group on it. There are still a few copies available.

With the inauguration this Tuesday of the first US President with an African heritage, some Americans, I'm afraid, will want to assume that we have now "transcended race." Certainly many barriers have fallen. Thank God. But one has only to cross "the tracks" the way our First Parish volunteers do when they help out at the Wm. Ellery Channing School in Boston's Hyde Park neighborhood to see how unequal opportunity persists. Where suburban schools have ample resources, that school -- dealing with many children who do not even have someone at home who can help them learn English, or read it -- was recently told to cut its budget and staff by a quarter of a million dollars.

America is still suffers a good deal of *de facto* segregation by race. But other factors -- class, education, culture, age -- also now help to segregate us. We all know that the gap between the rich and poor has been growing since I held that conference. But even I was surprised when I recently heard one of the present candidates to be our UUA President, the Rev. Peter Morales, point out that of Americans who are now 70 years of age and older, three quarters are "white." But of Americans who are 10 years of age and younger, only one quarter are "white." Think about that for a moment, and what it means for our religious movement: unless we become more racially and ethnically diverse, our very relevance is in danger. Fortunately, there are signs that we're starting to change.

Last weekend I was at First Unitarian Church of Dallas, where I served from 1981 to 87. For the last 22 years my successor there has been the other candidate for UUA President, the Rev. Laurel Hallman. I was there to take part in the installation of a new Sr. Minister, the Rev. Daniel Kanter. Now when I served there, there was just one African American in the Dallas congregation; a few people of Hispanic background; a few Asian Americans. Out of five or six hundred members. The music ministries of the congregation consisted of the pianist – a very good pianist – but with a very *avant garde*, highbrow repertoire. Now the Dallas church is twice as large, and it is far more colorful and diverse than it was even the last time I was there. The installation began with African drums, a Youth Choir of 30, an Adult Choir of 70 – taking the roof off with magnificent, multi-cultural music. “How did this happen?” I asked the Rev. Xolani Kacera, their Minister of Pastoral Care, an African American transfer from the Methodist church. “Folks were open to change,” he said. “to doing some soul work.”

Recently, as a member of the Human Rights Committee here in Needham, I have been suggesting that perhaps the Town would do well to start asking itself, in preparation for its 300th anniversary in 2011, why it is that Needham has actually, in the last fifty years, even while changing religiously – from 80% Protestant to 80% people of Catholic or Jewish background – become less diverse in socio-economic terms than most of the surrounding towns. Could it have something to do with neglecting affordable housing?

So, with less than 4% people of color living in the Needham, I am a realist about how much this congregation is likely to change in its racial diversity. But I sure would like us to overcome a few other forms of segregation. Like making sure that those with limited incomes are always welcomed here. Like reaching out more to young adults, 18 to 35. Like broadening and deepening the kind of spiritual dialogue that engages people of diverse backgrounds and opinion.

Because, let’s face it, one of the things that has happened in the last fifty years in America is that we have become ever more segmented and segregated by niche markets and the development of media that rather than promote dialogue, actually polarize us.

How often do those who listen to NPR, for example, tune in to conservative talk radio? While I was in Texas, I decided to take in a dose, just to hear what was being said. Certainly if there is ever going to be a healing of the polarization between red and blue America, as our President-elect hopes to lead, it is going to take more than his work. Evangelical minister Rick Warren, who is giving the invocation at Obama's inauguration, leads a California mega-church that won't admit openly gay or lesbian members, while here at First Parish, having voted to be a Welcoming Congregation, open homophobia would likely get the same sort of questions that were directed to the man who opposed open housing: "What are you so afraid of? Why deny anyone the freedom to marry the person they love? Don't you think that God is inclusive, and the church should be, too?"

I plan to say more about some of this next week in a sermon on the theme of "tolerance" – a necessary but often misunderstood and limited virtue. Since I'm the national co-chair of Freedom to Marry, some progressive clergy have urged me to join them in publicly condemning the invitation to Warren. I've declined to do so. Why? Because I respect the President-elect for inviting both Rick Warren and the openly gay Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, Gene Robinson. And because I know that Warren needs the pressure of being, not condemned, but drawn into real dialogue, if he's going to change his mind. You know, all over America, there are mega-churches that *have* transcended race.

Just last week I was talking to the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, one of our largest congregations, about his relationship with Bishop Carlton Pearson, an African American Pentecostal leader who developed a church of some 4000 members – and then had a revelation: that God did not want him preaching a gospel that condemns anyone to hell. When Pearson began preaching what he now calls "the gospel of inclusion," some of his colleagues called him a Universalist, and a heretic. The controversy cost him three quarters of his flock, and the church that he had built. With the remnant, he had to find a new place to worship. All Souls offered hospitality. Over time, the two congregations began to interact. Now the later Sunday service at the Unitarian church begins with a half-hour of African American praise music. Pearson has come to support equal marriage. He's recently turned pastoral leadership over to Marlin and a diverse ministry team. So that he can preach "the gospel of inclusion" nationally.

That, my friends, is what more of us need to learn to do! And I don't mean just clergy! Here's a good example of how to start. The week of February 8th to 14th is National Freedom to Marry Week. Every year for the past eleven years, right around Lincoln's Birthday and Valentine's Day, the group I co-chair has been promoting a national conversation about why equal marriage is one of the key civil rights issues of our time. Contrary to assumptions that most people of color oppose equal marriage, it has been endorsed by civil rights icons like the late Coretta Scott King, Julian Bond, and Congressman John Lewis. This year's theme is "Seven Conversations in Seven Days."

It's a challenge to gay and lesbian individuals and couples and their non-gay allies to reach across the blue/red boundary, and to talk with a co-worker, a relative, an old friend, or a recent acquaintance, about why same sex couples and their families deserve the same – not separate but only theoretically equal, but the same – legal protections and benefits as do other married couples. Especially here in Massachusetts, where the sky has not fallen nor the society been corrupted by everyone having the freedom to marry, it makes sense for us to reach out – either face-to-face, by phone, email, letter, text message, YouTube or Facebook – to talk with someone whose mind needs changing, but who is open at least to listening, and to dialogue.

America's new segregations have isolated us from people different from ourselves. They threaten the very fabric of our democracy. Weaving a strong fabric of diversity to sustain our democracy requires dialogue and outreach. Evangelical churches seem to know that. Why should we just sit around in some form of false pride, as though saying to ourselves, "We don't talk to anyone about what we believe; we're beyond all that!" If America is going to be the freedom land of opportunity that our immigrant forebears dreamed of, that Dr. King spoke of, that President Obama hopes to lead, let's take the chance. Let's reach out. Let's spread 'the gospel of inclusion.' And let the people say, Amen!

*Hymn 116

I'm On My Way

African American trad.

Benediction

And now, in our going, may ours be a religion which, as Theodore Parker put it, like sunshine, goes everywhere; its temple, all the earth; its shrine, the good heart; its creed, all truth; its ritual, works of love and courage; its profession of faith, divine living; its gospel, one of inclusive freedom. Amen.