

Presence: An American Sermon for This Time
 Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
 December 7, 2014

"Sunday Morning" by Mark Jones

Standing at the window,
 I let fall a book of American sermons

When I see my neighbor
 washing his Honda in the June sunshine

and across the street,
 an old woman catechizing* her roses.

On the radio
 a disc jockey affirms his faith in Virgin Records,

Though he himself is a separatist
 who mostly worships at independent shrines.

I switch stations to hear
 a scholar trying to describe the color purple:

it cannot be done, he finally admits,
 though he calls it the existential center.

Carrying flatbread & coffee,
 I abandon the house

for the sidewalk, where a block away
 two kids are playing with a garden sprinkler.

They dance in the rainbows
 Free, it seems, of all catastrophe.

.....

Monday night, November 24, Americans all over the country tune in as the prosecutor in Missouri announces the grand jury's decision: Officer Darren Wilson will not be indicted in the killing of Michael Brown.

To be clear, the decision to forego a trial basically meant that this young man's death was not worth a conversation, even.

Ferguson erupted.

We are reminded of Rev. King's big words* in the wake of the riots he witnessed:

But it is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that without, at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society. These conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. And I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard.

The riots were unfortunate for a range of reasons among those is that the violence caused distraction from the central point: An 18-year old, unarmed Black man was shot 11 times by a police officer and left to lie in the street for 4.5 hours.

Last week was Thanksgiving. A full week for many, your minister included. While I watched that press conference on Monday night my friend Kathleen and I were texting each other. She texted, "Stuff planned near you?" I explained that I had contacted two organizations that I assumed would be planning "stuff" and to my surprise, both said that they were focused on other things ... but that they'd come if I organized something.

Now, you all know that I have a fervent commitment to justice. But truth be told, I may have wanted that grand jury to do the right thing as much because on the Monday before Thanksgiving, my fervent commitment to Thanksgiving may've equaled that fervent commitment to justice.

I was looking ahead to a joyfully jam-packed holiday weekend. My family hosts family who come in from out of town for a Thanksgiving extravaganza that begins Wednesday night and concludes Saturday morning. And traditionally, I tie up loose ends here at All Souls on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving after which the late afternoon and night is for organizing & grocery shopping because on Wednesday I step into no rooms that are not the kitchen.

I had no time to organize "stuff".

So all of this minutia is floating through my head as the prosecutor is speaking As Kathleen is asking me what's going on in New London ... and the minutia is captured in this one text:

"I pulled together an event last week with three days notice. Maybe a vigil. Hate to work alone on this one."

You see, I'm all over the place. I'm tired. I'm anticipating more tired in the days to come if I lose my focus.

And then, thank God, I snap out of it. By 11:00 p.m. I've emailed local colleagues ... I've formulated a ghost of a plan that I'm sure will grow bones by the morning.

A minister's central responsibility is to pay attention. To be present to every major and minor detail that calls us to respond as people of faith. To be present to every major and minor detail that helps us to make meaning. That's the thing that is different about my job and practically every other job in the galaxy. I'd say that the only similar job is that of a comedienne only a comedienne is on a stage going for truth & laughs and I'm in a pulpit going for truth and transformation. And laughs.

My friend Anne Scheibner, organizer – and friend - extraordinaire agrees to help. Arlene is ready to do what needs doing, as ever. And together, with the support of the Mayor's Office and yes, the New London Police, we pull it together.

Because I snapped out of it. I heard my own fearful and nervous voice whining about my busy day. Until myself as minister pushed that girl aside.

We must be present in this moment in our shared history. We must pay attention. We must be present and we must be willing and then able to debunk the stunning flap trap that people are saying.

I attended the NAACP Freedom Fund dinner on Friday night. It was important that I show up at this event because the Don Wilson, the local NAACP Chapter president was an excellent speaker at the rally I helped organize last summer and he was equally excellent and supportive at the vigil Tuesday night. So Kate Treadwell Hill and I got dressed up and headed to the Holiday Inn together. (Kate's husband Bob Treadwell Hill, of blessed memory, had served on the NAACP Board.) The keynote speaker was Bill Dyson. Dyson was the state representative of the 94th District for 32 years and is now a professor of Public Policy and Practical Politics at Central CT State University. He told a story about his class that met on Thursday night. He made the decision that he would not bring up the protests that were happening all over the country. He would see if any of his students would do so on their own volition. Professor Dyson told us that the class's textbook is *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander. He waited. He waited. Finally, he said,

"Anything you want to ask me?"

