

Race In America

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith  
First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City, Utah

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## Race in America

The inspiration for this sermon came from a logo on a Tee Shirt. It was not just any old Tee Shirt worn by nobody in particular, but in fact a shirt adorned by the great African-American film writer, Spike Lee. The tee shirt read: Obama, colon, The New Black.

I liked what it said, both for its audacity and its pronouncement. But what does the New Black really mean? Is it a signal of hope ...or a prophecy that Obama will lift America into a post-racist era? Is the new black juxtaposed with the old black where the Civil Rights struggle is now seen through the rear-view mirror? Does the New Black speak of a new generation of voters for whom multiculturalism is a no-brainer? Does the New Black signal an unimaginable entrée into the oval office by a person of color?

Maybe I just need to sit down with Spike Lee and ask him. The image of "new black" was visibly obvious when Senator Obama took the floor during the first presidential debate this year in Oxford, Mississippi, on the university campus. I was 13 years old, that is, old enough to have a memory indelibly mark my consciousness, when James Meredith tried to enroll as the university's first black student in 1962, accompanied by U.S. Marshalls. Riots ensued in protest leaving two dead.

Is there a new black? Mississippi today, though 40% African American, has an enrollment at the university of 14%. I wonder about the New Black when at football games even today, black students remain seated when the band plays Dixie and fans chant, "The South will rise again." White fraternities still hold annual Old South parties where escorts in Rebel uniforms and women in hoop skirts mingle at a plantation. Race in America is like a Rubric cube: we turn and twist it and try to figure out how it all lines up. When Ole Miss elects a black homecoming queen, I'll stop trying to figure out race in America.

Sig Gissler, a foremost American educator teaching at Columbia University, said: "Race is America's rawest nerve and most enduring dilemma. From birth to death, race is with us, defining, dividing, distorting."

Race hit a raw nerve at the inception of our nation. White Christians at the Bethel Church in Philadelphia in 1787, kicked black people out of the church while they were kneeling to pray at that big Methodist church in downtown. Imagine the incongruity of the scene: On one end of town they were writing the Constitution while on the other end of town black skin precluded the right to worship. In reaction to the forceful expulsion of blacks from the white church, the black church and black religious organizations took root and developed a whole new set of expressions and songs and statements. I love the Negro spiritual written at that time with its subtle message – perhaps not that subtle, the spiritual called: "People Talk About Heaven Ain't Going there."

When the American Revolution started black men went to volunteer and George Washington thanked them and sent them home. Only when the colonies had their backs against the wall did Washington permit black soldiers onto the scene. In Utah, we call that a revelation.

Black men rushed to volunteer at the start of the Civil War only to be sent back until in 1863 after Bull Run, they finally received permission to sign up.

Our country did not let black men enlist during World War I, and instead, sent blacks to Europe to fight in the French army. So even before the invention of Freedom Fries and Americans pouring fine Beaujolais down the sewer, the French had very different sensibilities about race and justice and equality. I think Obama could be president of France.

Race in America speaks to a tragic history. The implication of racism runs more deeply than mere prejudice and inequality, but is founded on White Supremacy as manifest by slavery, Jim Crow, and lynch mobs. And we have to be clear that the Black church meant a great deal more than a Sunday morning meeting time for African Americans. Black Christianity is distinctly different theologically from anything else, which is why so few of us understood the message expressed by Obama's own minister in Chicago, The Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

All of Christianity deals with the issue of theodicy which basically means an effort to reconcile God's love and power in the face of human suffering. How do we understand the Holocaust, how do we understand the death of a child, how do we understand the destruction of an earthquake or Tsunami when we believe in a merciful God. It's a thorny theological issue. But in the Black church, the suffering takes on a specific black experience. Back when I was in theological school, Beacon Press published a very angry book by one of Rev. Wright's contemporaries, William Jones, called *Is God a White Racist?* This is black theology speaking 35 years ago, where Jones says that there are in-groups, and there are out-groups, and God loves the people in the in-groups. He refers to it as Divine racism.

In the black church of recent decades, the evil of racism must be reconciled with a loving and just God. Black oppression, specifically caused by the color of one's skin, inequality in America due solely to the color of one's skin, must find a theological thread that not only deals with black suffering but also inspires black political action.

And so you find the link between black church and black politics in Martin Luther King, Jr, and Jesse Jackson. Jesse Jackson who not long ago wanted to cut off a piece of Obama's anatomy, would never ever be the message on a Tee Shirt exemplifying the New Black. Jesse Jackson and Jeremiah Wright need to sit down with Spike Lee and learn that the black experience has crossed the threshold of a new era.

On March 7, 1965 in the march from Selma to Montgomery, 600 civil rights workers were attacked by state and local police with billy-clubs and tear gas. The event is known as Bloody Sunday. On March 7, 2007 Senator Obama spoke at a ceremony memorializing the anniversary of Bloody Sunday. He drew from the biblical tradition of his predecessors. He honored those of another generation who had gone before him. In part, this is what he said: "I am here because somebody marched. I'm here because you all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants. I thank the Moses generation; but we've got to remember now that Joshua still had a job to do. As great as Moses was, despite all that he did, leading a people out of bondage, he didn't cross the river to see the Promised Land. God told him your job is done. We're going to leave it to the Joshua generation to make sure it happens...The previous generation, the Moses generation, pointed the way. They took us 90% of the way there. We still got that 10% in order to cross over to the other side."

