

Sermon From the Land of Canaan  
The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough  
March 8, 2015 10:30 a.m.

Rev. Clark Olsen states that it was the murder of the white Rev. James Reeb and not the murder just days earlier of black Jimmie Lee Jackson that propelled President Lyndon Johnson's Voting Rights Act through Congress. He says this with overwhelming sadness and regret and pride. How did we get to Selma? Where are we now? What needs to be done? What can we do?

Almost forty years ago I was a librarian at a state psychiatric hospital and had the pleasant task of sorting through book donations. One afternoon I found in my hands a little antique book called the Salesman's Handbook; one of those illustrated friendly treatises on how to read a person's character from their appearance. Here was a thorough introduction to what the salesman could tell about an individual based on the height of the forehead, the shape and size of the nose, the width and roundness of the eyes, the shape of the skull, the color of the skin, the fleshiness of the earlobe, the thickness of the lips, the texture of the hair, the set of the shoulders and the type of the body. How quaint, I thought. It took me a while to catch on. In short, I had in my hands a virulent instruction manual on how to be a bigot. People with no chins were weak, people with strong jutting chins were aggressive, people with large noses and sallowness were greedy, people with eyebrows that met over the nose were unintelligent or weak-minded. I wanted to wash my hands after I pitched it in the trash. This poison didn't arise out of nowhere – it is a deeply ingrained European myth with centuries of weight behind it. And European Americans have for centuries absorbed this insidious evil nonsense to the point where we don't recognize when we see it.

If we are white, this is how we grew up. This was our standard of perfection. This is how we joked around. This was our social shortcut to how to behave. This was our code for understanding others. Think of the books we read and the movies we watch – especially the older classics. They are populated by actors dressed as racist stereotypes. Even the newer movies rely on them. Star Wars CGI characters from Phantom Menace – the first of the series to have characters speaking English -- have these stereotypes: the cunning and rapacious traders with the Japanese accents, the slave-holding shop owner with a hook nose and vaguely Semitic accent, the clumsy fool with the Jamaican accent. George Lucas has angrily denied these accusations and he is telling his truth. His stereotypes may not have been intentional. The point is they are unrecognizable to him – and yet they are recognized as racist by others. His images may be unintentional but that doesn't mean they don't do great damage to the young audience absorbing them. Racism is damaging and we are all damaged.

Race as a biological fact does not exist. You cannot predict anything about a person's character, intelligence or future based on skin or eyes or earlobes or ability to pronounce the letter "r." Race as a biological fact does not exist – no exceptions. Race as a social construct does exist. We have been taught to believe something about a person's character based on these things. We assign status to people based on the color of their skin, or their accent, or their appearance.

Europeans have been doing this for a long, long time. We've seen our manifest destiny the way the Israelites saw the promised lands: (Exodus 15)

'In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;  
you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.  
The peoples heard, they trembled;  
pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia.  
Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed;  
trembling seized the leaders of Moab;  
all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away.  
Terror and dread fell upon them;  
by the might of your arm, they became still as a stone  
until your people, O Lord, passed by,  
until the people whom you acquired passed by.  
You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession,  
the place, O Lord, that you made your abode,

the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established.

God took the chosen people into the heart of their enemies and planted them in that holy abode; and their enemies were powerless to prevent it.

By the fifteen hundreds, Europeans were gathering and trading and fighting with each other in terms of nations. The "other" was someone from a different territory who spoke a different language and ate different food; but they were recognizable as a fellow humans. We may have enslaved others, seized their land, wiped them out – but we also began to create laws to protect the others in our midst. In the fifteen and sixteen hundreds, when Europeans started to venture out to other continents and encountered people who looked, sounded and acted very different from themselves, they decided that these superficial differences indicated deeper differences as well, differences that made them inferior beings, or even less than human. The laws and social mores that protected Europeans did not have to apply to these new "others" because they were inferior. It was tribalism on a continental scale.

Our political nation and its mores of civil liberty and freedom were founded in the seventeen hundreds by European Americans. At the same time we were codifying our freedoms, we were declaring those who were not supposed to be free because of their appearance and gender. As enlightened as we were, we were still immersed in tribalism made worse with political will. We embraced an institutional racism that justified the enslavement of Africans, seizing land from Mexicans, and the extermination of Native Americans. Over the years, Europeans came to strengthen their beliefs and attitudes by creating pseudo-scientific classifications of people according to their physical characteristics. Tribalism, political might and fraudulent science spelled disaster for non-Europeans. This has shackled the moral character of our nation and we are not free of it yet. It is painfully clear and ironic that the outrages in Ferguson and Cleveland and New York have come about on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Selma.

Ferguson, Missouri has for years balanced its budget on the backs of minorities by systematically and unlawfully targeting African American residents with tickets and fines. Every branch of Ferguson government -- police, municipal court, city hall -- participated in these illegal activities. African Americans constitute 85% of Ferguson but almost all the government is white. If you think for one minute that this outrage perpetrated on our fellow country men and women is an isolated example of a town gone bad, think again. A white man is not going to be stopped for driving down a street in Roxbury as often as a black man is going to be stopped for driving down a street in Brookline.

Racism pollutes the very air we breathe. Racism is an infection of our perceptions, and we are all infected. Racism is the mortar in the foundations of our institution of privilege, and that mortar is crumbling. Our privileges cannot stand. It is not right, it is not practical, and it prevents us from becoming who we were meant to be. The walls that privilege has created around us will come down. We are the inhabitants of Philistia. We are Edom and Moab. We are the Canaanites. We have to become something else.

The European American time of supremacy in numbers is coming to a close. By around 2020, "more than half of the nation's children are expected to be part of a minority race or ethnic group," the Census Bureau says, putting Americans under the age of 18 at the front of a trend that will see the overall population follow suit some 20 years later. By 2044, no one racial or ethnic group will dominate the U.S. in terms of size. There will be no majority. There will be a lingering dominant culture, with all its good and evil attributes, for quite a while longer. If we don't find a better way of sharing, even more, relinquishing privilege, we will find ourselves as any shrinking body of conquerors. We will be a social power without relevance, intelligence or good will. And power without relevance, intelligence or good will becomes monstrous. It becomes violent, like Selma. It becomes rapacious, like Ferguson. It becomes destined to go down in flames.

I want to think we are strong enough and wise enough to dismantle our own walls and not have it done for us.

How do we do this?

First, we have to come to grips with our own racism. The task for us is to recognize that aspect of who we are and what we do and do not do that makes others unsafe. This is hard work that will last for the rest of our lives. We can do this together, and hold each other with love and accountability. But by God we need to change.

Second, we have to take responsibility for the failures of our people. That means we need to be empowered by the insights and the vision for a better world we gain from doing the anti-racist and anti-oppression work on ourselves. We need to seek forgiveness and reconciliation even when we have been blind to the harm we might have done. Above all, we need to teach our children different stories, about us, and about them: stories of the way others see us and not as we see ourselves.

Third, we need to use our prophetic voices of regret and accountability in the wider world. We need to seek out ways of making personal sacrifices to restore the balance of things. We need to seek out ways to take apart privilege and distribute the pieces of those walls like we did the Berlin wall to everyone who needs to be safe and secure and strengthening our future.

We need, for the rest of our lives, to be in two places: to honor and seek forgiveness for what is present among us, and to be invitational to what we hope we might become. We need to make a place and welcome those who are not in this room, in this community. We need to be open to the lessons they will teach us.

Jimmie Lee and James together have opened a gate in the walls of Jericho. It is time to welcome in justice. It is time to welcome in change. It is time to welcome in freedom. It is time to fulfill the promise for all God's children.