***“1619, Not 1492”***

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Lancaster

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**Reading: from *How to Be An Antiracist,* Ibram X. Kendi**

So. What is a racist idea? A racist idea is any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way. Racist ideas argue that the inferiorities and superiorities of racial groups explain racist inequities in society. As Thomas Jefferson suspected a decade after declaring White American independence: “The black, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.”

We are surrounded by racial inequity, as visible as the law, as hidden as our private thoughts. The question for each of us is: What side of history will we stand on? A racist is someone who is supporting a racist policy by their actions or inactions or representing a racist idea. An antiracist is someone who is supporting an antiracist policy by their actions or expressing an antiracist idea. “Racist” and “antiracist” are like peel-able name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos. No one becomes a racist or antiracist. Like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examinations.

Racist ideas have defined our society **since its beginning** and can feel so natural and obvious as to be banal, but antiracist ideas remain difficult to comprehend, in part because they **go against the flow of this country’s history.** As Audre Lorde said in 1980, “We have all been programmed to respond to the human difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and it that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals.” To be an antiracist is a radical choice in the face of this history, requiring a radical reorientation of out consciousness.

**SERMON: “1619, Not 1492”**

Here in 2019, American culture… at least American liberal culture … is beginning to understand the call to dismantle white supremacy. If not across the board among all your neighbors and acquaintances, at least in Unitarian Universalist circles, we have defined clear policies and agendas to interrupt power structures which have arisen by virtue of power defined by white people. We are challenging power derived not only through race but through other long-standing cultural habits such as sexual harassment; the “Me Too” movement has opened up the voices of many women. It’s a big job, changing power dynamics among human beings: as Kendi said, such ideas remain difficult because they go against the flow of this country’s history.

White supremacy feeds on the multiple dimensions of racist attitudes, habits, and institutions. As we just heard from Kendri, a racist idea is any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group. Racist ideas argue that race is an arguable factor in defining inferiorities and superiorities among people, and that these given understandings justify inequities in society.

I won’t speak for any of you, but I know that, along with most of my minister colleagues, I am on a long learning curve about this stuff of recognizing, interpreting, and countering white supremacy: this habit of hierarchies which justify oppression of one another. For the past several years we ministers have been required to attend workshops and other conversations to better understand how to counter white supremacy, and all our congregations are committed to a mindset of anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multi-culturalism (AR/AO/MC). Reading the new book *Centering* is a start, but it isn’t enough. There are so many layers to the onion. Just when I think I reach a new level of understanding my own part in systemic racism, I realize the need to go deeper. Dismantling white supremacy it not easy, I’m never going to be perfect, and I’m never going to stop learning and growing in this work of equity and freedom for all, creating dynamics of belonging, dynamics of opening our circles wide.

The Tradition of Columbus Day

Tomorrow is a holiday, traditionally called Columbus Day. It offers me an opportunity to illustrate one way we can dismantle white supremacy: by challenging and changing our origins stories. Origin stories celebrate some marker in our history. Origins stories can be drawn from anywhere on the timeline of our past as a way of defining who we are today. Origins stories usually rise to iconic or legendary stature, and are told in celebratory or exceptional terms. What we celebrate we tend to live into, and heroic origin stories help us feel OK about who we are in the present and how we move into the future. Established origin stories may block out other possibilities for the telling of any history: often we understand ourselves through a single lens. How many personal origin stories are here in this room right now, as well origins stories about this congregation?

Many of us learned the traditional origins story of tomorrow’s holiday. We learned to celebrate the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus for landing on the shores of the New World in 1492 in search of a route to the Near East. His story of bravery and discovery can be inspirational. Still recently many Americans have rethought Columbus Day. To many his voyage represents not discovery, but the beginning of colonial empire building in the New World, when “natives” were conquered and supplanted by white European power and disease. In response, several states and many cities will shift the subject of the origin story they celebrate tomorrow to “Indigenous Peoples Day,” declaring a story which calls us to remember those many cultures who were here before Columbus. Recasting this origins story, we create a wider circle of American identity.

