

San Miguel Congregation

Unto the Third and Fourth Generation

On the continuation of institutional racism

Andrea Abbott
3/20/2016

For those of you who have been basking in this wonderful climate, you may not be able to relate to our home area. This is the time of year when we know in our heads that winter will end, but it is still hard to feel it in our hearts. No matter that February is the shortest month, even with its extra day tacked on this year, it still feels very, very long and seems to go on far past the end of the month, threatening to eat up the rest of the year. Just as in our own lives, there may be many things that we think should end, that we hope will end, things like personal discord, financial troubles, illness, when we are the ones enduring them they feel like they will go on forever. We feel stuck. Like February, the injustice and resistance commemorated by Black History month never seems to end. It bleeds into the present. We, the personal, the national we, are stuck. It feels as if we have not moved very far at all in the last forty, eighty, one hundred, four hundred years. Oh, yes, laws have been changed. Perhaps some steps have been taken socially. Perhaps there has been some movement towards understanding. Perhaps some barriers have fallen. But if we need any reminders that racism is alive and well, let me recommend three books, three books out of many, many books that deal with the issue of continuing racism. They are: *Black Man in a White Coat: A Doctor's Reflections on Race and Medicine* by Damon Tweedy

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates and *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson which is the book our church has chosen for our book club.

Reading these books reminded me that racism is the elephant in all our living rooms, the word that calls up anger, defensiveness, guilt, resentment, denial. Racism is the most unresolved word in our vocabulary and so, like a family secret that festers below the surface of every holiday, the word most avoided. We avoid, I think, because there is nothing new to be said. There may be everything to be done, but so much of the doing seems so hard, so emotionally threatening, so disruptive, that we prefer being stuck.

That was how I felt reading these books. I felt that there was nothing I could contribute to this topic that would not, somehow, be hurtful or platitudinous. And so, to that list of adjectives, I would add feeling helpless. But perhaps the word that most described how I felt was cheated. Cheated because there seemed to have been so many missed opportunities, so many times when things could have gone differently, so many overtures abandoned that could have led to different outcomes. And those outcomes would have meant that all the wasted emotions I felt as I read those books would not have had to have happened. I could, we could, our children and grandchildren and great grandchildren could

live in a very different world. And so I felt cheated by the past, cheated by how the decisions of people long dead had robbed my world of peace, happiness, progress. And if I felt cheated, me, selfish little me, how much greater must people of color feel cheated. I couldn't begin to feel how much greater that feeling must be.

The phrase that came to me most often as I read these books was "unto the third and fourth generations" and when I looked it up, I found that it occurs not once but twice in the Bible, once in Exodus, once in Numbers. There is also a related saying from Lamentations: "Our ancestors sinned and are no more and we bear their punishment." And a proverb alluded to in Ezekiel that I particularly liked for its visceral depiction: "The parents eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." But, as it appears in Exodus and Numbers: God is depicted as:

Keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

That's a loving, just God? Isn't this the depiction of God that drove many into the arms of Unitarian-Universalism? It doesn't matter what we do, we will still be

made to suffer for the sins of our ancestors? Then I wondered. What if this phrase is not a description of God's actions but instead is a way to understand how life works; not an approval of how divine wrath is meted out but instead a revelation of the laws that govern human life? What if this is a wake-up call to us about our responsibilities and the long effect of our actions? When we look at it this way, it seems pretty accurate to me. We do something and we may not suffer for it but the waves created by our actions or inaction keep pounding the shore for a long time after the initial impact is made. The earliest slavers may have prospered. Those who avoided dealing with slavery when our country was founded may have been honored leaders. Those who broke the promises of Reconstruction may have died peacefully in their beds. Those who fought hard and viciously against Civil Rights may have been spared punishment but eventually all those acts of greed and hate come home to roost, not on them but on their children and grandchildren and great-great-great grandchildren. Those acts follow us all today, way past the third and fourth generations. No matter what our intentions, no matter that we are, personally, not interested in being unjust, no matter that we abhor racism, we are caught in the web of history. We do not choose when to be born nor the circumstances into which we are born. Neither did the people born into slavery or segregation. They, too, were

innocent, but innocence is seldom safety. We might hope that justice would spare the innocent, but, as we know, it often does not.