Silence.

"Anything you want to talk about? Maybe the protests?"

Silence.

He surmised that his students were afraid to speak. Years of conditioning brought that fear. But they finally did speak up and discuss. And it was good. And then finally, one student asked the professor, "How do YOU feel?" "Thank you a lot for asking me! I'm *pissed*." Answered the professor. And because he had established a trusting relationship with his students, they knew that they did not need to fear his anger. For his is the clean and efficient fuel of righteous anger – and many Americans share his feeling.

You may've read that a Stonington school official called the decision to cancel a class trip to NYC a "no-brainer". Actually, let's put some brains on this one. What are we afraid of? Are we afraid of anger? Even anger that is merited? Many of us are adverse to confrontation. But anger that moves us to action ... anger that shakes up the status quo ... let's harness that anger. Let's teach our children that there are times – and this is one them – that we best put anger to good use.

There was at least one Stonington High School student who approached the vice-principle and expressed his desire to get on the bus and go to the protest. That student was Spencer Mangiacotti.

If we're not going to get on the bus to go to a show and then out to eat, let's talk to students about what's going on in NYC and why. And then as families, let's get ourselves to these protests if there are none planned in SE CT. Or better yet, let's plan them in SE CT.

Yes. There's plenty of anger going around. No small portion of the anger is from white folks who deny that there is a problem at all. All this fuss ... stirring the pot ... fanning the flames ... why? Do you know how tough it is to be a cop? If they hadn't been resisting arrest. If he hadn't been a thug. If his parents hadn't been in trouble with the law. We've heard it all.

Denial. Perhaps you are in denial that there is a problem with denial. But if you want to see anger and denial on full, unabashed display, you need only read the online comments that followed the vigil coverage in "The Day". I usually don't read the comments but I had a sermon to write and I knew I would find there a treasure trove of material to make this very point. The comments did not disappoint.

So, I share these as examples of denial ... denial that we see race in this country. That systems of racism are firmly in place.

(Note: I left these comments as they were written.)

Reading the article, where Don Willson talks about equal treatment from police. One question i have is when is the NAACP going to be happy? Where is the line that white people have to cross in order for the black community to say hey we did it. Just what I thought it will never happen, there will never be satisfaction in the black community. These silent protest mean nothing to [me] except that the protesters for equal treatment will also be the ones to continue the racism in this country. Color was not issue in the Ferguson shooting, the shooting of this thug should not be the grounds for equality.

Pockets of racism exist now and will always exist. The extent of racism that hucksters like Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson et al. proclaim does not. These two charlatans make an extreme amount of money conning foolish people into thinking that it does. The president and his attorney general as well as the liberal media help feed into that mind-think. Racism buys votes, makes money, and sells newspapers. The above people need racism and if it doesn't exist they must make the minorities think it does.

Why did The Day stoke the racial division by putting that racist sign front and center by promoting that divisive placard? Shameful. (Note: it seems that the "racist sign" to which the writer refers was our "Standing on the Side of Love" banner.)

Every article or news piece describes the killing of an "unarmed" teenager, suggesting that one that is NOT armed couldn't possibly inflict serious physical injury or death upon another person. The fact is that unarmed people kill others with their bare hands EVERY day in our country.

Which, of course, in the wake of Eric Garner's chokehold death is the most ironic of statements.

There's no time this morning to deconstruct each of these comments. But the denial each of them presents is right out there. And it's everywhere. These are the consistent comments from those who are fearful of the legitimate anger that comes in the wake of injustice in Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland – and our entire beloved but flawed country. These are the consistent comments from those who fear any loss of their perceived privilege.

And for those who read and hear these type of comments ... and there isn't a single soul in this sanctuary who has not ... what do we say in response? How do

we accept our responsibility as people of faith who covenant to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; and the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all ... how do we accept these responsibilities and RESPOND?

Because sitting silent in the classroom before the question is unacceptable.

