

8/18/19 Sermon “The Case For Reparations”

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Several years ago, I had my big interview with the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Ministerial Fellowship Committee. This is the last major hurdle you need to clear to become an ordained UU minister. The question I remember most from my interview was “Name one influential African-American Unitarian Universalist since the 1961 merger, other than Bill Sinkford.” Bill Sinkford is a two-time former President of our UUA, serving from 2001-2009, and again as an Interim in 2017. I had a very difficult time thinking of another influential African-American UU. After a very long and uncomfortable silence, I said “Mark Morrison-Reed,” who is an author, historian, and minister in our movement.

It has stuck with me ever since, that although we have had a public and explicit commitment to anti-racism in our movement for over 20 years, our leadership doesn’t necessarily reflect that. Mark Morrison-Reed was honored with the Distinguished Service Award this June at General Assembly. When speaking at the Award reception, Rev. Reed noted that Bill Sinkford was the first African-American male who was raised UU and became a minister. Rev. Reed himself was the second Black male minister raised as a UU. There has not been a third.

It may seem odd to harp on anti-racism and the lack of Black leadership in our movement during a visit to Maine, a state that is 95% white. My point is simply that although UUs think of ourselves as a diverse and inclusive group, we have a long way to go to truly live into our values in this area. This is primarily white folks’ work to do. Racism is not a People of Color problem, it’s a white people’s problem, and our world needs a lot of woke white folks. Talking about anti-racism is complicated and difficult, but it is work we are called to by our Principles and our commitments as Unitarian Universalists and people of conscience.

Much of our evolving understanding of the slave trade in this country comes courtesy of Emory University historian David Eltis and his creation of the [Trans Atlantic Slave Trade Database](http://slavevoyages.org), located at slavevoyages.org. The United States (and the colonies that were to

become the United States) accounted for less than 3% of the overall Trans-Atlantic slave trade. How is it that we struggle with the legacies of slavery to a much greater degree than countries that traded many times more slaves? Spain, Portugal, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and France all accounted for far higher numbers of slaves being traded. It's hard to compare racism between countries. But reported hate crimes in the US increased by 17% last year, the third consecutive year of such increases. Our President in 2017 said of a rally of murderous white supremacists in Charlottesville, VA where Heather Heyer was killed that it featured "good people." It's safe to say that the US accounts for more than 3% of the world's anti-Black racism. In order to begin to properly make reparations, to begin to heal our nation's broken and battered soul, we need to know why that is.

The short answer is that anti-Blackness was codified and systematized in the United States from before we began as a nation. One example of this is the fact that we changed our inheritance laws for the specific purpose of preserving a white supremacist hierarchy. You may remember Bree Newsome as the "artist and free black woman" who removed the Confederate flag from the South Carolina Statehouse in 2015. Newsome described the process of changing inheritance laws in colonial America in a series of tweets last year, writing:

"Chattel slavery was constructed around laws that legalized the raping of Black women and the selling of their children. Rape of BW was so pervasive that the prevalence of "mixed race" children posed a threat to white supremacy & the slave system. Were the children of white fathers and enslaved Black mothers slave or free? English law had traditionally held that children inherited status & titles from their fathers. This custom was specifically changed in America to accommodate the growth of slavery."

Newsome is describing a 1662 Virginia Slave Law that made it so children born of enslaved mothers inherited their mothers' slave status, regardless of if the father was a slave or, as was often the

case, a free, white slave-owner. The law stated “Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or free, Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly, that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother...”

This is what we mean when we talk about “intersectionality.” The legacy of slavery in America has been determined not only by laws targeting slaves of African ancestry, but by those targeting slave **women** of African ancestry in particular. If we focus only on the ethnic aspect of slavery’s legacy in America, we do not get as full a picture as if we account for exploitation based on sex, also. Bree Newsome brings a forceful analysis because she is writing not just as a Black person or as a woman, but as a Black woman.

