

CHURCH OF THE CROSSROADS UCC
BEGINNING A SACRED CONVERSATION: RACISM

May 18, 2008

“ Embracing God”

Gen. 1:26-31; Psalm 8; Matt. 28:16-20

How does one begin a ‘sacred conversation on race’? Today, May 18, the congregations that claim union in the United Church of Christ (UCC) have been asked to find ways to begin just such a conversation. My immediate thought is, “Why ‘race’?” Haven’t we said enough, done enough about race? The UCC has a legacy of racial justice advocacy. In 1785, the UCC was the first mainline church to ordain an African-American pastor, and provided active witness for the abolition of slavery. During the 1940s, UCC churches came to the aid of interned Japanese-Americans and, in the 1970s, were among the first to stand in solidarity with migrant farm workers. As a leader in the environmental racism movement, the UCC commissioned the nation’s first comprehensive study in 1987 on the connection between race and the location of hazardous toxic waste facilities. More recently, the UCC and UMC stood together in 2004 to support the people of the Marshall Islands who were unknowingly exposed to nuclear radiation to determine the effect of various levels of radiation on human beings.

Our own Church of the Crossroads was founded because high school and college students of various ethnic backgrounds wanted to be able to worship together, and would not accept the ruling of religious authorities that they could worship only with their ‘own kind.’ So why are we asked today to begin a sacred conversation about race? Why should we have to address racism in our blended rainbow state of Hawaii?

Well, for starters, let me show you the editorial page cartoon of the Honolulu Advertiser on Friday, May 16. (Show). Three candidates crouch at the track starting line for Campaign 2008. One entry in the race is identifiable as Hillary Clinton, and one is definitely Barack Obama. The third candidate is between the other two, and is much larger and looks quite intimidating. Obama is asking this candidate, “You’re new to this event, right?” Across the chest of this 3rd candidate is the word: RACISM.

Neither racism nor genderism is new to our election process. Why have our presidents been entirely white males to date? And our vice presidents? Are white males innately more intelligent? More educated? Better leaders? Just about every major country in the world has had a woman in leadership, as president, prime minister, queen or empress. Some have served well, and some not so well, just as recent world leaders who are male have included Kennedy, Mandela and Churchill, but also Hitler, Mussolini and Khrushchev. We now have a woman running for the Democratic nomination for president. This is not a first, but it is the first time a woman has come this far. Genderism is definitely an issue in our country today.

But the biggest issue seems to be a four-letter word, one that begins with R: Race, with links to two other four-letter words: Fear and Hate. As we look to the media to provide us with information about the qualifications of candidates for the office of president, Racism seems to

have surfaced as the leading method for steering attention away from competency, values, integrity, experience and the other qualities that matter. One candidate for president is ‘hapa’—his mother was a white woman from the mainland U.S., his father was a black man from Kenya. The candidate was born in Hawaii, his education includes Punahou, as well as classes in Jakarta, Indonesia where he lived with his mother and step father; Occidental College in CA; and Harvard University School of Law where he majored in constitutional law.

Besides the fact that this candidate is from Hawaii, we also know that for twenty years he has been an active member of a UCC church in Chicago, was married there, his children were baptized there. Trinity UCC is a large church, actively involved in worship and service, both in the impoverished areas of Chicago and throughout the world. The charismatic pastor of that church is the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, aptly named for his prophetic preaching style. This church and its pastor have received a lot of scrutiny and media attention, mostly negative, in the past three months, largely because of the candidate who worships there with his family.

Trinity UCC is an historically black church, but there are active members who are not black, such as the Rev. Jane Fidler Hoffman, interim Conference Minister of the Southern California-Nevada Conference of the UCC, and her husband, Milt. In a letter sent to members of her Conference on March 18 Rev. Hoffman states, “I have spoken with several reporters about our experience at Trinity but am never referred to in print, (I presume because my experience is POSITIVE!) Milt and I are members there very intentionally because it is a Christ centered, Spirit filled congregation where the worship is powerful; the preaching is spiritually insightful and prophetic; the welcome to all is warm and embracing; mission is both local and global; tithing is encouraged and expected; members bring and read their Bibles; and disciples are nurtured in the faith.”

Rev. Hoffman goes on to say, “Yes, we are among just a few ‘white’ members. And yes, sometimes in worship I hear a painful biblical challenge to the white privilege that has been part of my own life and to the racism that is so destructive in our culture. That challenge has helped to shape my own journey in following Jesus as I try to live and minister in ways that contribute to a more loving and just world.”

Rev. Wright has been criticized for saying things that we don’t want to hear, but I can’t help but wonder what the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., whom we revere and honor with a special holiday and streets bearing his name, might have to say to us today about ways in which we oppress others to serve our own purposes.

