



RACISM
IS ALIVE
AND
WELL A
SERMON

BY THE
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ALL SOULS
CHURCH, UNITARIAN
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I HESITATE to preach this sermon for two reasons.

First, it has been my way to deal with racism issue-by-issue. I approach it as an affront to justice. By advocating justice in every possible area and on every point that I can, I hope to reduce, and at some point in history, eradicate white racism. That has been my usual method.

The second reason I hesitate is that to speak about racism is for me very painful. It is very painful because I am the product of a racist system. I was born and raised in Washington DC.. I was forced to go places that I did not necessarily want to go and I was kept from going places that I thought I would like to go.

I can remember when I was a very small child being downtown and being terribly hungry and wanting a sandwich. I could see all the people sitting at the counter in a store eating and I asked my mother could I eat. She found it very difficult in the days that followed to explain to me why I could not have a sandwich.

I don't think that the Ministerial Relations Committee knew these reasons when they asked me to deliver this sermon. It is something that they wanted me to do, it is something that I have done before in many different ways, but to confront it head-on is for me painful.

In order to complete this task, I am going to have to deal with some terms and some differences in terms.

Racial *segregation* is not racism. Racism often leads to racial segregation, but not necessarily. In order to understand this, we must first understand that racial segregation is the practice of restricting people to certain limited areas of residence or to separate institutions — such as schools and churches — and restricting them from certain facilities — such as parks, playgrounds, restaurants, and restrooms — on the basis of race.

It seems strange, but Malcolm X Park a few blocks from here, originally known as Meridian Park, was given to the city by a woman, on the condition that no Negro would ever set foot in the park. When I was a child, I was legally prohibited from going to Meridian Park. It is one of the most beautiful parks in America, with its waterfalls and its fountains, and I could see it only from the outside. It seems strange that it is now called Malcolm X Park, and you have to be a brave white person to set your foot in Malcolm X Park.

In the United States, such restrictions developed primarily as one aspect of relations between whites and blacks, especially in the South. Although other groups

in this country — such as the Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, and American Indians — have at times also been affected, segregation as we understand it in America has been applied primarily by whites against coloreds. Even though the Irish experienced some segregation and the Jews certainly experienced some segregation, the harshest forms of segregation in the United States have been based on color.

Elsewhere in the world, segregation has not been confined to the relations between white and nonwhite or colored populations. Colored races have also practiced segregation. The Asian Mongols, the African Bantus, and the American Aztecs were great conquerors and practiced discrimination, including segregation of subject peoples. The caste system in Hindu India, in which occupation as well as race and religion are important elements, is the most extensive system of segregation.

So segregation is not merely a phenomenon based on color. It has been used by the conqueror against the subject people and it has been used in religion; but most of the segregation we see in the world is based on color. The phenomenon of racial segregation has appeared in all parts of the world where there are biracial communities, except where racial amalgamation has occurred on a large scale, as in Hawaii and Brazil.

Racism is an excessive and irrational belief in or advocacy of the superiority of a given people, group, or nation on racial grounds alone. If you say a person is a racist, you are saying that that person believes that he or she is superior based on racial grounds alone.

When we look at racism from that perspective, it becomes clear that all segregationists are not racists. It is also clear that all racists may not practice segregation. It does mean that in most instances a racist culture will practice segregation.

Segregation appears always as a means of maintaining the economic advantages and the superior social status of the politically dominant racial group. Segregation is a system constructed for the purpose of ensuring that the dominant racial group stays in power.

This does not necessarily lead to special physical segregation because the social segregation of the subordinate group may be maintained through a system of etiquette, symbols, and exclusion from intimate social contacts that would reduce the social distance between the races. That is to say, one does not have to legally segregate in order to keep people apart.

In an urban industrial society it becomes much more difficult to maintain the physical segregation of races, therefore more dependence must be placed on institutions to maintain segregation. As the result of segregation, the races live in different social worlds and communication between them is restricted, no matter how close they may live physically.

My wife and I were discussing this a few days ago. We have, on occasion, invited three families that live in our apartment house into our apartment to partake of refreshments. The only family that ever reciprocated was the Lundburg family. He and his wife are deceased now, but they were members of this church. The people we invited were very polite, very nice, but they made it clear by their actions that they would not reciprocate.

I'm not one to try to force anybody to sit next to me or to invite me home to dinner or to have me as their friend, so that ended that. You can believe me, if I ever visit with anyone in my apartment house, they will invite me first. I gave it my best shot.

Listen to this carefully because it deals with racism being alive and well in this country: The distribution of power in a biracial community is not only important in determining the economic relations of the races. It is of equal importance in determining their social relations or their status in the social order.