Another origin story which we have been called to rethink is about the year 1776, traditionally identified as the founding date of the United States, when Thomas Jefferson penned the words that “All men are created equal.” By now in 2019 many recognize the foundation of sand on which that declaration of freedom --- written by a slave owner --- was built. If we want the 1776 origins story to embody our freedom and democracy, we are far off the mark. Jefferson wrote on behalf of white male Americans, and not even all of them: in the mid-eighteenth century, being of certain economic privilege made it much easier to belong to the group identified as citizens, with rights to vote and own property.

Rather than shifting the subject of an origins story, a recent project by the *New York Times* --- which is not fake news --- calls Americans to a different date for the founding of this country. Instead of 1776, let us claim 1619 as the founding date of this country. Four hundred years ago, in August 1619, the first slave ship landed on the coast of the Virginia colony. An origins story of 1619 offers us a truer picture of who we are today as a country. While that story encompasses 400 years of oppression based on race, it also calls us to notice true and heroic patterns of democracy, as well as our striving to make the world a better place. To quote the *Times*: “Out of racism and anti-black slavery came nearly everything that made American exceptional. “ That’s a pretty awesome origins story in my book, placing black Americans at the center. Having a new origins story can help us in this compelling work of dismantling white supremacy.

Today, let us briefly review a history which includes --- a brief disclaimer here --- many troublesome events, to realize the extent of racism in this country. This is a story of human survival and progress, but in the current environment curated by political leaders who are unabashedly racist, it is also a story which demands that we heed Ibram Kendi’s call that all of us --- people of any skin color --- must work to become all the more effective anti-racists.

Some Facts of the Slavery Story

Around August 20, 1619 a Portuguese ship arrived at Point Comfort, Virginia near Jamestown, carrying thirty humans of African descent as cargo. Only half of the original passengers survived the voyage. Coming from Angola, this event marked the first delivery of human slaves to the colonies. From then until Emancipation in 1865 the slave trade, defined by race, imported empoted a total of 12.5 million men, women and children from Africa --- another two millions did not survive --- to work fields and farms in the south. Slavery supported the lucrative economy of cotton and sugar, controlled by white persons of privilege. Considered as commodities, slaves were exploited and sold, children taken from parents, loved ones forever separated. For 250 years the foundation of this country’s economy was built on the backs of slavery.

We know well the irony of Jefferson’s words in the Declaration. By now many Americans, particularly Unitarian Universalists, have practiced well a re-visioning of Jefferson’s legacy, especially after the disasterous Jefferson Ball at a General Assembly in the early 1990s. We have removed Jefferson from various high pedestals of liberal religion. Jefferson was not unique in perpetuating the culture of slavery: among the first twelve US presidents, ten owned slaves, Jefferson built Monticello on their backs, and fathered several children with Sally Hemmings, a black woman whom he owned.

Slavery continued through the mid-nineteenth century and many northern reformers, including many here in Lancaster, supported the Underground Railway to secure freedom for runaway slaves. --- To that, don’t forget about the Walking Tours led by the African American Heritage group, a project supported by UUCL’s Walters Trust: there is one more tour on November 2. I recently took this tour and it is wonderful! --- President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation represented hope for freedom and equality: slavery officially ended in the 1860s but the system of white privilege was so well established that new forms of oppression over blacks and poor whites replaced the official institution of slavery. The Jim Crow era of the early twentieth century was no better. By the time of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, this country had made some progress in anti-racism and the election of the first black president represented even more hope, only to meet reversals from current politicians in power.

This is a story of brutality. Slaves did not have access to legal marriage, education, authority over their biological children, rights in court proceedings, access to voting, equality in public spaces and places, marriage rights, and more. In reviewing this brutality my intent this morning is not to “afflict the comfortable,” as preaching if often described. I also hope to offer the flip side of that preaching mantra, to “comfort the afflicted.” The *Times* reminds us that slavery is also a story of endurance, a story of faith and hope. Collectively blacks didn’t seek vengeance. Instead they organized to work for equality, for human and civil rights. Perhaps they found inspiration through music, as our opening hymn, “Circle Round for Freedom,” expressed. This hymn is not a negro spiritual but it does express the heartfelt call for building circles of freedom. Many freed slaves worked for change, for themselves as well as for poor whites, creating new public education systems, more equitable tax laws, and many more opportunities in American society. If there is an authentic American origins story of democracy, it lies here: without the struggles former slaves endured, democracy in the United states would look very different. Resistance to slavery sparked many other “rights” movements: women’s rights, gay rights, immigration rights, disability rights and more. There is so much justification for claiming 1619 as the date of the American origins story.