We are caught in a particularly binding web because racism long moved away from individual action and preference into becoming the air we breathe, the food we eat, the way we see and the world in which we move and have our being. We cannot help but be part of it and it of us. It is institutionalized; it is a deep part of how we live. And it is infused into every institution that impacts our lives. As the three books, and innumerable other books make clear, it impacts medicine, as Damon Tweedy documents, where African Americans suffer disproportionately from serious physical and mental illnesses that are often not remedied with the same vigor as they are for whites. It impacts justice, as Bryan Stevenson and Ta-Nehisi Coates both testify. It is present in each act, each presumption of law enforcement. It enters the court system where justice is not blind but very aware of skin color differences. It defines the correctional system and it follows its victims back to the streets on release. How else could the prison population be 60% African-American? How else could incarceration be more common for African-American men than college? It is powerfully present in education, economics, politics and the media.

And, most of all, it is in our heads, how we see each other, how we judge each other, our assumptions about each other. It is in our heads so that it is impossible to see each other without the distorting lens of race. Whether we want it to be there or not; whether we try to account for it, remediate for it, compensate for it, it makes our relationships difficult at best. It walls us off from each other and denies us a fuller, richer world.

What is perhaps one of the saddest things about this distortion is that it is done through a lie, something that has been passed along as a scientific truth. There is no scientific basis for dividing the world by race. That is something invented, a devise to divide, a devise to subjugate. There is only one race and we are all in it.

But it has been a powerful devise. Perhaps not everywhere. There are certainly places that use other devices to attain the same end, height, ethnicity, class, but here, in this country, it has been a most powerful devise.

I would like to tell you a story from my college days. It is a story I never told anyone before I prepared this sermon, not even my husband of many years. It goes like this:

When I went to Antioch College, in rural Ohio, I had very little experience with people who weren't, like me, of European origin. When I got there, in 1966, there had been an attempt to diversify the campus through an early version of what we might now call affirmative action. It was not a huge effort, but it meant that there was a small group of African-American students, mostly from NYC, on campus. One of this group was in our freshman hall, Linda. Linda was exotic for a couple of reasons. There was her ethnicity, her background and the fact that she was older than the rest of us, 21 to our 18, which in Ohio meant she could buy booze and the rest of us couldn't. She was assigned a roommate across from my room and then the thing we both had in common was that we had roommate difficulties. I solved mine by not being in the hall more than I had to be. Linda solved hers by confrontation. One day she came into my room and said that she had been instructed to find another roommate from the group in the hall since, as freshmen, we were not allowed to change halls for some reason and that, though she hated everyone in the hall, she hated me less than the others so would I room with her? I wasn't sure this was exactly a ringing endorsement but I agreed. At the end of that quarter, we agreed to room together and then agreed to room together for our sophomore year. We ended up with a large room in a dorm that was a bit off campus, an old house, with very little supervision.

On an evening close to my birthday, I walked into our room to find what seemed like a million people, some of whom I'd never met, packed in the room. Beer cans and candles were everywhere and as I walked in everyone yelled, "Happy Birthday!" A surprise party! Linda thrust a present at me, too, the Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club band album, which then went on the record player. I was overwhelmed but I was tired and had just gotten off work in the cafeteria and wanted only peace and quiet so perhaps my thanks were a little subdued. I knew there'd be no peace for me for hours. I found a few inches on the floor next to a girl I knew slightly and endured the rest of my party. I thought I was friendly, I thought I was appreciative, but when the party was over, Linda started screaming at me about my ingratitude, how I hadn't really thanked her, how much the party, particularly the beer, had cost her, and then, the really damning accusation. She said, "And you went and sat next to the only other white person in the room." Somehow that went home, more than all the other recriminations. Because I had. I hadn't been conscious of it; I hadn't planned to do that, but I had and I realized that she was right. Though I wasn't good friends with the person I chose to sit with, I had seem something familiar and, tired and dazed, had gone there. What I had done was to join sides with those who had refused invitations

for change. I, too, had joined the ranks of the cheaters. I had cheated the future and I had cheated myself.