If one does not have an appropriate distribution of power in a biracial community — regardless of whether you live close together, eat together, go to the bathroom together, go to the movies together, or go to church together — then power and inequity will maintain segregation in terms of social contact, and the community will be racist.

Because of this, the people of this country, in all good will, tried to implement programs to bring blacks and whites closer together in genuine communication. Those programs are now being gutted by a racist administration.

Affirmative action programs probably bring people closer together and do more to move toward equitable distribution of power than any other single act that a government could take, including breaking down legal segregation. Affirmative action and equal employment opportunity do more to distribute power in the biracial community, thereby minimizing any need to speak of segregation.

Racial segregation is a consequence of deliberate social policy. Behavior as a result of racism does not have

to be either conscious or deliberate.

A few months ago I was in a very high-powered meeting, with dignitaries from various organizations, about six of us. The Urban League was represented, but I don't want to identify the others too closely. The representative of the Urban League and I were explaining the subtleties of racism — how it doesn't have to be open and blatant, how subtle it can be. Somehow the whites present weren't picking up on it. Then, just as if some transcendent communication channel had opened up, a representative of one of the larger white organizations interjected: "Let us change the subject. I am concerned about the widening gap between the civilized and the uncivilized world."

Not one white person in the room picked it up.

The woman who was executive secretary of the Urban League looked at me and I looked at her and we smiled. And she said, "Sir, what did you say?"

He repeated it with a sense of pride. He said, "I am concerned about the widening gap between the civilized and the uncivilized world."

I looked at him and smiled and asked, "What is the uncivilized world?"

You could see all the red faces in the room. They finally picked it up. And they quickly moved on to something else: "On the agenda . . ."

I am not going into a long discussion about how the word *race* came about and how scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and others attempt to classify race, and why there have been counted to be over 400 races in one classification, 11 in another classification, and three in another. I do want to refer you to the views of such people as Ashley Montagu, in his book *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, and Gunnar Myrdal in his classic *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal not only called white racism "America's cancer," he also said that in no other field is there so wide a gap between popular impressions and the conclusions reached by biological and social scientists: "Race in many of its aspects exists only in the minds of men."

Many people have pretended to be scientists and scholars and attempted to prove scientifically that whites are superior and nonwhites are inferior:

- Joseph Arthur de Gobineau in the 19th century published a four-volume essay on the inequality of human races. He taught the superiority of the white race over all the other races, and that the Aryans, among the whites, had reached the height of civili-

zation. In fact, he went further to say that if it were not for the Aryans we would not have civilization. To quote him: "The Aryans are responsible for civilization, wherever it develops."

- The theories of H.S. Chamberlain, an Englishman who wrote the book *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, provided the basis for the views of Adolf Hitler on the supremacy of the Aryan people.
- In the United States you had people like Lothrop Stoddard and Madison Grant.
- You had another person, whom for a long time I just refused to read — Rudyard Kipling, the Englishman. One of the justifications that colonialism used was that there was no need to accord nonwhites the same treatment that one would a fellow human being.

Businessmen in England and France, and in many of the other Western countries during the colonial period, tried to make colonialism a missionary movement. They made it "moral." They said that to go to Africa to colonize and Christianize the people was the "white man's burden." People like Thomas Carlyle and Kipling presented imperialism as a noble activity that was destined to bring about civilization.

There is a great deal of evidence for my view that racism is alive and well in the United States.

One could look at the unemployment statistics and get into a discussion about why the unemployment rate is so high among blacks, why it is almost triple in some cities among black teenagers.

One could discuss the racist attitudes that go into administering and even setting up the welfare system.

Why is it that people can't be trained for jobs and given jobs and daycare facilities? What type of mentality says that we have to have a percentage of our minorities out of work?

You don't have legal segregation. But is not segregation occurring? Is not the group in power doing everything it can, according to the definitions of why segregation occurs, to stay in power?

To share with you another opinion: A few months ago the Western world was very proud of Desmond Tutu. I have the feeling that now they wish they hadn't given him the Nobel Prize.

In the *New York Times*, Tuesday, 29 October 1985, Tutu said that racism is alive and well in the United States. Quoting from the article:

Bishop Desmond M. Tutu accused President Reagan and the leaders of Britain and West Germany

today of racism for their opposition to economic sanctions against South Africa.

"I've tried to be as nice as I could be, but we're talking about children being killed by a racist government that is being protected from the consequences of its actions by Mr. Reagan, Mrs. Thatcher, and Mr. Kohl," Bishop Tutu said in an interview, referring to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain and Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany.