Two Modern Institutions Grounded in Slavery

The *Times* supports its claim of 1619 as the founding date of American “democracy” by demonstrating how many components of modern American culture have an origins story based on slavery. This report really opened my eyes to the extent of the legacy of slavery in so many arenas of modern life which would not have occurred to me to associate with slavery. Indeed, this reporting has also opened my eyes to the challenges of dismantling white supremacy and also given me new ideas for making positive contributions to the dismantling. The *Times* article described ten institutions in modern American life with roots in slavery. I can summarize two of these here: health care and, traffic patterns --- yes, traffic patterns.

The poorly-defined modern American health care system formed during slavery. Slaves shouldn’t become too healthy or they’d overthrow white owners, but they still needed a degree of good health to do required physical work. Discrimination abounded in developing the American health care system after slavery officially ended. For example, the American Medical Association and medical schools barred blacks, and many hospitals and clinics were segregated. Access to health insurance was limited and even those who had insurance could not use segregated facilities. It took a black medical society in the 1960s to argue for health care as a basic human right, directly influencing the creation of Medicare. Disparity remains today: the US is the only high-income country without universal care.

The example of slavery’s influence I found most surprising was on modern traffic patterns. The *Times* focused on Atlanta to illustrate traffic congestion as a direct result of poor planning of street layout after the Civil War. Streets were planned to keep freed slaves in their place. Even after segregated neighborhoods were outlawed, more subtle methods created ghettos defined by race. Then the interstate road system of the 1950s and 1960s created impassable barriers between neighborhoods in cities such as Buffalo, Kansas City, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Austin. Then white flight to the suburbs increased traffic congestion all the more. I don’t know the street layout in Lancaster well enough to know if this city was influenced by racial distribution. Perhaps after the service we can discuss this.

Raising Awareness of Dismantling White Supremacy

How do these stories of slavery’s legacy expand your reflections about dismantling white supremacy? It’s not enough for us to read about or talk about becoming more antiracist, we also must act, we must turn our liberal theology of equality into tangible results.

For me this *Times* reporting has done two things. It has opened my perspective on the human proclivity to create hierarchy among humans, and to issue power over those lower on the hierarchy who we define as “less than.” Even we open-minded, liberal, fair, compassionate people, we do this. Racism is widespread, ingrained, and insidious. I’m glad for this project promoting 1619 as the founding date of an American origins story: this analysis of slavery has helped explain the present for me, including the vitriol and nastiness of the current President of this country.

Additionally, the *Times* reporting also gives me new insight into what I can do to live more fully as an anti-racist: what I can do to contribute to dismantling white supremacy, which for me also embraces dismantling white patriarchy. You may say that these examples of slavery’s legacy are too large, beyond anything I can do to bring about change. I challenge your response: each of su can help.: We have an election coming up, in which health care is a central campaign issue: make sure you get out there and vote, and work to rally others to the polls. Join the UUA’s movement, “UU The Vote.” You may not be able to build a new roads to ease traffic, but next time you move or otherwise look for lodging, consider neighborhoods which shout “diversity” rather than “gated communities.”

Conclusions

More particular to this congregation, in addition to attending the Transitioning Forum after this service, when we discuss staffing at UUCL, mark your calendars for November 17, when my “boss,” Rev Keith Kron, will lead you in a workshop called “Beyond Categorical Thinking,” a requirement for congregations in search. This workshop invites each of us to explore unrealized ways in which we carry around preconceived opinions about others based on physical characteristics such as race and gender identification. If in no other arena of congregational life right now, you can practice becoming all the more anti-racist --- and “anti-“ other stereotyping --- as you engage in ministerial search.

How will you recognize tomorrow’s holiday? What origins stories will you re-consider? Whatever you choose, I invite you to celebrate the reality that change is possible, that dismantling any oppressive system is within the grasp and reality of each of us.

May we all work to see that this is so.

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