

## “The Dream of America”

Sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

July 5, 2015

When I was a little kid I wondered whether if I connected all the people I knew with all the people they knew, with all the people those people knew, if eventually, all the people all over the world would somehow be included in what was essentially an early notion of the interdependent web of which we are all a part.

Then I became a Unitarian Universalist and found a theological perspective in Universalism that I could really hold onto. Universalist theology affirmed my girlhood wondering and eventually led me from wondering to certainty: we are each of us connected to every person on earth. Those of you who are on Facebook may understand when I say that overlapping friends from far-flung circles have encouraged my certainty. Not a week goes by that I’m not sending a message to one friend asking how in the world they are connected to another friend.

And so, this morning I stand in our pulpit acutely aware of and with a sense of connection to the pulpits in Black churches in Charlotte, NC; Knoxville, TN; and Macon, GA all of which were burned by arsonists. Because we are as connected to those congregations as we are connected to Clarke Walls AME church around the corner ... as we are connected to each other.

As we are connected to the nine people who fell victim to a terrorist’s racism at Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina. As some of you may remember, two Sundays ago about 15 Souls walked from All Souls to Walls Clarke Temple AME Church to worship and stand in solidarity with that congregation. Reverend Florence Clarke preached a powerful sermon that morning and asked: “What will we do with this great moment that God has given us? Certainly it must be more than meet & greet, and chat & chew...”

Pastor Clarke then concluded with this encouragement, ““Fear must not have the victory... Let's band together for change- even in this small corner of New London... In the words of Arsenio Hall 'Let's Get Busy.'”

Florence Clarke is a good friend of mine. We count on each other. So when she turned to me in the midst of this passionate sermon to point out that I have certain privilege because of the color of my skin, she added, “I can say that to Carolyn.” She can. And I’m glad that she did because it served as a reminder that I will always through all the rest of my life be learning about that privilege.

Cornel West is a powerful thinker and writer on matter of race. He was the Ware Lecturer at General Assembly last week and he did not disappoint. He told us that in a conversation with a white friend, said friend expressed frustration with a family member who was expressing racist ideas. But that family member was of a different generation, he reasoned. He, on the other hand, had worked out all of his issues regarding race. All the subtle and not-so-subtle biases ... all the discomfort ... the political and historical contexts etc. etc. etc.

West was doubtful. He responded that he is a Black man living in the United States of America and therefore has lived with the subtle and not-so-subtle impact of white supremacy all of his life and HE hadn’t worked out all of the issues concerning race that are bound to affect every citizen of this country.

In other words, we ALL need to get - and stay - busy for it will likely take all of our lives to unpack all there is to learn.

So, I'm assigning you all some homework. And yes, there is going to be a quiz.

Did you watch President Obama's eulogy for the Reverend Clementa Pinckney? Did you see it? I am asking that you watch it if you haven't done so already. I'm asking you to watch it again if you seen it once.

In it, our president talked a lot about grace. He believes that in the wake of tragedy, we have been given the grace to live into our better selves as individuals and as a country. But we have to get busy. He said, "It would be a betrayal of everything Reverend Pinckney stood for, ... if we allowed ourselves to slip into a comfortable silence again." He spoke of interconnectedness.

He said that "Justice grows out of recognition."

John A. Powell is a professor at the University of CA at Berkeley. He's a lawyer, too. Smart guy. Raised in the Black church, a preacher's kid. I listened to a podcast of the show "On Being" with Krista Tippet in which she interviewed Powell. (Tippet is next year's Ware Lecturer which in and of itself will make a General Assembly pilgrimage to Columbus, OH worth it.) The interview was riveting. He talked about - guess what - our interconnectedness. About how we best be thinking more about "We" and less about "I". How the left needs to learn that vital lesson. How in the wake of President's Bush election so many liberal folks said, "I'm leaving the country." But when President Obama was elected, the right said, "This is what WE'RE going to do." We who are religiously liberal and politically liberal need to live more in the "We". And questions of ethnic and racial diversity are at the heart of that mind and heart shift.