"Certainly the support of this racist policy is racist," the Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg, who won the Noble Peace Prize last year, continued.

Listen to this because it is very interesting. You see, if you are nice and sweet and don't talk about violence and upsetting people, you are an "OK Negro." If you stand up and tell it like it is, tell it like you feel it, you are ostracized. Tutu knows this. Listen to what he is saying:

"I'm supposed now as a Nobel laureate to speak responsibly. . . ."

"Speaking responsibly" means speaking so you don't upset white folks. That's what speaking responsibly is. There is not an Afro-American in this congregation who does not know what I am talking about. Put it in a way that the white person will first listen to it and then accept it, then you are okay. That is what Bishop Tutu knows. Listen to what he is saying here:

"I'm supposed now as a Nobel laureate to speak responsibly and all that sort of thing, and I try to, but I just think we are seeing closet racism coming out into the open. How else can you explain the fact that people say that sanctions will hurt the blacks, so we won't apply sanctions? . . ."

He was especially critical of Mr. Reagan, whom he called "a very strange man," for failing to mention the crisis in South Africa in his speech before the General Assembly last Thursday. "His speech merely underlines what one has been suspecting — that for him we are just statistics, we are pawns in the East-West power game," Tutu said.

"It is highly unlikely he would have the same indifference if the casualties had been white," Bishop Tutu said, referring to the more than 700 people (and now it's more than 1,000), most of them black, who have

been killed in racial violence in South Africa since August of last year.

When asked if that meant that Mr. Reagan was a racist, Bishop Tutu answered with another question, "How do you explain someone who goes and bends over backwards to the extent he has in trying to defend the South African Government?"

In his speech to the General Assembly, Mr. Reagan proposed that the Soviet Union and the United States accept joint responsibility for resolving five "regional conflicts": Ethiopia, Angola, Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Nicaragua. He did not mention South Africa.

It may come out in the workshops following this service that there are many tentacles to this octopus of racism. One tentacle is the feminist movement, as primarily controlled by white women. I predicted this about seven years ago and I talked to you about Dorothy Height and I had her here in the pulpit.

We all know that chauvinism has an even longer history than racism, but once women were included in the legislation that was specifically designed for non-white minorities, the white male power structure favored and promoted white women more quickly than black men or black women. You can see it in terms of jobs, opportunities, and upward mobility.

Racism means that you don't let people you fear get power. The white male does not fear the white female, and in many instances the white male does not fear the black female. The one he fears is the black male. There are implications in this for discussion.

There are implications for discussion in the nation's foreign policy, as Bishop Tutu talks about. And there are a lot of other social issues in this country that are tainted by and positioned by racism.

Let me now refer to Paul's letter to Philemon and give you a thesis that you won't find any place else. This is my own view after many years of struggling with this question. It is the primary reason, along with theological reasons — and I can't separate the two — why I am not a Christian, and why I can say in a mystical and spiritual sense, "I can accept your Christ, but not your Christianity."

Before Western slavery, particularly slavery in North America, a slave was a person who was powerless, a slave was a person who lost a war. When the Egyptians beat the Athenians in a war, the Athenians became slaves.

When the Athenians beat the Egyptians, the Egyptians became slaves. Slavery was not dependent upon the color of one's skin. You had segregation, but you did not have racism.

Aesop, as I told you some years ago, was a teacher in Egypt who was captured by the Athenians. In his interrogation they discovered that he was brilliant. They reasoned: Why have him digging ditches? Let him teach our children. Since he has to have time for study, let him have some slaves to take care of his household while he teaches our children.

Aesop couldn't vote, couldn't hold public office, and couldn't own property, but he was a full human being.

In most of the instances of slavery before Western slavery, particularly slavery in America, a slave was acknowledged to be fully human. You know the stories of Roman gladiators who were slaves who fought to gain their freedom and married aristocratic Roman women. Many of you know that Pushkin, Russia's famous poet, was the grandson of Hannibal, a black man who had been a slave.

What changed? The unique factor was the teaching of the Christian church. The Christian church said that if you are a brother in Jesus Christ you are fully human. Christian teaching said that if you are a son or daughter of God, you are fully human. But the colonialists — the French, Portugese, Spanish, and English — wanted cheap labor. They took the Christian teaching and turned it to their advantage. They said, if you are white you are fully human; if you are not, you are subhuman.

For the first time there emerged the ugly head of racism — whereby the complexion of a person's skin determines whether a person is human or subhuman.

You could go to Africa and get all the subhumans you wanted and treat them as property, as chattel. You could rape the women, even practice human breeding, or sell the children at an early age away from their parents. These people, because of the color of their skin, were nonhuman — because they weren't white.