I will take some time to deconstruct the following email, however. This email came to Arlene in response to the eblast that went out last Tuesday announcing the "Black Lives Matter" Vigil. Arlene, bless her heart, forwarded it to me. It reads:

And this helps how? Nobody made a statement that black lives don't matter. Have you made an informed decision that the system and the jury were wrong in their assessment of the facts? And you based this on... ? You are simply fueling the fire. For shame.

Let's have a go at this one:

Every shooting of a black or brown individual who is unarmed when any amount of reasoning might have prevented the tragedy ... every time when the aftermath the justice system is lined up so that prosecutors are in charge of prosecuting the very people – the police – with whom they otherwise work closely ... every time this happens it is a clear statement that to far too many Americans, Black lives don't matter. Or at least, they matter way less than white lives.

What do I base this response on? I am present. I pay attention. I spend a lot of time reading and listening and learning. I am a person of faith who believes that all lives are inherently worthy and therefore matter but to become enraged in this instance by the phrase "Black Lives Matter" is to dismiss the very real and lived experience of Black people in this country.

Was the jury wrong in their assessment? Tragically, probably not. But what is wrong is the system in which they set upon their task. The decision was within the legal system. But it certainly was not moral. That is what must change.

Am I fueling the fire? No. Injustice is fueling this national, long over-due response. To sit in silence is to fuel the fire. To do nothing is to fuel the fire.

For shame, indeed.

Denial that racism is alive and well: for shame
Fear of righteous anger: for shame

Our silence: for shame

Shame though: not a great motivator. Righteous anger. And love. As Dr. King said: *"Love is the key to the problems of the world"* These are far more effective. We have great love in our hearts. And that love mixed with righteous anger moves us to pay attention to be present ... to show up. In whatever capacity that we are able. We must show up. And show up for what will certainly be a very long haul. In the words of W.E.B. DuBois, words we spoke as we lit our chalice this morning: *"The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence, not for the one good deed or single thought. But deed on deed and thought on thought until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living."*

So, think about people of color who you know and admire and respect and love. Let's imagine Souls among us, in fact. Let's consider the James Carnes kids, in fact. If you love the James Carnes family as much as I do ... let's use that love to get ourselves to the vigil ... to sign the petition ... to make a call ... to stop our dearly beloved or casual acquaintances when they speak nonsense like the nonsense I shared with you today ... let's use that love to motivate us. In the flurry of righteousness that flooded Facebook the day after the announcement, here's what Jessica James Carnes had to say:

If you think my children are precious and adorable and so sweet ... and you also think it's alright for unarmed children to be killed by the police, we have a problem. It is not a policing problem. The police are not hatched from the special poe-leece farm. The police are us. We have a problem, Folks. Guess what? It's not a new problem. It's been going on continuously and mostly without media coverage, for centuries.

And now I want you to imagine those precious and adorable and sweet children: Isis, Yemaya, Olorun & Sati ... and I want you to imagine the other children of color who are growing up in the warm embrace of this faith community, among them: Nick, Ella, Joe, Claudia, Jennifer, Evan, Jasmine ... my daughter, Lily Jun.

And I want you to do something that will help ensure that their futures are free of catastrophe.

Start here ...

If you weren't at the vigil last week, ask yourself why not. If you haven't been paying much attention to the events of this past week, ask yourself why not. If as you sat at your Thanksgiving table and your mother said to your activist cousin, *"And this helps how? Nobody made a statement that black lives don't matter."*

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Have you made an informed decision that the system and the jury were wrong in their assessment of the facts? And you based this on... ? You are simply fueling the fire. For shame." Ask yourself why you didn't respond. If you're so angry right now you'd like to walk out, ask yourself why.

Oh Friends. This isn't the sermon I wanted to preach today. I had a different story I wanted to tell you about presence, this month's ministry theme. But instead, I had to tell you a story about a different kind of presence. This uniquely American sermon is the one that had to be preached this morning. On this historic day in our congregation's history, I wanted to be all pastoral and understanding about the vote we are about to take. I wanted to honor our ancestors. But to do as we are meant to do is perhaps the greatest honor.

When we are living in a tough time, we are called to be tougher. We have to be willing to show up, even when it means living in uncomfortable, creative tension.

We are called to work toward a day when we let fall this and all sorts of American sermons in order to take in the ordinariness of an ordinary Sunday ... our neighbors living in peace ... and our children – all of our children – free of all catastrophe.

Amen.

A reference to "Martin's Big Words" by D. Rappaport