

Service, Servants, and Supremacy

A sermon by Dr. Erik Wingrove-Haugland

Preached at All Souls January 28, 2018

This month's theme is service; in the last three weeks, Carolyn has covered the positive side of service: the joy of service, Martin Luther King Jr. servant leadership, and the service millions of women performed by protesting against our tyrannical government.

When service involves voluntarily subordinating your own interests to a cause, service is a good thing. We honor those who volunteer for military service, we enjoy good service at a restaurant, we gather on Sundays at our worship service. Each of these kinds of "service" is good, and each involves people voluntarily choose to serve and being compensated in some way for their service.

The fact that service is voluntary and compensated in some way is, of course, what distinguishes "service" from slavery.

The important distinction between service and slavery is illustrated by an experience my wife, Suzanne, had while driving to Connecticut from our previous home in Florida with her sister. Suzanne had just read *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* and wanted to stop in Savannah, Georgia and tour a mansion. The tour guide kept referring to the "servants," until finally my wife's sister asked "don't you mean the slaves?" The tour guide wrinkled up her nose and said "there is no evidence that there were any slaves within the city of Savannah. There were slaves on the plantations outside the city, of course, but there is no evidence that there were any slaves inside the city of Savannah." Suzanne and her sister were so astonished by this literally unbelievable claim that they didn't respond, but I think a perfect response would have been "wow, how long did it take you to destroy all that evidence? That must have been quite a task; are you sure you got it all?"

In his book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates talks about the myth of white American innocence, and the lengths to which whites will go to defend this myth. This tour guide is a perfect example of this, and of what Robin DiAngelo calls "white fragility." Her need to believe in white innocence is so powerful that she cannot admit that there were slaves in Savannah, Georgia before the civil war.

We honor those who serve voluntarily; they deserve whatever compensation they receive. As we honor them, however, we must remember that, both around the globe and in our own nation, many people are still forced to serve involuntarily and without compensation.

About twenty years ago, after the first time I spoke at one of our summer services, long-time All Souls member Bob Treadwell came up to me and attacked my claim that, while slavery and racism still exist, no one advocates them publicly. Bob mentioned the KKK and other groups, but I noted that even these groups claimed not to be racist, and I said "no one is marching down the streets saying 'I'm a racist and you should be one, too.'" When we had this argument 20 years ago, I think I was right—but now I see that Bob was right. It was just a matter of time before racists got tired of winks and dog whistles and returned to the streets chanting "Jews will not

replace us” and “closed borders, white nation, now we start the deportation” and responding with violence—including lethal violence—to those who opposed them.

Perhaps the only positive consequence of the political events of the past year and half is that no one can reasonably argue that racism and sexism are no longer powerful forces in our nation. I still believe what Martin Luther King Jr. said: the long arc of history bends towards justice, but I think it has a lot farther yet to bend than I did two years ago.

Astonishingly, however, not only our current president but even the marchers who chanted racist slogans say they are not racists. The fact that these claims are not met with universal derision shows that the word “racist” no longer has any meaning. When one of the Charlottesville marchers can say “I am not a racist, I don’t hate anyone; I just came here to protest against the slow replacement of white heritage in America,” it’s clear that “racism” has lost its meaning. I think this is why efforts to promote racial equality now discuss white privilege or white supremacy, rather than racism.

I think focusing on racism has several problems. First, asking whether or not someone is racist assumes that people are either racist or not, that everyone is either 100% racist or 0% racist. Ten years ago, when I preached at the UU Church of Norwich after Obama’s speech on race, I said that the primary barriers to racial equality are not people who are 100% racist, but people who are, say, 20 to 50 percent racist but who are not working to become less racist because they think they are already 0% racist. I still think that’s true today, although I think those who are 100% racists are a bigger problem than I thought they were then. The recent re-emergence of overt racism could not have occurred without this covert and unconscious racism.

Second, those who claim not to be racist often say “I don’t see race” or “I see people as people, not as black or white.” While there may often be good intentions behind this claim, I don’t see how anyone can say they don’t see race unless they have really, really bad eyesight. The whole idea of unconscious racism is that everyone is influenced by the racism of our society, so that we see race even when we don’t think we do. The claim to see someone as a person rather than as black may itself be racist; it assumes seeing someone as a person is better than seeing someone as black. Being able to say “I don’t see race” is part of white privilege; most non-whites in America cannot say “I don’t see race,” because they have race pointed out to them every day.

Finally, focusing on racism assumes that the racial problems in America are all about whites; ironically, this keeps the focus on whites, and perpetuates white supremacy. Our racial problems are not just about whites, and won’t be solved as long as the focus remains on whites; they are about all of us, and will only be solved when we the people strive to create a more racially inclusive society. We are not going to overcome barriers to a racially inclusive society by pretending they do not exist.

Some whites, especially from impoverished or immigrant backgrounds, don’t like the phrase “white privilege,” since they don’t feel privileged. Those raised in poverty certainly face disadvantages that those raised in a middle-class or upper-class home do not face. While poor people face disadvantages as poor people, however, blacks also face disadvantages *as blacks*. Each person’s life presents its own challenges, some of which are unique and others of which are shared with all members of a group. Since those in poverty are disproportionately black, many blacks face both kinds of disadvantages. Since they are also disproportionately female, black women face even more disadvantages. Whatever disadvantages whites may have faced, we can

always ask “would it have been even worse if we were black?” The answer, unfortunately, is almost always “yes.”

Reforming our society so that the answer to that question is no longer “yes” is going to take a lot of work, and not only by white who are 100% racist—indeed, not primarily by racist whites. To achieve racial justice, whites who are much less racist need to learn to identify the barriers to racial justice and develop ways to overcome them. To make our society more inclusive, members of racial minorities also need to look at how their attitudes have been influenced by our culture of white supremacy.

