

“Becoming White”
Sermon by Sharon Wylie
For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Marin in San Rafael, CA
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I want to talk about racism this morning. I want to talk about how racism affects all of us in the United States. And I want to talk about why racism is of religious importance to us.

Many of us saw in the news this week video from Jackson, Mississippi apparently showing a white man—his name is Deryl Dedmon—in a truck intentionally running over and killing a black man. There has not yet been a trial, but the news reports indicate that the only known motive for the murder was racial hatred. He wanted to kill a black man.

This news report horrified me, and I rushed to distance myself from it. This was Mississippi, after all, the last state to abolish slavery, the geographic center of the Civil Rights movement. And this was an isolated incident, yes?

My research into hate crimes found that they DO occur here—in progressive California—that 26 hate crimes have already been reported in California in 2011 alone. Nationwide, annual hate crimes average over 7000 incidents per year. The FBI reports that almost 50% of all hate crimes are motivated by racial prejudice, and of those, 71% are crimes against black people. 62% of hate crimes are perpetrated by white people.

I would like to reassure myself that what happened in that parking lot in Jackson, Mississippi was an aberration, a random act of violence. I know it’s not true. It wasn’t an aberration. By the law of averages, there are 19 hate crimes committed

per day in this country. They just don't all make headlines. And it wasn't even particularly a random act. White people commit 62% of all hate crimes. 71% of hate crimes involving racial prejudice are committed against black people.

As a white person, I have to ask, Why did Deryl Dedmon do this thing?

Now let me be clear: he has not had a trial, and he has not been convicted of any crime as of yet. Like you, I know only what I've read on the internet, and there may be much more information still to come. But let's face it, it's easy to imagine that this happened just as we've heard. Because we know that white people have a long history of killing black people, from slavery to lynchings to hate crime.

Why did Deryl Dedmon do this thing?

Let me ask a different way: if this was a hate crime, then why did Deryl Dedmon hate black people enough to kill a stranger, a man he didn't even know? What do we think about that? We think perhaps that Deryl Dedmon was TAUGHT to hate, was raised in a culture of HATE. Maybe we think to ourselves that he is a monster. Perhaps the compassionate among us wonder if he himself has been a victim of violence, perhaps in his own home.

Why did Deryl Dedmon do this thing?

As long as we keep wondering why did Deryl Dedmon murder James Craig Anderson, we will remain stuck looking for answers in the individual. We will remain stuck thinking there is some particular explanation, something about Deryl Dedmon, something about that night, something about a convergence of people and places that couldn't have been predicted or may have been prevented. We want to blame someone, we want to blame Deryl Dedmon, or his father—perhaps he was violent—or

his mother—perhaps she was neglectful. We want to find some answer that liberates us from our fear that Deryl Dedmon has inherent worth and dignity, that the monster we see in him as we push him away could be a mirror to our own potential for horror.

The question is not, Why did Deryl Dedmon do this thing? The question is, Why do white people kill black people? Why do WE kill black people?

As a white person, I have struggled with this question my entire adult life. My gut response that >> I << have never killed a black person, has never seemed good enough. I'm not racist, you're not racist, but somehow there aren't many people of color in this room. Despite the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and the end of legal segregation in this country, we are nevertheless largely segregated anyway. On average, people of color are less educated than white people, earn less money than white people, are more likely to live in poverty, to not own their homes, and to not have access to health care.

Why? Is it just that the racists are winning? Are they more powerful than we are? Is it us against the racists?

Or is it that racism is a much more insidious and intractable force than we have realized?

Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka has a compelling theory about racism. In her book "Learning to Be White" she makes the following arguments:

First, she observes that no one is born white in America. Instead, white people are taught that we are white, and we learn what it means to be white. I'll give you an example:

This story is from when I was very young, I'm guessing 5 or 6 years old, and it's a very dim and hazy memory. I was at daycare one afternoon playing on the large playground. I was in a line of children waiting to go on the slide, and I had finally stepped onto the ladder to go up. It was crowded; there were children ahead of me on the ladder, and children behind me. Suddenly, a little girl ran up and tried to tell me something. She was tapping me on my arm, but it was so noisy with so many children around, I told her to just wait until I went down the slide and to tell me then. I brushed her aside, and finally went down the slide. When I reached the bottom, a teacher or adult or supervisor, whoever she was, grabbed me by my forearm and told me I should not have gone down the same slide as all those black children. I was supposed to use a different slide. The little girl who had tried to stop me on the ladder had been trying to tell me that.

Now, this was San Diego in the mid 1970s, so segregation wasn't legal, and my parents wouldn't have had me in a daycare that was practicing overt racial segregation, so all I can think is that the adult involved was imposing her own views on the playground. I asked my mom recently if she recalled anything about this, and she didn't recall me ever even telling her this had happened, so she was unable to fill in any details.

