

*A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 15, 2008, dedicated to all fathers, dedicated to the millions who died in the Atlantic Ocean and the millions more who died in slavery on American soil and always to the glory of God!*

## **“The Race Matters”**

### **Hebrews, 12:1-2**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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A few years ago, while diving off the coast of Africa, scuba divers discovered a slave ship buried in its watery grave. Not many of these ships have been found because the motivation for finding them is low. They carried no gold. Their treasure was human cargo. Like pirate ships, they carried few records or logs. In the watery grave the divers discovered many things, including tiny little bracelet-like shackles no more than one inch across. Historians noted they finally had evidence of what they thought to be true: African babies and infants were brought from to America in shackles.

The image of shackled babies as slaves has often overwhelmed me when considering the 380-plus-year experience of African people on American soil. Stealing

people from their homes, shackling, transporting, selling and enslaving free men, women and children from Africa's west coast to America's east coast was the most treacherous and evil industry ever conceived and perpetrated by humanity against humanity. It was largely a crime of white men against black humanity and it continued for hundreds of years. It is believed that 80%, or four of every five men, women and children brought from Africa, died in the transport ships. All told, 10 million deaths at sea in more than 200 years of this heinous and genocidal economic mission. If we were to drain the Atlantic Ocean, the bones of the millions who died in transit would guide the path from Africa to our American coastline.

The first African slaves arrived in New York state as property of the Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam in 1626 – 382 years ago. By the time the words of the Declaration of Independence were being crafted, there were 450,000 slaves in America who were not counted as free men. At that time, there were more African slaves on American soil than any other single group of immigrants except the British.

The shackled bones of babies still lie on the Atlantic Ocean floor. Although we in America would like to bury the chains and the memories of slavery, we must deal with this horrible heritage, which will not rest in peace until we face the ghosts of our past.

In America, race matters. In this year, of all years, with our nation's Democratic presidential nominee, Barack Obama – a true African-American and a Kenyan born in Kansas – we would be wise to remember Harlem renaissance poet Claude McKay's *The White House*. In *The White House*, McKay lays

out the difficulties faced by African-Americans and speaks of the resentments that might build in a community. Pay attention to the dignity and power herein:

*Your door is shut against my tightened face,  
And I am sharp as steel with discontent;  
But I possess the courage and the grace  
To bear my anger proudly and unbent.  
The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,  
A chafing savage, down the decent street;  
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,  
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.  
Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,  
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,  
And find in it the superhuman power  
To hold me to the letter of your law!  
Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate  
Against the potent poison of your hate.*

On March 18, Senator Obama's speech on "A More Perfect Union," delivered while standing by the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, was a sterling call from the heart for this nation to deal with our racial divides and challenges as he made his bid for very White House that Claude McKay wrote about! It came on the heels of Dr. Jeremiah Wright's provocative and disturbing words delivered from Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, and captured and transported to America via YouTube days before. Senator Obama's words move us and Rev. Wright's words shake us at deep levels because both speak out of the primal and

pivotal experience of African-Americans, an experience much of America has yet to fully embrace.

As you know, until a few weeks ago when Barack left Trinity UCC, both he and Jeremiah were members of our denomination. I, for one, am pained when anyone leaves the church. I feel this pain with Barack and Michelle Obama's departure from our denomination. I feel like we need to reach out to them and offer them associate membership in this congregation.

I know others have felt pain during the struggles of recent months for Trinity, Jeremiah and Barack. Our United Church of Christ has called all people of faith to enter a "Sacred Conversation" on race. Our leaders have identified nine qualities of a sacred conversation. They are:

- \* *Invoking God's presence and wisdom* when we gather to talk about race.
- \* *Establishing safe spaces* for the conversation with commitment to mutual respect and Christian love.
- \* *Listening deeply and honoring* the feelings of anger, pain and joy in those who have been the targets of racism.
- \* *Listening deeply and honoring* the feelings of shame, fear and grief in those who are waking up to the reality of racism in their churches, neighborhoods and nation.
- \* *Continuing the conversation* beyond the exploration of individual feelings, attitudes, and behaviors but continuing on to examine the realities of cultural and institutional racism.
- \* *Recognizing that our deepest common humanity is*

not grounded in race, religious creed, or national origin but in the extravagantly inclusive love of God!

\* *Realizing that within* our common God-given humanity resides a glorious array of colors, cultures, sexualities, and beliefs.

\* *Ending each conversation* with at least one tangible and specific commitment to action on behalf of racial justice in our communities.

\* *Understanding that this conversation* is not a one-time event, but a continuing journey.