Fortunately, on Saturday it took me four hours to get from my parents' home in NJ back home to New London (normally a 2.5 hour trip), so after the Powell interview, I listened to Tippet interview Sister Simone Campbell - famous for facing down Paul Ryan and his draconian budget and getting her religious community to take their message on the road as the "Nuns on the Bus". (Sister Simone was last year's Ware Lecturer. We clearly have our finger on the pulse of the change makers!) Sister Simone describes her life as one of contemplation, herself as the "walking willing" walking toward the hope, vision, and opportunities that we are given. She is focused. Razor sharp focus, in fact. And she knows about interconnectedness. About the power of sharing our stories. And our poetry. The interview concluded with this poem, one she wrote to bring fortitude close:

### ***Loaves and Fish***

*I always joked that the miracle of loaves and fish  
was sharing.*

*The woman always knew this.*

*but in this moment of need and notoriety*

*I ache, tremble, almost weep*

*at folks so hungry, malnourished*

*faced with spiritual famine of epic proportions.*

*My heart aches with their need.*

*Apostle-like I whine, "What are we among so many?"*

*The consistent 2000 year-old ever-new response is this:*

*"Blessed and broken, you are enough."*

*I savor the blessed.*

*Cower at the broken.*

*And pray to be enough.*

We are each enough. But we need to get busy lest, in President's Obama's words, we "slip into our comfortable silence once again."

This issue of interconnectedness - specifically, connectedness with the Black Lives Matter movement - has been the center of my focus since last summer certainly but my focus has been ramped up in the wake of the tragedy we've witnessed in the past three weeks.

I know you are glad for my participation. I feel your pride in my witness, your valid claim to pride in your minister's willingness to stick my neck out for what you believe. But now, in addition to some homework, I'm asking you to join me, if you haven't already, in sticking out your own neck.

For years from now, young people will ask you what you did during the summer of 2015 in relation to the Black Lives Matters movement. And I hope that you will be able to say that you did your part. And that in the moment before us you will know that your part is enough.

In the aftermath of the Charleston massacre, there was a community vigil at the Trinty Mission Baptist church. I was at General Assembly when this took place but heartened - and so proud - to see a number of Souls in the photos posted on "The Day's" website. Raise your hand if you were there. You showed up. And you likely learned something. And that is enough.

Here's what I've been doing and what I've volunteered YOU to do:

I participated in a call specifically for "white faith leaders against Black church burnings" and organized by "Showing Up for Racial Justice". There were over 400 clergy on the video call all over the country. We were eventually broken up into local small groups with the hope that work would be done. Work will be done in CT, I feel certain. We were asked to make a commitment to the Black Lives Matters Movement. I volunteered All Souls for a few things including:

Taking up an offering for the "Rebuild the Churches Fund". It will be our "Pies for Peace" recipient in September.

More and more communities are organizing rapid response teams in the event that a Black church is threatened or attacked. I volunteered All Souls foremost for our commitment but also because we have some experience with security with our Safety Task Force and because as a downtown congregation, we are in close proximity to a number of historically Black churches.

We were asked to stand outside our church after Sunday services holding a banner that says, “Black Lives Matters”. I signed us up for that, too.

These are small things that we can do with great love as per Mother Theresa. As a congregation we will do our part.

Growing Racial & Cultural Equity (GRACE) is meeting through the summer. If you haven’t come yet, I hope you’ll enter into serious discernment and ask yourself why. And then I hope that you will resolve to come. Our next gathering is July 16th. 6:30 pm. Chris Wright is a New Londoner who sits on the Police / Community Relations Board. She’s one of my most-admired local activists. She always shares something that we all need to learn.

And finally, one last invitation / encouragement. There will be a regional conversation on race at the Science and Technology Magnet High School here in New London on July 7th, from 5-7p.m. Let’s show up, Friends.

Charissa will be sending out links to all that I hope you’ll read and listen to and dates for the events I hope you’ll attend.

In a statement issued last week, the Rev. Peter Morales, expressed the same hope when he said:

At the Unitarian Universalist Association’s General Assembly in Portland, OR, delegates overwhelmingly passed an Action of Immediate Witness entitled ‘Support the Black Lives Matter Movement.’ It calls our Unitarian Universalist community to ‘take initiative in collaboration with local and national organizations fighting for racial justice against the harsh racist practices many black people are exposed to.’

We must not just proclaim black lives matter. We must also engage and act with love and compassion. It is the only way to stop the hatred from spreading. We can make a difference, and we must. It is a matter of life and death. Black lives matter.

As that Action of Immediate Witness that Peter references was wending its way to a vote, it got terribly tangled up in a messy and I would say botched process. So much so that it was nearly derailed. Emotions were running high for Unitarian Universalists have blown it on the issue of race specifically at a General Assembly once before in our history. I was not in the hall but watching on my laptop. A bit frantic, I texted my friend Carlton Elliott Smith, an African American leader in our movement, “Carlton, are you in the hall?” to which he responded, “Help us [Audre] Lorde!”

Indeed.

And so, in the words of the African American poet and activist Audre Lorde:

*And I dream of our coming together*

*encircled driven*

*not only by love*

*but by lust for a working tomorrow*

*the flights of this journey*

*mapless uncertain*

*and necessary as water.*

On this independence day, let us remember our interdependence ... and that our individual liberty depends on all of us being free.

Let's get busy.

Amen