Colonial laws like this were how chattel slavery, slavery where a person is owned forever, and their children and their children’s children are owned forever, became inextricably woven into the fabric of American history. And, lest we categorize codification of racial discrimination as a colonial artifact, let’s not forget that redlining was not outlawed until 51 years ago. Writes Ta-Nehisi Coates in a 2014 piece for the Atlantic:

“...it was the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation, not a private trade association, that pioneered the practice of redlining, selectively granting loans and insisting that any property it insured be covered by a restrictive covenant—a clause in the deed forbidding the sale of the property to anyone other than whites. Millions of dollars flowed from tax coffers into segregated white neighborhoods...Redlining was not officially outlawed until 1968, by the Fair Housing Act. By then the damage was done—and reports of redlining by banks have continued.”

If you want to see the effects of redlining, just Google “mapping inequality” and you can see the degree to which different American cities were divided by banks and city governments for the sake of

keeping Black and brown folks confined to specific, “undesirable” neighborhoods. The property values in those areas has risen much, much more slowly than in other places, which has been a major contributor to the wealth gap in our country.

Why dwell on this in a sermon about reparations? Well, the reparations debate is picking up again this year, and we cannot be good faith participants or partners in this debate without a proper historical context. 2020 Presidential candidate Sen. Cory Booker unveiled a plan last October that would give “baby bonds” to all children in America, bonds which children would accumulate in inverse proportion to their family’s wealth; the less wealth your family has, the more bonds you get between birth and age 18. A 2018 study by Naomi Zewde of the Center for Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University found that such a policy would decrease the racial wealth gap between Black and White young adult Americans by a factor of over ten times. Whether or not one thinks it is fair for the government to create a policy that has a disproportionately positive impact on Black young adults as it does on White ones probably depends on whether or not you are aware that the current wealth gap is a product of our laws as well, over the course of nearly four centuries. That is the case in the United States. Many countries engaged in the slave trade between 1500 and 1800, as I mentioned. Great Britain outlawed the international slave trade in 1807, and the United States followed suit the year after. Unlike in other nations, however, the US continued to have a booming domestic slave trade, due in large part to its chattel slavery laws.

It’s important to remember our country’s racial history because examining that shameful past holds a powerful spiritual lesson for all of us. I was raised as a Unitarian Universalist. As such, I was taught that I was defined as a person not by the conditions I was born into, but by my actions and my decisions and how I lived my life. None of us chose to be born into a country with a barbaric and exploitative racial history. I’m fairly certain no one in this room who is an immigrant came here because of an affinity for the Slave Laws of the Virginia Colony. But we each get to make a choice, every day, about how we are going to confront that reality. And as Unitarian Universalists, our choices and our actions determine who we are, not the conditions we were born into. Our theological forebears taught the

world that damnation or salvation were not pre-ordained at birth. And that, in fact, eternal damnation was not anyone's fate. Instead, they affirmed we are all bound for a common destination; that we are co-creators in the building of that destination, not passive inheritors. None of us was born bad or evil because of the color of our skin or the policies of our nation. But neither are we free to ignore the moral obligations that come with them. We are called to continually act for justice and equity.

If you're not sure what that looks like, my advice is to start small. Focus locally, on the lessons you teach your family, the politics you advocate for, and the voices you make room for in your life. Follow Bree Newsome or Ava Duvernay on Twitter and ask yourself why they are saying what they are saying, especially if you disagree. Seek out writings and media produced by people who do not share your social identities. Have conversations about race **without** the primary question in your mind being "how do I avoid making White people uncomfortable." Work up from there and keep challenging yourself as you go. The Movement For Black Lives just released a "[Reparations Toolkit](#)," available on their website, which would make a great congregational study subject this year. None of us is a bad person because of the situation we were born into, but we have to do everything we can in this life to make things more just and equitable.

I am asking for your help in the work of racial justice not on behalf of African Americans, or Indigenous Americans, or any of the many other groups who have been systematically harmed and exploited by the laws and policies of the United States. I'm asking for myself. Please. I need your help. Please join me in the work of racial justice. I can't not do this. This is the work of a lifetime for me. Heather Heyer, the young woman killed at the rally in Charlottesville, she and I were born five days apart. It could very easily have been me that day in Virginia. Don't do this work because it's a nice thing to do, do it because your salvation and mine depend on its success. None of us were the ones to make discriminatory laws in 1662, but we can't ignore their effects on our world today. As a minister, a person of conscience, someone aware of our country's history, I support reparations for slavery. I hope that you will join me, because I love you, and I cannot do this work alone.

May it be so, and may we be the ones to make it so.