I invite everyone here to join in sacred conversations about race in the coming months, using the guidelines just mentioned. Entering into such sacred conversations is crucial to facing and moving through the pain and separation of Black and White in America. In listening, we who are white and other Americans of color will hear the stories of the living and their stories of the dead who tell their experience of racial oppression and pain. We will hear the stories of men and women who have known the sting of prejudice and felt the residual pain of racism.

If we listen long enough and build relationships deep enough with those who have known this pain, they will tell of the millions. They will tell of their grandparents' lynchings and great-grandparents in slavery. They will tell of their children coming home in tears asking why they were hated because of the color of their skin.

They will tell you about the murder of youth and children during the civil rights movement. You will hear of the murder of Emmett Till in 1955 and Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robinson and Cynthia Wesley in 1963, who were

blown up in the women's room of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham as they prepared to go to worship.

In listening, we who are not African-American will hear stories of shame and guilt in relation to race divides. When speaking to a national gathering of rabbis only weeks before his death (Feb. 1968) of his recent time spent in the Birmingham jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. told how he finally got the white jailers to stop harassing him and just sit down and talk with him. When they did, he pointed out the economic poverty they shared. The jailers' salaries were so low that King invited them to join his poor people's movement. Like their black brothers and sisters, they were victims of economic injustice. Sadly, they shared this common ground.

I know for many of you, the thought of sitting down and working out our collective salvation through sacred conversations sounds like a lot of hard work. It is. It is always hard work when we work at healing a deep hurt in our personal lives or cultural lives. That is one reason I find the Letter to the Hebrews to be helpful.

In Hebrews, the race matters. Hebrews is a masterful document written by an unknown "preacher." The preacher attempts to convince Jews to consider faith in Jesus. Building upon the faith of the Hebrew forebearers in faith, the preacher calls the faithful people to acknowledge the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds them, and to now "run with perseverance the race that is set before them, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that set before him endured the cross." (Hebrews 12: 1-2)

The preacher goes on and calls his people to endure trials and suffering, to subject themselves to God's discipline, and to take their weary and drooping heads and hearts and be strengthened and healed. In other words, he calls them to sacrifice themselves – a sacrifice that will carry social costs, financial costs, the cost of discipleship and the cost of endurance for the sake of Christ.

This doesn't sound like much fun! We all know following Jesus has a cost. We know commitment has a price tag. Like the price of paying a toll every day on your way to work, we get worn out by the cost, even though we know it is part of doing what we do (refer to Tom Long, *Hebrews Interpretation*, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky., 1997, p. 131).

Long shares this observation in his commentary on Hebrews:

*For the most part, weary Christians are not going to do anything dramatic; they are not planning to join a witches coven or write a tract on the satisfactions of atheism or establish a new and less demanding religion. They are not going to go away mad; they are just going to go away. The Preacher (in Hebrews) is not concerned about the few who make a scene and slam the door of the church on the way out; they were never really with us in the first place. He is concerned with those who slip quietly out the side door, never to return.*

But, in response to his congregation's fatigue and their desire to slip out the side door, the preacher of Hebrews tells them about Jesus, who was a great runner. For Jesus, the

race really mattered. He ran with perseverance the race that was set before him. He never ran away. He ran through the pain and hardship. He knew that the way out of hardship was back through the pain. Today, in relation to race matters, I believe we must go back through this experience again and again until it is paradoxically purged and embedded in our soul.

Finally, the preacher tells his flock whatever the hardship they face, whatever suffering they endure, they need to know it is never meaningless. When a hospital patient is recovering from surgery and rings the nurse for pain medication, the most reassuring thing the nurse can say is that the pain is a sure sign of the healing that's happening. I see this here in our congregation. As we have faced our difficulties, we have discovered the pain is not destructive but it is redemptive and healing. We come through in spite of the difficulties because our God is a healing God. Our God wants wholeness for his creation, of which all humanity is a part!

In his book *Race Matters*, Cornel West writes that overcoming the experience of racism in America will take a spirit like jazz. We need to become “jazz” people of faith.

Jazz is the ability to improvise, to be fluid, to be flexible, to be suspicious of “either-or” viewpoints. Jazz doesn't trust the ruts of dogmatic pronouncements. It won't stay still for liberal-conservative mind sets. To move through the music, you have to integrate and galvanize dissonant tones and voices in a creative tension, which actually yields a much higher level of performance.

I believe Jesus was “jazz” when he faced racism and

hostilities in his context. May we become “jazz” people of faith as we embrace creative tension. Then we can sing in a new voice: *We shall overcome someday*. Amen.

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