

Sermon given by Rev. Stephen Kendrick

March 2, 2008

Earlier this week, I was channel surfing, and I discovered a documentary on PBS, that, actually, Susan Branaugh had alerted me to the existence of, because she had heard me refer years ago, to my having grown up in Clinton, Tennessee, a little town of about 4,000 people on the banks of the Clint river—near Oak Ridge, near Knoxville, but not really near anything. But it was a great town to grow up in, and I have great fondness for it. So there was a special entitled “The Clinton 12.” It was actually made by people in Clinton, and then PBS stations picked it up across the country. It was about the 12 kids, who, in 1956, were among the very first in the entire country to desegregate a high school, in Clinton. Now why this happened in Clinton, I don’t know. I was alive then, but I was only two year old. And when I finally moved there, many many years later, the residual memory of the Clinton 12, was not just the bravery of those high school kids, but the fact that two years later, someone blew up the high school. It’s one of the signal events of the civil rights movement. And this little town had to decide whether it wanted to live with that reservoir of hate, or whether it was going to pull itself together.

Well I happily can report, that in my time in high school 1968-72, we had our first black homecoming queen, and the president of my class was black. And the weird thing about it with a town with that kind of history, no one remarked on it one way or another. It just felt like that was the tide of history blowing through even little backwater Clinton Tennessee. It didn’t feel special, but it felt right—a funny combination of emotions. And when I watched that special, these memories came back to me. I haven’t been back to Clinton for 20 years or more, and suddenly I saw these people, and their decency, and the way they talked so movingly about what they had gone through, what they had face, and what they think about their town now.

Well it’s a long way from Clinton, Tennessee to Boston, Massachusetts, but we too here in Boston have our memories and our racial history, and it’s a mixed bag. As it probably is anywhere and everywhere in this nation of ours. One of the great hymnal contributions of the Unitarians to America, besides Jingle Bells, is James Russell Lowell’s “Once to Every Soul and Nation,” the way that we’ll end our service today. This hymn captures so beautifully what those kids experienced so long ago in that little southern town. This sense that this is now the moment of decision. This is that existential moment. The modern phrase now of course is ‘the tipping point.’ This is the point where everything has been leading up, and now there is a hinge of history, and nothing will be the same. Everything’s changed. When individual choices begin to accumulate in a line with the destiny of a nation itself, a whole society. But of course, it’s not just once. Over and over again, we’re presented, and luckily we are, we’re presented with these choices, these moments in our own lifetime, where some decisive point confronts us all.

Now I think, no matter how you have voted in the last 3 months, nor how you envision voting in the next 9 months, that we are living in such a time. Now, a year ago, the excitement I felt for the possibility of our first woman president was palpable and real. And I have to confess to you from the pulpit, that I thought that was a thousand times more possible than that we would somehow live to see the possibility of the first black president. And yet, and yet, here we are, the suspense of the March 4 canvasses and primaries hovering over us. With the distinct and utterly viable candidacy of Barack Obama. Now, this isn't a sermon about Obama. One thing I have learned being a UU minister for more than a quarter of a century, is that Unitarian Universalists are very proud of their ability to cast their own vote, and they really don't like or need their ministers to tell them what to think, politically. But it has now seemed to be the right time. And especially with my son Paul and I working on this book on Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, which is really about the fiery trial of race in America, lived through our great civil war. And the book that we worked on before, Sarah's long walk where we talked about what happened really less than a mile away from here about the free blacks of Boston before the Civil War and how they truly changed America by their free decision to accept their own dignity and to work with white allies, and when it was necessary, not to work with white allies, but to stand for what they believed themselves and to make it happen.

As James Russell Lowell says "Then comes the moment to decide." The moment like the Selma march. One thing I talk about when I do orientations like I did just a couple weeks ago, when Martin Luther King asked the clergy of America to come to Selma, over half of the ministers who arrived were Unitarian and Universalist. That something about, when that moment comes to decide. Where are you ready to stand? Who are you going to stand with? Who are you gonna fear? Who are you gonna reject? What can you realistically hope for? And what can we as a people idealistically envision becoming together? Where are we? Where are we with the issue of race?

Now, having written two books on the issue of race in American life, I have to tell you, that in fact, the experience has left me humbled. I am no authority. If anything.. one of the quotes that has haunted me that we placed at the beginning of Sarah's Long Walk, is not from a politician or a race leader. It's from the Jazz musician Winton Marseillis, and he says " Well, race. It's always something you don't want to do It's always about confronting yourself. Always tailor made for you to fail in dealing with it. And the question of your heroism and your courage in dealing with this trial, that is a measure of your success. Can you confront it with honesty? Do you have the energy to sustain an attack upon it?"

