

**"BLACK LIVES MATTER—IN FERGUSON, STATEN ISLAND,  
AND THE FOX VALLEY"**

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To be honest, I have desperately tried to avoid doing a sermon on Ferguson, Staten Island and the latest convulsion of race and racism in America. I have been quite content to have my colleague Leah do a sermon last fall and to throw a couple sentences here and there in an occasional sermon. Personally, I've been thinking, "I'll deal with Ferguson when I move to St. Louis." With everything going on in my personal transition and setting the stage for my departure from the Fellowship, I haven't felt like I've had the emotional or intellectual bandwidth to do a sermon about race.

If I'm honest with myself, some words come to mind to describe this avoidance: cop out, denial, dereliction of duty. I make sense of things for myself—and hopefully help you make sense of things for yourselves—through my sermons. You pay me to think about, explore, talk about and act on the important issues of the day. Not addressing this incredibly important and timely topic finally felt untenable. Metaphorically kicking and screaming, a few weeks ago I changed the topic of this weekend's sermon. I did so with a deep sense of dread.

There's one other fact about my avoidance of race and racism this fall and winter that I must acknowledge out of the gate today: as a white person, I have the privilege of deciding not to address race. If I'm a black living pretty much anywhere in the U.S.—including in the Fox Valley—I don't have the luxury of deciding to ignore this issue. Per capita, for example, arrest rates of blacks in the Fox Valley are higher than in Ferguson.<sup>1</sup> This is not an issue about somewhere else. It's an issue about here. It's an issue about now. But as a white person, I have the privilege of choosing to ignore this issue even though it's here. It's not staring me in the face on a daily basis.

I've tipped my hand about the first premise of my sermon today. The title says the same thing: I'm not talking about Somewhere Else today. Yes, I'm talking about Ferguson and Staten Island and Cleveland and so many other places in the United States that haven't but should pierce our collective consciousness—or more precisely, the collective consciousness of whites like me. But more than anything, I am talking about the Fox Valley today.

When I moved to the Fox Valley from Chicago in 1990, I noticed right away that whenever the subject of race came up, folks here turned their gaze to Milwaukee and Chicago. There was a sense that race is an issue in those places, but not here. There's a word for this sense: fiction. It's not true. Race and racism have been and are huge issues here. Turning our gaze to Milwaukee and Chicago—or Ferguson—whenever the topic of race comes up is an evasion. And it's an evasion with very significant consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/investigations/2014/11/18/wisconsin-black-arrest-rates-dwarf-ferguson/19244069/>.

This is why the History Museum at the Castle's traveling exhibit "A Stone of Hope: Black Experiences in the Fox Cities"<sup>2</sup> is such a momentous event for our community. (You can see the exhibit in the reception hall after the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration on Monday evening, and at the Fellowship in the spring.) With historical facts that have long been suppressed and/or ignored, "Stone of Hope" blows the fiction that race is not an issue here right out of the water.

I found the exhibit to be shocking. Like so many whites here, I bought into the fiction that racism wasn't such a big deal here because we've never had a significant black population. The exhibit reveals that both parts of this statement are lies. The Fox Cities had a thriving black population in the decades following the Civil War, including veterans of the war. The South lost the war but won the peace and in doing so, the hundreds of thousands of blacks who served in the Union Army were carefully excised from history. At the fiftieth anniversary of Gettysburg in 1923, white Confederate and Union veterans gathered together to commemorate the great battle. And they all pretended that there had been no black soldiers there.<sup>3</sup>

It was in this same period of the early twentieth century that the significant black population in Appleton disappeared. As the exhibit documents, Klan activity, police harassment and segregation likely caused the black population to plummet. By 1920, not a single black person lived in Appleton. This was an astonishing transformation. You don't lose a whole minority population within a few decades without vicious racism being at the center of the story. Right here in Happy Valley.

And then in a sleight of hand worthy of Houdini, the memory of the thriving black population that once lived here disappeared from white consciousness. The erasure was so complete that a well-meaning white like me, a person who has tried to work on race issues for twenty-five years, was completely unaware of this history. Our worship leader Connie Roop and her husband Peter—both progressive people who as we've heard have been involved in the civil rights struggle for a long time—wrote a children's history of Appleton that did not include anything about a thriving black community once existing here. So thorough was the rewrite of history that they didn't run across this reality in their extensive research.