Our ‘sacred conversation on race,’ in whatever form it takes, needs to move out beyond the politics of this election which will soon be over, and into a greater dialogue that examines how we relate to the world God has placed us in and the sisters and brothers God has given us.

I hope that in our sacred conversations on race we will be able to identify those areas within ourselves that separate us from our brothers and sisters, and that therefore separate us from God. And that we will be able to share these areas of separation with one another in order to overcome them.

Let’s briefly look at the scriptures read for us this morning. In the beginning, God created all that is and called it ‘good.’ In particular, after creating humankind in the image of God, “God saw everything that God had made and indeed, it was very good.” When I was first introduced to this concept in Sunday School long ago, Adam and Eve were very white, with features usually associated with western Europeans. Somehow the stories about creation fail to tell us about the beautiful world of color in which God placed us, including the various hues of color of skin, eyes, hair. And far too often, the passages about ‘subdue’ and ‘have dominion

over' have been used to give us permission to trample, misuse and even to abuse, not only our Earth but also those who differ from us in one way or another: skin color, place of origin, gender, educational achievement, height, weight, physical acuity... 'Hey bro—you born Hawaii?' 'What school you go?'

Today's scripture from Matthew is also misused in ways that ignore that all humankind is created in the image of God. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." This has been used to subdue and dominate persons throughout the world for centuries, even to the extent of forcing people to 'accept Christ or the sword.'

In our 'sacred conversations' we need to examine such areas as 'white privilege,' 'entitlement,' 'manifest destiny,' 'luna mentality,' 'discrimination,' 'colonialism,' and more. But we must go beyond an intellectual exercise of defining and categorizing, and then forgetting. Knowledge and education are not enough; we must move into action, we must be willing to change.

And just what is a 'sacred conversation,' anyhow? I love the term, 'sacred conversation.' Sacred means 'holy,' 'set-apart,' 'take-off-your-shoes' kinds of conversation. And conversation, to me, means a kind of conversing where two or more people share what they truly believe, knowing that what they say will be heard with respect and held in trust, regardless of whether the other conversants agree or disagree with the content. It means that a person will not be attacked for what he or she says, but will be listened to. It means people can be honest about their beliefs and feelings, and can express them without fear of ridicule or rejection. And it means that we must be willing to listen to others without judgment, without confrontation.

Sacred conversations can be held online, through email or blogs, but are best when persons can sit down, fact-to-face, where eyes and hearts can meet, perhaps over a cup of coffee or glass of iced tea. Sacred conversations have rules that are simple, but are firmly kept: Everyone has a chance to speak, but no one is forced to speak. Persons share what they themselves believe, feel, or have experienced. No one contradicts or challenges what another has said. Each person's perspective is seen for what it is...the belief or perspective of that person. The idea is not to try to change someone else. The only person we can change, if we so desire, is ourselves.

Does sacred conversation sound somewhat like prayer? It is my image of the kind of prayer life I try to have with God, knowing I can share my deepest desires, my anger, my hurts, and that the Other will accept what I offer with grace, with acceptance, with love. In sacred conversation, we are that Holy One for each other. Do we dare to risk being that vulnerable, that open?! Wanting someone else to listen to us nonjudgmentally and without confrontation is a normal desire, but for us to listen to someone else in that same way takes some doing, doesn't it? When we believe strongly about something, we want others to affirm our belief. When we know that we are right, then isn't it normal to think that anyone who thinks differently is wrong?

We must listen to one another's stories, and embrace them as if they were our own. In the Native American saying, "We must walk a mile in the other's moccasins." For those of us who are white and educated, and in our congregation we are many, we must move from patronizing and tolerating, until we find ourselves embracing those who are different from ourselves. One of my favorite t-shirts says: "I believe when you truly embrace diversity, you embrace God." Just ask this 'white' woman about my 13 Chamorro, Filipino, Chinese, German and Thai grandchildren, and their right to co-exist as equals with all others!

I would like to close today's message with the words of a hymn written by Shirley Elena Murray of New Zealand in 1978:

*O God, we bear the imprint of your face; the colors of our skin are your design
and what we have of beauty in our race as man or woman you alone define,
who stretched a living fabric on our frame and gave to each a language and a name.*

*Where we are torn and pulled apart by hate because our race, our skin is not the same,
while we are judged unequal by the state and victims made because we own our name,
humanity reduced to little worth, dishonored is your living face on earth.*

*O God, we share the image of the One whose flesh and blood are ours, whatever skin;
in Christ's humanity we find our own, and in your family our proper kin;
Jesus, our brother, we still crucify; love is the language we must learn, or die.*

Amen