That quote has really really meant a lot to me. What can I say to you my friends and to my congregation, because there's probably nothing in our life that is as hard to talk about as race. Nothing as painful and as complex and frankly perplexing. And it's very very easy to side step and to just glide by. Ministers in America don't tend

to talk about race and racism very much and there's a reason why. But I find that today I *do* want to. And I want to speak as straightforwardly as I can. And not because I'm some authority, because I'm not. And not as some exemplary beacon of racial enlightenment, because I'm realistic to know just exactly how far I am from that. But quite frankly, in this experience I've had a good partner, my friend Paul, who has frankly taught me a lot about what it means to really confront this. Confront this in my own life and to try to deal with it honestly. And I want to share some of that with you today, though I'm not a prophet. But I hope I can express maybe some feelings that you might have had along the way. Or maybe something that you can resonate with. Or maybe something provocative enough that you would like to argue with me in a productive and fruitful way. For all of our sakes.

So, I've already staked my ground on the first thing I want to say, and let me repeat it. Race is inutterably painful and raw and difficult. Anyone who says that it isn't has to be heart-numb, and maybe a little brain-dead. Because to get conversations going about race is incredibly hard. I think we usually and understandably and humanly repress and hold off confronting race in our lives because it does in fact seem so intractable and so excruciating at times. It separates us from one another. It blights young lives. It erupts in senseless and seemingly ceaseless violence in our own city and especially young people seem to be paying the worst price for it. And it makes us strangers from one another. Now my personal theology is not particularly complex. I simply believe God is love and love is God. Nothing too complicated in that. And because I believe that, I also believe God does not wish us to be separated in this way. It is literally a blasphemy against the creator when we fear each other. How can we possibly be engaged in worshipping God if we are simultaneously resenting and fearing the results of precisely that creative spirit? Dealing with racial fear is baseline to possibly loving God. Hating others that we fear as the other not only separates us from God, but I think it separates us from ourselves. And I believe this with all my heart. Although, with all my heart I also understand just how short I fall from that very simple request, which is to love your neighbor. That's what racism is, it's a fervent, heartfelt rejection of the request to love your neighbor.

The second thing I wanna say, and it's both a suspicion and also at times a hope... that dealing with race precisely because of it's painful reality is precisely the path to actually finding ourselves both individually and as a people. And finding ourselves at last, cause this has been going on a long long time. And here's where, if you didn't like all that theological stuff I just gave you, here's where life gets interesting. Because in point of fact, maybe you're the kind of Unitarian Universalist who kinda likes science. And I'm gonna give you a little science. Because the thing I want to say about race right now is that race doesn't exist. It just doesn't exist. Science gives us one truth. Sociology and politics and your daily newspaper offers you quite a different truth. But the reality is, if you look inside your DNA, if you look inside *all* of our DNA, the master blueprint of our existence as a species, guess what? Sometime between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago in Africa we were born. We know this, our DNA tells us. The present constitution of the DNA of every person that lives on this

planet comes from a small circle of about 86,000 individuals—indeed can even be traced to a sort of archetypal “Eve.”

If you just, at random, come and analyze the DNA of a group of people like you that gather together in a public forum, you will find variations of about 85% between your DNA construction. Race only explains 6% of it. It is an absolutely insignificant element to how we might conceive of being different from one another. Race is totally unimportant. And indeed if you look at issues of skin color, the shape of the eyes, structures of muscle, hair type... these things are at the very edges of our DNA, they are truly a *pigment* of our imaginations. Absolutely insignificant in the billions of nucleotides that make you up. To most biologists, race does not exist. It is a social construction. It is something that history gives us. It's something that we construct in our own hearts and minds. But it has absolutely no scientific validity in the structure of your DNA.

And ask yourself... “What race is Tiger Woods? What race is he?” He's one half East Asian, one fourth African, one eighth European, and one eighth Native American. The race that Tiger Woods is, is just Tiger. The greatest golfer the world has ever seen. But does he represent a race? Do any of us represent a race? In 1911, a Texas law was passed that said if you had a drop of black blood in you, that you, for legal purposes – for voting rights and every other aspect of your political existence as a citizen—you would be considered black. This is social construction people, this has nothing to do with the reality of science. And you know what, I have thought to myself over the past week... let's just take that law, and every single one of us is black! Congratulations, we're black. Because we all have every constituent element of every racial construction that has ever been. And it's in you, and it's in me.

That's just the truth of it. Race as a concept comes in very late. We don't even really have the pseudoscientific analysis of race until 1785. With Carlos Linnaeus. He analyzed what he thought were four races that constituted the world, and you might be surprised... white people were on top. That might be a shock. I've often said from this pulpit that winners write history. Guess what... winners write biology too!