Linda and I toughed out the rest of the quarter, avoiding each other, not really speaking. We found other roommates for the next quarter. I seldom saw her again and, indeed, not long after that, she was asked to leave the school. I don't know for sure what happened. I do know that I wished for a time machine, to go back, to do differently. It would have been possible for me to excuse what I had done, or not done but I knew that Linda was right and it was the accuracy of her perception that I would have to live with. And still do.

Institutions. They get inside our heads. They make us think in certain ways, draw certain lines, create certain assumptions. Then those assumptions and divisions appear to be normal. We, unconsciously, act on those assumptions and divisions, giving them more validity, and therefore increasing their power.

Institutions are influential because they are established. They acquire history and authority. They are so pervasive that they are invisible. We don't even know that we feel their pull, their way of shaping our world. It is hard to think outside a box when you can't even see the box itself.

But we, too are an institution. We are not just individuals. We are a religious establishment. The IRS says so, so it must be true. The other power institutions have is to magnify the voice. When we speak as an institution, we are heard more than if we spoke alone. We offer a counterweight to the institutions that would keep us stuck, keep us thinking that it is not possible to change.

But how could we do that? What tools do we have, what advantage over the pull of established ways of thought? Now, you know I'm setting you up. We are Unitarian-Universalists, for heaven's sake. We have run counter to the established ways of thought since we began. This is our mandate--to seek truth.

In the Truth and Reconciliation commissions of South Africa, the word Truth came before the word Reconciliation. In the book, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism*, Alan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung stress how difficult but how necessary hearing the truth is, how much it was necessary for the victims of apartheid to tell the truth before any process of reconciliation could begin. They also talk about how tempting it is to short circuit the process, to say, enough, this is enough, I can't bear to say any more; I can't bear to hear anymore. But it is necessary for the people who have been most harmed, most damaged by racism to tell their stories. It is necessary to hear that

truth. Not to acknowledge it is to continue the situation, to deepen the wounds. And it is necessary for people to listen, particularly those people who may not have known that they, too, were harmed by racism, particularly those people who think that they are not affected by racism, who think they have not taken part in it, it is necessary for them, for us, to listen, to hear deeply what is said, no matter how painful that is. To listen until we all understand how we have all been crippled by the poison in our system. It is necessary for us all to become sad, necessary for us all to become sad, until we are sad and angry enough to confront the demons in our society that will shape our children's and grandchildren's futures. I would recommend, as a beginning, the three books mentioned earlier.

We have never had, in this country, any formal, institutional apology for slavery. We have never had any formal, institutional apology for segregation. As a society we are terrified of the burden that would put on us, legally and financially. As a society, we have turned down the possibility of reparations for the actions against African-Americans in any form, whether it was financial remuneration or, past a few hard fought victories, a real affirmative action initiative, something that might build a better future for us all. We certainly have never had anything like the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of South Africa where it might have been possible to commit to justice and from there to building

bridges. As a society, we have remained stuck, stuck in denial and defensiveness and therefore in destruction of each other's lives. It is hard to hear the truth, first because it is often muffled and secondly because of the pain that hearing the truth causes. And yet there is no other way but to begin.

At every moment in history we have both responsibility and opportunity. We may have been poisoned by the actions of those who went before us but we can also be the people who sever our loyalty to that past, our loyalty to those who made the mess. Instead we need to work for the future. And we need to confront our own history, both as a denomination in which, despite good intentions, we have often not lived up to our first principle. We can confront our own demons, personally and as a community and talk about our assumptions and the way that those assumptions play in our heads. We can understand the deep ways in which institutions take up residence in our heads, the way our own thoughts have been thought for us. We can do this because we understand the power that we hold for change and the penalty for not changing. We can acknowledge the truths in Ezekiel and Lamentations, Exodus and Numbers, the truth that our actions matter and our actions today shape the future. We cannot continue to ignore these truths for, if we do, we doom generations to come. This is the time to end the long February of our souls, of our national soul. This is the

time to become unstuck, to do the hard thinking and the harder doing so that the generations to come will find a world that has been healed with all her people one.