And why would I have told her about it? I was a little girl who wanted to be good, who liked to follow the rules, and what I learned that day was that I need to pay attention to the color of the people around me. Did I even know what racial color was before that moment? I learned that white and black people are not supposed to occupy the same space, not supposed to play together. And I learned that when a

white person violates those rules, there would be repercussions from other white people, people in authority. There may even be physical violence.

This is what Thandeka means when she says white people learn to be white. Each of us here learned at some point what it means to have a racial identity. Thandeka also observes that white people tend to deny that they've had these learning experiences, but they inevitably begin to remember when asked.

Next, Thandeka observes that the first racial victim of the white community is its own child. When that adult grabbed my arm, when I was yanked off the bottom of the slide, I was afraid. I was afraid of that white woman. I was afraid of getting into trouble. I wanted to be seen as good.

Thandeka calls this kind of violence, emotional and physical, "white racial abuse." She theorizes that for many white people, the experience of learning what it means to be white is accompanied by feelings of loss and dismay. She writes, "These are stories about children and adults who learned how to think of themselves as white in order to stay out of trouble with their caretakers and in the good graces of their peers or the enforcers of community racial standards. Their motive was not to attack someone outside their own racial community. They simply wanted to remain within their own community—or at least not to be abandoned by it."

Finally, Thandeka theorizes that racist acts are sometimes not motivated by white racist sentiment but by feelings of personal shame. This shame comes from white people having to reject and hide parts of ourselves in order to be fully accepted in white community. In my instance, Thandeka would theorize that when I was chastised for going on the same slide as the black children, I became ashamed that I

had not even NOTICED all the other children on the slide were black. She would suggest that my core sense of myself was threatened because I was essentially being told there was something wrong with me. I should have known I was not supposed to go down that slide. From this place of deep fear of not being good enough, white enough comes the deep need to prove one's own whiteness to one's community over and over again.

And how do white people prove our whiteness? By laughing at racist jokes. By staying silent in the face of violence and injustice. And in extreme but not that unusual of cases, we kill black people.

I don't know how this sounds to you. It's a very different theory of racism than most of us are familiar with. But here's why I wanted to bring it to you. When I wonder why white people kill black people, this theory of white racial abuse and shame feels more plausible to me than the explanation that some people are just filled with hate. When I think of why racism is so persistent in our culture, despite our best efforts to eradicate it, this theory of white racial abuse and shame makes more sense to me than the explanation that the racists are winning. And when I think of all the good white people I know who have struggled with racism—of the times when a white person has made a prejudiced comment or joke, and everyone else has been frozen in response, with no idea of what to say—this theory of white racial abuse and shame makes more sense to me than the explanation that all white people are inherently racist.

President of Starr King School for the Ministry, Dr. Rebecca Parker, calls this kind of anti-racism work, “soul work,” noting that we “must turn inward as well as

outward.” The self-examination and reflection that Thandeka calls us to is demanding, painful, and personal. But this is just one aspect of anti-racism work, and today I am calling you to more than just this.

The film “The Help” came out this week, based on the novel by white author Kathryn Stockett. It is a story of black domestic workers in segregated Mississippi in 1963. It is easy for us to look back 50 years and recognize with crystal clarity the institutionalized racism at work, the systemic misuse of power. Dozens of laws enforced segregation. In Mississippi at the time, it was a crime even to advocate or publish suggestions in favor of social equality...between whites and blacks.

But the story told in “The Help” also demonstrates that the misuse of power doesn’t come only from institutionalized systems. Informal systems among white people also served to oppress and silence. A domestic worker who had displeased or angered her employer could not expect to find work somewhere else. A domestic worker who asked for better pay or better treatment could find herself without a job, without any means of support. In the face of mistreatment, a domestic worker could not rely on the police for protection or support.

In a novel or a film like “The Help,” we look back 50 years and see these racist systems, formal and informal, with clarity. But it can be challenging to look around today and see with the same clarity.

There are over 200,000 domestic workers in California today. They are overwhelmingly women of color. Their work involves long hours and low pay. Existing labor laws don’t sufficiently cover the abuses these workers face. A domestic worker who displeases or angers her employer cannot expect to find work somewhere

else. A domestic worker who asks for better pay or better treatment may find herself without a job, without any means of support. In the face of mistreatment, a domestic worker cannot rely on the police for protection or support.

We look back 50 years and see these racist systems with clarity. But it can be challenging to look around today with the same clarity.

Anti-racism is the work of living our principles: to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. To affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. To affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. To affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

May we engage in this work with our whole hearts. Blessed be, and amen.

BENEDICTION

Our closing words come from Reverend Wayne Arnason.

Take courage, friends.

The way is often hard,

the path is never clear,

and the stakes are very high.

Take courage.

For deep down under, there is another truth:

You are not alone.