Julian Huxley, one of the great scientific minds of the last century said “the word race, as applied scientifically to human groupings has lost its sharpness.”

But it has never lost its knife edge of keeping people from one another, of hurting people, of repressing their possibilities. Oh the knife edge has been strong, and we have applied it. But the fact of the matter is, human beings rose from the Savannah only in a few thousand generations. We haven't truly had time to divide from one another. We are a very recent event, and that's the truth. But sometimes the truth has never been enough.

And step number two of what I want to say about race today.. nothing in life is as real or as wrenching as race. It's an illusion, but my God what a persuasive and powerful illusion it is. Because it changes and warps lives. People buy into it. They

can decide, OH, I know where I stand in relationship to others, because I know where I stand in relation to my concept of race. And today, this morning, some child in Roxbury is thinking “Well hey, for something that isn’t real I’m paying some price”

And this is where race gets convoluted and paradoxical. Because it sure feels real. People make huge investments in their racial distinctions and others’ identities. And this is where it gets complicated. Because sometimes in what we call racial pride and identity the soul of a people’s tradition and their proud cultural self-understanding, it is important for that to be preserved and to be recognized and to be welcomed, because it frankly makes the world a better place—this wonderful diversity that makes up our world.

But as I stand here, we truly are one. There is only one race. It’s one thing to proclaim that truth as a glorious and great thing, which I believe it is. But I also, and this is where the humbling quality comes in, because it’s very easy, if you’re not part of the dominant race. It’s easy to hear that as someone wanting to take away everything that’s precious about your self-identity. To someone else, who might be happy to strip away my distinction, my history, my language patterns, my music to make one universal white bread world, you don’t have to think too hard before you realize where the conflicts come in here.

We are one race, one people, one blood, one DNA. We also share a beautiful and I believe a tense and at times deeply resentful mosaic of people, none of whom want to get swallowed up and spit out. And part of what makes race so complicated is how much we don’t know. How much we don’t actually understand about the experience of other people. And how humble we each have to be in gingerly exploring how race feels for others. How can you speak for other peoples’ experiences? That’s really tricky. How can you possibly know and understand?

All this is true. But if we just let it stand there, then we also maybe don’t pay attention to the fact of our common pain and our common joys that this quality of being human is more essential and more primal than we often give credence to. If we can just move past the idea that we can never really know what goes on inside the experience of others. If we believe that and keep it as an ironclad law, what a very frightening and isolating, and, I think, sad truth that might be.

I know one thing... that the issue of race gets more complicated every day. If the notion of race is a social construct, which I fervently believe that it is, then it can be changed, and it has to change. And racial boundaries and borders are shifting all the time, and they have through history. And the challenge is somehow to move this alteration into a movement of hope.

Frederick Douglass’s vision was that somehow the people of America need each other. He said that even in the midst of the civil war. And when Lincoln was killed he was sitting in the back of a civic memorial and frankly no one knew what to say, they were all shocked and someone said, “Let Douglass speak.” And he got up and he gave frankly one of the great speeches impromptu in his life. And what he said was about

the journey I think all of us are on in this moment to decide. He said “We shared in common a terrible calamity, and this touch of nature has made us more than countrymen, it has made us kin.”

For Frederick Douglass to say that in 1865 is a deep echo of what is reverberating in our lives today. One of the very first sermons that ever happened in my ministry here, was I invited our friend EB Jones to come and talk , and he said, “One thing you have to ask yourself”—this is where race in America is real—“at your funeral, how many folks from other communities might be there? What kind of friendships and partnerships have you forged and has your church forged?”

These are the important questions to confront and deal with it for friendship and partnership. To try, even when it doesn’t feel great. Even when it feels absolutely too tough to do, and we do it any way.

And the reason that I want to end with this quote is that I have just loved it—we have used it a lot over the years. It’s words from Isaiah, and it’s at the hear really of where I want to leave this today. It’s Isaiah 58, and he says “Is this not the fast that I would choose? To loose the bounds of injustice? To undo the throngs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? And not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly. And if you remove the yoke from among you, you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.”

I’ve always loved that, because it’s about healing. It’s about recognizing, we are kin. We are one. And despite the complications, despite the paradoxes, and despite that long history of pain, the reality is—we are ready to spring up. We are ready to be healed like a watered garden whose waters never fail.

I believe this with all my heart. I believe in hope. I believe that you don’t have to be a leader to make a difference. You don’t have to be famous to change the world in which we live. That each of our decisions culminate and cascade into a waterfall, into a moment to decide. This is the irreducible truth of our situation. It is come, once to every soul and nation.