Then a great debate occurred: If blacks become Christian, do they become human?

Answer: No.

The whites went back to Paul's letter to Philemon returning the slave Onesimus, taking it out of context and manipulating it.

The next step was to spread this teaching in every institution — in our churches, in our schools, in our social organizations — that to be white is to be human

and to be nonwhite is to be subhuman. This is where you and I come in — we are the victims of this teaching.

You can recognize it throughout the history of this country, including today.

Remember World War II? The Nazis were bad people, but the Germans were good people. Remember that, those of you my age and older? The Japanese were what? Monkeys. Remember that? Monkeys. The same thing happened in Korea — “gooks.” And those of you who are younger — the same thing happened in Vietnam. Why? These people were nonwhite.

None of us in this sanctuary asked to be a victim of racism. I do not feel unkindly toward any person here or any person I have met, black or white.

I am almost moved to tears to describe some of my experiences in the armed service, seeing black soldiers being punished for crimes they did not commit, punished because they were “sassy blacks.” They told it like it was without scratching their heads and moving their feet. (You know what that means? It’s called “sanning.”) Many of them I tried to help, and many times I got in trouble.

I don’t feel badly towards those white officers who did this to those black soldiers, because they were victims too. I can deal with them. I can fight them. I will not allow the injustices to continue.

We must recognize that no person in this sanctuary asked to be a victim of racism. No black person asked to be taught to believe that he or she was inferior; and no white person asked to be taught to feel that he or she was superior.

We all have to learn together to rid ourselves of the demonic implications of racism and stop trying to get out of it. Stop talking about reverse racism. (You know, I have yet to meet a nonwhite person — except the Chinese and the Japanese — who felt that they were superior to anybody. This may shock you, but that includes Farrakhan.)

If we are to rid ourselves of racism at some point in history, we are going to have to sit down as blacks and whites together, to get away from the statistical documentation, and to begin to share with each other, “How do I feel?”

Before the benediction, I’m going to tell you about a woman whom I highly respect.

Some of you know that between 1969 and 1975 I went through the worst experience of racism that I had ever encountered since I left the United States Army. It

happened right here, at our church. Many of you don’t know that.

Some of you know that there were people in this congregation who checked on every detail of my resume, including calling a minister with whom I once worked and telling him that he must be making a mistake, that I couldn’t have done all of that.

I was invited to a party I never will forget. At a party welcoming me as senior minister, after the polite greetings, I came in contact with about 40 senior church members whom Bill Gardiner, after hearing about it, called the hostile elders (rather than the Friendly Seniors). I’m serious, this actually happened. Ripped across the fire, attempts at degradation.

Many people left the church, and some for legitimate reasons. A lot left because they could not stand what I am talking to you about this morning.

Something wonderful and beautiful happened in the midst of it all. A woman, 62 years old, came to my office. She was crying, and I went over and held her in my arms.

She said, “I’ve got to leave the church.”

I asked, “Why?”

She said, “I’m just not comfortable anymore. It was all right before, with ministers who were white. There were a few blacks, but now there are too many joining the church. I’m not comfortable anymore. I feel ashamed of myself.” She said, “I’m a liberal, and I never thought that I could have racist feelings, but I do.”

I said, “Well, you can try to change.”

She said, “No, I’m too old for that, I can’t change. When I go to church I want to be comfortable. But I’ll send you money from time to time to help the church out.” And she left.

I see her from time to time. She is out in one of the suburban churches. I see her through the corner of my eye, and if she sees me before I see her she vanishes quickly; and I let her. But if I see her first, she smiles and we hug each other and she asks me how things are and we quickly part. But I appreciate her honesty.

Some of you stayed. Some of you have told me you felt you have grown by staying. Some of you have gotten angry about things and still stayed, and I’m glad that you did.

I recommend, as you discuss this question today, don’t argue history. Don’t argue whether or not all slaves were beaten to death or not beaten to death. Don’t argue about whether every black woman was raped or did she

go to bed voluntarily with her white master. None of that is important.

The important thing is that in these workshops — whether you are black or white, oriental or hispanic — you share what you actually feel. Share what you actually feel.

It is through love and compassion and acceptance that we will get understanding. We will not get understanding from intellectual debate or from history that was written by the conqueror. We won't get understand-

ing of each other and ourselves except through love, compassion, and acceptance.

Let us bow our heads for the benediction.

May the words of our mouths and meditations of our hearts be acceptable to the best that is in this cosmos and within the human family. May we find meaning and significance in our lives as we continue to fight for justice, equity, and equality. May we know that our instruments to achieve these goals can be love, compassion, and acceptance. This we ask, Amen.