But many blacks here and well beyond know and have always known this history. This place and its history is thick with the stench of racism and segregation and hate. Our area continues to struggle with a bad reputation among blacks because of this history. And activist whites like me have been completely oblivious to this.

So in its own way, this area is as steeped in racism and racial strife as Ferguson. If anything, racism has been even more thorough here because blacks were completely evicted for decades and the memory of their thriving community was erased from history. This is a powerful racist legacy that all of us here are part of. This came home to me when Nick Hoffman, the chief curator of "Stone of Hope," did a service here last spring. He showed a slide of a *Post-Crescent* advertisement for a KKK rally in the early 1900s. I noticed the address of the rally: a Methodist church located at 800 N. Superior St. Hey, that was our old building! For seventeen years, this Fellowship occupied a building where KKK rallies once took place, and we didn't even know it.

Here's a quote I ran across attributed to Dan Pallotta in a TED talk: "Injustice isn't 'coming soon to a town near you,' it's already struck your town, and the question is simply: How are you showing up?" Our (white) rewritten history and ignorance has prevented too many of

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.myhistorymuseum.org/a-stone-of-hope.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion* for a compelling exploration of this.

us—me included—from showing up. We'd rather talk about Milwaukee or Chicago or Ferguson. That keeps us from showing up here.

With this premise that we are not talking only about Somewhere Else but also about here, this is how I make sense of this latest race convulsion in our country.

First, we whites need to understand that there is ample reason for blacks to mistrust and feel angry toward law enforcement and our criminal justice system. There is a centuries-long history of racial disparity and bias in our criminal justice system.

In her Wellspring Wednesday talk this past Wednesday, Michelle Kuhl made this point in a compelling way. In the hundred years following the Civil War, thousands of blacks were lynched while law enforcement looked on. In 1921 (right around when the disappearance of blacks in the Fox Cities was completed), scores and possibly hundreds of blacks were murdered in Tulsa by whites while law enforcement looked on. (As Unitarian Universalists, it's important to note that a newspaper owner whose paper encouraged the violence was a distinguished Unitarian.) In more places than we can catalogue—Selma, for example, as the current movie illustrates—it was law enforcement officers themselves who assaulted blacks. And while it does not always look the same today, the disparity in our criminal justice system keeps on going. We can see this in the astronomically higher black incarceration rates and in blacks getting killed in disproportionate numbers by police.

This is why there are such disparities in how whites and blacks view the police. I shared at Wellspring Wednesday that my experiences with law enforcement have been positive (like most white people), with one notable exception. That one exception was when I tried to enter Canada with another white guy and a black woman. We were hassled in a way I've never been hassled by law enforcement before or since, and ultimately were refused admittance to Canada for the flimsiest of reasons. For me this was an eye-opening exception to positive experiences of law enforcement. It exposed some of the privilege I've obviously enjoyed and gave me a tiny peak at how different black experiences of law enforcement can be.

This disparity of experience calls those of us who are white to empathy. We need to understand that our white experiences of law enforcement and the criminal justice system are likely very different from black experiences. Rather than ignore black experiences because we cannot imagine how they could happen, we need to listen with open hearts and open minds to our black sisters' and brothers' stories.

Second, I unapologetically support robust accountability for law enforcement. Police have a sacred charge from the community, and they are given lethal weapons in fulfilling this charge. Our justice system needs to hold them accountable for fulfilling this charge in an even-handed, legal way. Police who use excessive force recklessly or brutally should be held accountable for their actions.

At the same time, I understand and appreciate that most police are conscientious and law-abiding. I refuse to demonize all police. I deeply appreciate the work they do, and I try to cultivate empathy for them, too. Their job is tough. They put themselves in harm's way to an extent I can't even fathom. They have to make split second, life and death judgments with incomplete information. I get all this. I honor all this. But this doesn't mean that I am willing to give them a free pass when they violate the law. It is not anti-police to say that police brutality is wrong and that perpetrators of police brutality should be held accountable to the full extent of the law.

Here's an analogy that I find helpful. Most clergy don't sexually abuse children and/or adults in their congregations. But some do. I think there needs to be a high degree of

accountability for clergy who perpetrate abuse. And I don't feel like I'm anti-clergy in saying this.