The New Black. We understand a little better where Jesse Jackson was coming from and why he's filled with such contempt for the guy who will take African Americans the rest of the way to reach the other side.

We, too, have a lot of work to do. It's easy for white liberals to believe that racism means anything but me. Jim Crow, Selma, Bubba, I'm good. Now that we have a black man running for president, racism no longer touches that raw nerve that defines, divides, and distorts.

Jim Wallis refers to the term "invisible racism." We saw it rear its ugly head in the poor white communities of Ohio and Pennsylvania and West Virginia during the Democratic primaries. We felt the

stinging slight when Senator McCain referred to his black senate colleague and presidential opponent during the debate as “that one.”

But there’s also you and I and we can’t let ourselves off the racist hook that easily, not if we’re going to go the remaining 10% of the way to the Promised Land. We’re up against a huge wall of denial.

It is not that we secretly harbor, even unbeknownst to ourselves, some bias against people of color. What white liberals deny is that we are over-privileged while fighting for the disadvantaged. We believe that since we work to improve the status of African Americans in society and in universities, and try to change history curricula in schools to incorporate a fairer balance of black and white achievements, vote against vouchers, and support black candidates ... we earnestly believe that we are free of racism.

What Peggy McIntosh so cleverly delineated in our second reading this morning is that where racism puts others at a disadvantage, white privilege puts me at an advantage. We are taught not to see or recognize white privilege because (inevitably) we would have to concede that we benefit from the disadvantage of others. Our liberal leanings refuse to go there.

But by not acknowledging our privilege, we unconsciously oppress others. The only way we can deal with white privilege is to give up some of our power. We may talk a lot about how privileged we are, but let’s cut to the chase: What will we do to reduce our privilege or even end it? What exactly are we willing to give up in order to level the playing field? We don’t see ourselves as oppressors or, as McIntosh calls us, “unfairly advantaged persons,” because to do so would mean affirming the systemic conditions that confer power and dominance and privilege according to race. She also writes: “Whites are taught to be morally neutral, normative, and average...so when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow them to be more like us.”

I’m not pointing any fingers unfairly. We need to see, however, that any discussion on race in America must include more than the overt racism tied to the past. The white liberal problem in thinking about race is the belief that we change things through good and kindly deeds. We give little or no thought to limiting our own power and dominance, let alone remove ourselves from positions of power in the workplace or as decision-makers in society. Our privilege is safely maintained by denying that we are part of the problem. Race continues to be a factor, despite an African American running for the top elected office in the country. If we agree with Obama that the Joshua generation of black leaders - the new black - have only 10% of the way to go before reaching the Promised Land, then we must do our part to get us there.

I am gaining a sense of the New Black. Race in American these days is less about repairing the past, and more about moving to a new landscape of human understanding and shared power.

Governor Deval Patrick of Massachusetts is the New Black. Keith Ellison and Emanuel Cleaver II are the New Black representing overwhelmingly white communities from Minnesota and Missouri in congress. In 2001 there were 92 black legislators in state houses of government. By 2007 the figure stood at 189. In New Hampshire, Kris Roberts is the first black committee chairman in the legislature, but said that white lawmakers still confuse him with two other black representatives. Yeah, he said, us brothers all look alike. But he conceded that there was still a stinging feel to white people unable to distinguish among blacks.

We still have that 10 percent to go. Maybe more, maybe less. But is it clear that racism in America now belongs in the hands of a new generation. Old Civil Rights leaders may not get it entirely. Old black preachers may not get it entirely. Most of us may not get it entirely. But a new generation stands ready

to eliminate skin color as a variable of any kind. A new generation stands ready not to forgive and forget the trespasses of old, but to lead us to the Promised Land.

A new generation, reflected in part by what has been called The Great Schlep – involving a young Jewish generation traveling en masse to Florida to get their grandparents to relinquish their fears about the black race and vote for a black man for president. The grandkids even threaten never to return for a visit unless Florida goes blue.

Race in America now rests with the younger generation of all religions and colors and ethnicities. And even in Ole Miss, on the university campus, white fraternity brothers have joined the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation. Fraternities are still divided into black and white, but they have joint parties, and most recently divided into mixed-race teams where the winners were given tickets to the presidential debate.

Race in America. One Last story: Donald Cole, a black freshman to the University of Mississippi in 1968 was blocked in his path on campus by white students, male and female carrying confederate flags. When he and other black students participated in a peaceful protest, Cole was arrested and expelled. It was a huge embarrassment since his family and church had raised money for him to attend. Donald Cole returned to the campus in the late 70's to finish his doctorate, and in 1992 was hired as a professor in mathematics. Today he is the assistant to the chancellor for multicultural affairs.

I am sure that if Dr. Cole were asked to explain the New Black, his personal history would at first flash before his eyes. And then he would undoubtedly say that the issue of race in America is held in entirely new hands. He knows that from his own experience in working with students – first time voters – that they are ready to lead us to the Promised Land. The Moses generation has been thanked and put to rest and the Joshua Generation has just received its marching orders. And if I remember the story correctly, the walls came tumbling down.