Winner of the Skinner Sermon Award for 1986, given by the Unitarian Universalist Association to the preacher of the sermon which best expresses Unitarian Universalism's social principles. The award is named for the late Clarence R. Skinner, a Universalist teacher, author, and reformer, longtime dean of the Tufts College School of Religion in Medford, Massa-

chusetts and author of *A Religion for Greatness*.

Mr. Eaton is minister of the All Souls Church, Unitarian, in Washington D.C., a position he has held since 1969. A graduate of Howard University, Washington D.C. and Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts, he is married to Dolores, and they have one daughter, Claudia.

CLARENCE R. SKINNER

The Skinner Sermon Award honors the late dean of the Tufts College School of Religion in Medford, Massachusetts. Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1881 (his father, Charles, was the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*), Clarence Skinner was a major voice of prophetic religious liberalism. As Professor of Applied Christianity at Tufts College (now Tufts University) from 1914 to 1945, he taught generations of Tufts students, undergraduates and graduates alike, of the social, economic, and political realities which shape religion and are in turn shaped by it. His manifesto, *The Social Implications of Universalism*, published in 1915, gave American Universalism an ethical platform by stating the religious basis underlying such reforms as anti-slavery, women's liberation, and the humane treatment of prisoners.

In 1920, in cooperation with Mrs. Skinner, Mrs. Gertrude Winslow, and the Rev. John Haynes Holmes of New York, Professor Skinner established the Community Church of Boston. He served as its spiritual leader for 16 years. Along with the Community Church of New York, the Boston congregation symbolized the congruence of religion and democracy by welcoming many points of view to its pulpit. "No controversial topic was too hot to handle," a biographer later wrote of Professor Skinner's leadership in public issues at the

Community Church.

In 1933, Professor Skinner was appointed Dean of the School of Religion. During his 12 year incumbency he produced a number of substantial works including *Liberalism Faces the Future*, *Hell's Ramparts Fell* (a biography of John Murray written collaboratively with Alfred S. Cole), and *A Religion for Greatness*. His book-length essay, "Worship and the Well-Ordered Life," appeared posthumously in 1955, six years following his death at the age of 68.

Universalism, he wrote in 1915, "meets the demands of the new age, because it is the product of those forces which created the new age. . . . Its theology expresses the modern conception of the nature of God and [hu]man[ity]. Its motive power arises out of the new humanism. Its axioms are the assumptions of the great social and psychical movements of the twentieth century. It is the real religion which the masses consciously or unconsciously are adopting. It is the philosophy and the power which under one name or another the multitudes are laying hold upon to swing this old earth nearer to the Kingdom of Heaven. It is the religion of the people, for the people, by the people. It is the faith of the new world life, sweeping upward toward spiritual expression."

FOR 1986-87

THE SKINNER SERMON AWARD

"Universalists are a free people. Therefore, they should be in the front rank of the daring few who are fighting the battles of social emancipation. They have pledged themselves to break the tyrannies of the mind, and strike the shackles of tradition from the soul."

Clarence R. Skinner

The Clarence R. Skinner Award is presented to the preacher of the sermon best expressing Unitarian Universalism's social principles, and is open to any Unitarian Universalist layperson, religious educator, or minister. The purpose of the award is to stimulate meritorious preaching concerned with the social implications of religion, particularly needed in this period of history. Criteria employed in judging the sermons include: grasp of subject, religious depth, originality, conviction, an understanding of a point of view other than the author's, plus these qualities: prophetic and timely, courageous, personally involved, well-argued, action-oriented, and inspiring.

The award carries a stipend of \$250.00. Recent recipients include Joan Kahn-Schneider, Susan Tresch-Fienberg, Philip Zwerling, and Judith Meyer. Individuals may submit to the Award Committee up to three entries of sermons which must have been delivered between 3 April 1986 and 31 March 1987.

Requirements for submission are:

1. Entry must be typed, double-spaced, using one side of paper.
2. Six copies of each entry must be included. These entries will *not* be returned to participants in the contest.
3. A single cover page must be submitted with author's name, address, church affiliation, and indication of when and where the sermon was delivered. It is important to keep authorship of each entry anonymous. Be sure there is no identification on or within the text of the sermon.
4. Entries are due 1 April 1987. Entries received after this date will *not* be considered.

Persons who have heard a meritorious sermon are invited to take the initiative in submitting—with the permission of the preacher—to the award committee. Such submissions must conform to all requirements.

Send entries to the Skinner Sermon Award Committee, Attention: The Rev. David B. Park, UUA, 25 Beacon St., Boston, MA 02108.



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