Third, until we have ridden this land and our souls of the scourge of racism once and for all—and clearly we haven't arrived at that promised land yet—we whites need to say loudly and clearly that black lives matter. We need to say this with our voices and with our actions. Slavery and Jim Crow and lynching and medical experiments like those at Tuskegee and keeping a chokehold on an unarmed black man to the point he dies and shooting a twelve-year-old black kid who has a pellet gun and then letting him bleed out while you stand by doing nothing and massively incarcerating blacks: these things all send the relentless message that black lives do not matter. For centuries, black lives in our country have mattered a whole lot less than white lives. Tragically, this is historical and contemporary truth. There is only one antidote to this: saying in our words and especially our deeds that black lives matter.

There has been a lot of backlash against the Black Lives Matter movement in our overwhelmingly white Unitarian Universalist faith. Often this backlash is manifested by insisting we need to say All Lives Matter, not Black Lives Matter. Yes, all lives do matter. I believe this deeply. Our UU belief in the inherent dignity and worth of all people calls us to affirm this. But right now, and for too many centuries in our country and our community, black lives have not mattered as much as white lives. For this reason, we need to say and act on the more specific maxim that Black Lives Matter. Watering this down into "All Lives Matter" aids and abets the perpetuation of racism.

Here's another analogy. When the Fellowship decided to become intentionally welcoming of gays, lesbians, bisexual, transgender and queer people, we needed to say this specifically. Many straight people in Unitarian Universalist congregations resisted saying this. No, they said, we need to say we welcome everyone. Sexual orientation doesn't matter, they said. The truth is that sexual orientation and gender identity did and still do matter a great deal in our society. Sexual orientation and gender identity can even be a matter of life and death. You think sexual orientation didn't matter to Matthew Shepherd? In the face of homophobia and heterosexism and centuries of exclusion within Unitarian Universalist and other faith communities, we need to specifically say loudly and clearly that we are welcoming of LGBTQ folks. Too often saying "Everyone is welcome" means a continuation of the same old subtle or not so subtle exclusion of LGBTQ people.

So what do we do in the face of continued struggle with racism here and elsewhere in our country? Where do we go from here? This is all a bunch of hot air if we don't do something to move forward. Here's what I think we should do. And by "we," I need to own that I am talking specifically about myself and the other whites among us. I'm not going to presume to tell blacks or other people of color what they should do about racism.

Each one of us who are white first of all should look within ourselves and honestly examine our privilege and our own personal racism. Doing the work of racial justice cannot happen if we don't do this work. I hope that the Fellowship collectively will more seriously engage in this work in the coming year or two. It's essential to us becoming more of a leader in the movement for racial justice.

We need to cultivate our empathy and our understanding of people different from us. Instead of responding to black stories of abuse and harassment by law enforcement with disbelief and reference to our own more positive experiences, we need to try to walk a mile in a black person's shoes. Cultivating a sense of humility is a great strategy for doing this work.

We need to say in our words and deeds that Black Lives Matter. We need to get involved in the Black Lives Matter movement. In that quotation from Dan Pallotta I used earlier, he says the question simply is: "How are you showing up?" We need to show up. And in showing up, we need to be sensitive to not taking over the movement—something that often happens when whites join a movement led by people of color. This is another place where humility is a good trait to cultivate. We also need to work on how our Fellowship can say Black Lives Matter in the same powerful way we say LGBTQ folks are welcome here.

I believe we need to be non-violent in our work for racial justice. I say this with profound uncertainty. It's plainly evident that legal slavery in this country would likely not have ended without the horrific violence of the Civil War. It's plainly evident that the Holocaust and its breathtaking systematized racism would not have ended without the violence of World War II. But like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., I remain committed to non-violence. It's a faith stand for me.

Finally, we must remain engaged in the hard, wrenching work of racial justice—even though those of us who are white have the privilege of choosing to stand on the sidelines. And we must remain hopeful. President Mark Burstein of Lawrence University wrote a beautiful letter to the Lawrence community after the grand jury decision not to indict Darren Wilson in the shooting death of Michael Brown. Burstein quoted the veteran civil rights leader John Lewis from his 2005 convocation speech at Lawrence:

America is a better place; we are better people because we are in the process of laying down the burden of race and creating the beloved community, a community at peace with itself. None of us, not one of us should give up. Not one of us should throw in the towel. It is in keeping with the movement, in keeping with the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence to be hopeful.

Friends, we need to listen to our black brothers and sisters and understand that we have a long ways yet to go before the promised land of the beloved community. And we, each one of us regardless of our race or ethnicity, need to keep on working toward fulfilling this beautiful dream, right here, right now.

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