For white Americans, the first step involves admitting what the tour guide in Savannah, Georgia could not admit: that our nation was built on the involuntary and unpaid labor of millions of blacks over hundreds of years, and that whites in our society still have unfair advantages over blacks, whether we want to or not. It also demands that we acknowledge that slavery still exists today, and that females are now the group most likely to be slaves. According a 2016 United Nations report, there are approximately 40 million slaves around the world today; 71 percent are women and girls. There are still about 60 thousand slaves in the United States, and more than two-thirds are female.

While slavery is the most obvious example of unpaid and involuntary labor, we also have to look at other kinds of unpaid labor, such as the unpaid domestic labor and childcare performed by millions of women. Recent studies show that American women still do about two-thirds of the unpaid domestic labor in households headed by a male and a female, and about two-thirds of the unpaid childcare in such households which have children under 18. This is not limited to heterosexual households, either; a 2016 study by Indiana University showed that, among same-sex couples, the perceived masculinity or femininity of the partners was an even stronger predictor of gendered chore assignment than it was in straight couples.

Of course, this is not slavery; most people get married voluntarily, and most women have children voluntarily. The act of having children or getting married, however, does not constitute consent to this unequal division of household labor and childcare. I don't know of a single marriage ceremony in which the wife vowed to love, honor, and do two-thirds of the unpaid domestic labor. It's hard to see how a male and a female having sex and producing a child amounts to the female agreeing to perform twice as much of the unpaid childcare as the man does. If these stipulations were included in marriage contracts, I'm sure a lot of women would refuse to sign.

When we talk about white supremacy or white privilege, we're really talking about white male supremacy and white male privilege. What Ta Nehisi Coates calls the myth of white American innocence is really the myth of white American male innocence.

As Unitarian Universalists, we like to think our denomination is an exception to the ubiquitous racism and sexism of our society. When the President of the UUA resigned over racially biased hiring practices, many were shocked. Unfortunately, only the resignation was unusual; the hiring practices of the UUA have never been free from the taint of racial bias, even when Bill Sinkford was President. If we focus on whether or not the previous president of the UUA was racist, we are missing the entire point, which is that we now have an opportunity to make the UUA's hiring policies racially just for the first time.

We are an incredibly white denomination. A recent Pew survey showed that 88 percent of Unitarian Universalists are white, 7 percent are mixed/other, 4 percent are Hispanic, less than 1 percent are Asian, and less than 1 percent are black. We are whiter than the Baptists, the Presbyterians, and the Anglicans. Whiter than the Mormons and the Congregationalists. Almost as white as the Jews and the Lutherans. We are not going to become a more racially inclusive denomination by pretending that we are not predominantly white.

When faced with these statistics, many white Unitarian Universalists point to our denomination's history of promoting racial equality and social justice in the political arena. Just as we have done more to promote political and economic equality for women than we have to reduce the domestic burden women face, however, so we have done more to promote racial justice in the United States than we have within our own denomination. We insist on our denomination's innocence for the same reason Trump and the marchers in Charlottesville denied being racists: we do not want to feel guilty, and the opposite of innocence seems to be guilt. Guilt, however, is an inappropriate and unproductive response to the oppression of women and racial minorities. White males who are alive today didn't create patriarchy or white supremacy; guilt is appropriate only if we perpetuate them. The Martin Luther King Jr quote about burnout that we heard two weeks ago is also true about guilt: guilt is surrender, it is a paralyzing response that prevents us from trying to undo the wrongs of patriarchy and white supremacy. The appropriate response to oppression is not guilt, but outrage, which motivates action.

We have to stop focusing on who is racist and focus on creating a more racially inclusive environment, which is not the same as a racially diverse congregation. I am not suggesting we recruit more minorities into Unitarian Universalism; I can imagine few things more insulting than being recruited into a religious community so you can provide them with more racial diversity. Greater racial diversity makes a denomination more colorful, but it doesn't necessarily make a denomination more inclusive. A racially inclusive environment is one where members of diverse races feel more comfortable, not necessarily one in which there is more racial diversity.

Inevitably, efforts to make our congregation and our denomination more inclusive will sometimes make white males feel uncomfortable. When I offered to do this sermon several months ago, I was initially told "no" because having me preach does not promote the goal we recently adopted in our long-range plan: to "bring an ethnically, culturally, and theologically diverse group of preachers to the All Souls' pulpit." I must admit, I was annoyed at first. One could argue that, in the case of All Souls, having a male preach increases the diversity in our pulpit. But I didn't argue that; I waited until a Sunday when we couldn't find any underrepresented minorities to preach. It has been a privilege to preach here about two dozen times over the last 18 years, but the time has come to check our privileges and see which ones may be a part of that invisible knapsack Dr. Peggy McIntosh wrote about so insightfully in today's reading. I have to wonder whether being able to preach here so often, or to preach a sermon like this without worrying about whether I'm offending anyone, is part of my own white male privilege.

All the ways of undoing the harms of patriarchy and white supremacy seem to demand that white non-impooverished males like me voluntarily subordinate our own interests to the cause of racial equality. This attitude is precisely the positive sense of the term "service" I spoke of earlier.

To promote equality for women, males need to act as servants in an almost literal sense. What can men do to promote equality for women? Laundry. Dishes. Childcare.

Promoting racial equality is more challenging, but also demands an attitude of service, of voluntarily subordinating our own interests to the cause of racial equality. Becoming servants to the cause of racial equality is the first step towards entering into what Glen Thomas Rideout eloquently described at last year's General Assembly as "the blessed relationship that allows us to deserve to be called allies."

May it be so. Amen.