

**“The Long Road to Justice”**  
A Sermon by the Rev. Dottie Mathews

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**Reading #1 – Excerpt from *A Long Overdue Conversation About Race*<sup>1</sup> By Rev. William G. Sinkford, President, Unitarian Universalist Association (3/24/08)**

[...] In our hearts, most Americans will acknowledge that racism is still at work in the body politic and in our individual lives, regardless of our race or cultural identity. But most would also acknowledge that we haven't yet found a way to move forward to redress the impact of racism, or even a way to productively talk about race in our society or in our lives. We have been stuck for far too long.

Much of the conversation about race is so filled with political correctness that truth is hard to come by. Whites move so easily to denial, citing the progress that has been made in recent decades and glossing over the glaring disparities in opportunity, income, even incarceration that remain. African Americans and people of color generally, including myself, show up defensive, afraid that the reality of our lives will, yet again, be deemed unimportant, that we will, yet again, be made invisible. Honesty has been simply too hard to come by, at least in mixed company.

Obama's [recent] speech, by naming the honest concerns and fears on both sides of the racial divide, presents us with that rarest of opportunities, an invitation to re-engage with an issue many people would prefer to ignore. I hope and pray that we have the courage to take advantage of this gift.

The religious community has an important role to play. Forty-five years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. observed that 11:00 a.m. Sunday morning was the most segregated hour in America. It was true when Dr. King said it, and it is still true today. But the religious community knows something about confession, reconciliation, and forgiveness. At least we say we do. [...]

This message is not a political endorsement of Senator Obama, but it is support for his courage and leadership in calling us to a long overdue conversation about race. That

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<sup>1</sup> Available online at <http://www.uua.org/news/newsubmissions/103966.shtml>, Last accessed April 15, 2008.

conversation needs to move forward regardless of who is elected to our national leadership in November.

**Reading #2** - “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you mad.”

~Aldous Huxley

**Sermon:**

There is no way that I could have foretold what awaited me as I pondered the flyer Roger had handed me. The large print across the top of the page said simply, “Southern Civil Rights Tour, Sponsored by Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago. March 21 – March 31, 2008” Roger indicated he’d heard about prior excursions with these folks and he strongly recommended that, if I could fit it in my schedule, he was sure it would be worthwhile.

Well, trusting Roger’s judgment as I do, I put it in my stack of things to be researched further. My only hesitation was that it was kind of costly, and the time away was more than I’d prefer – especially since my spring schedule was already so packed. But the idea really intrigued me and that flyer just kept rising to the top of the pile. Then I spoke with a colleague who had gone on this a few years before and she told me that this venture had absolutely changed her life. And then I heard from others who spoke in glowing superlatives as they declared this was “must do!” while it’s still available. (The leaders are in their 70’s and it had been rumored that this would be their last.)

So I did finally send in my registration. But you know how hesitant you are to see a movie that is being wildly, universally praised? So often, it seems, if everyone agrees that some movie or book is the very BEST, by the time you get to it, your expectations have been raised so high, it’s impossible to avoid disappointment. That’s was my fear – I thought: “Sure, it will be a good and valuable time, but it’s hard to imagine that it will move me as deeply as these folks describe. After all, I am in my 50’s – I LIVED through the height of Civil Rights Movement.” But all I can say is that in this case, the advance publicity dramatically underplayed the personal impact of this trip. I know without a doubt that I am changed – deeply – and I hope that as I proceed into life, I will continue to hear with new ears and to see with new eyes.

So, let me offer you here some context. The primary leader of this trip was the Rev. Gordon Gibson, a gentle, marvelously grounded man, a longtime UU minister who, in the 1960’s served the Jackson, Mississippi, congregation and was active in the Movement. He was among the many who marched, struggled with police, and were arrested, although he is very humble and says little about his personal involvement.

He believes strongly – like SO MANY we met - that ***if we fail to remember our past, we are condemned to reliving it.*** So he and his wife bring busloads of people - and help them to remember. This was the fourth Civil Rights pilgrimage they’ve led since their retirement.

Now, as I said, I entered this trip with a belief that the Civil Rights Movement was a familiar part of my youth, but I quickly learned that I, like so many of us, had had the luxury of keeping the full depth of those horrific stories at arm’s length. They were tragic – even terrifying - but they did not pierce me to my core, not nearly as much as was warranted! They were shocking pictures on Life Magazine pages and on TV news

reports, but I know now that I never fully understood the complexities or the true gruesomeness of that time.

You know, forty years is really an awfully short period – just a whisper of time. And, yet, that whisper, when seen aright, ROARS on into today with the oceans of tears and the spilled blood of numerous people, a few of whom are famously memorialized like the Martin Luther King, Jr., and innumerable whose names never reached notoriety . Four decades have passed. It's a whole new world, in many ways and, yet, as our reading from Bill Sinkford points out, despite our remarkable progress on race issues in the U.S., there is still SO far to go!

Here's a brief idea of the logistics of my journey. Our bus with 30-odd pilgrims started and ended in Chicago and we rode together for a week and a half to many of the most sacred Civil Rights sites of the South. Through Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama, learning some of the stories through several documentary videos while driving and then stopping at more than a dozen memorial sites. Some of the sites had great monuments erected and some had no marker at all. If it sounds exhausting, it was! But I have to say that at each stop – as we ventured off the bus and stood ready to hear the truth of what had occurred at that site – at each stop we made, survivors, residents, relatives greeted us with warm hugs, gracious hospitality, and songs and words that painted stark pictures of their very real pain .... but also of their unquenchable hope.

The stories we heard were far worse than I recalled from my childhood. From today's perspective, it is so difficult to imagine that **all** that these people were asking for was the right to sit at the counter, ride in the bus, or shop, or be educated next to a white person. They had the audacity to persist in their demand to cast a valid vote. In the country that claims to be the greatest and most free nation in the world, these basic requests were enough to unleash the wrath of bombings, fire hoses, billy clubs, lynchings, bullets, imprisonments, vicious dogs, rapes, beatings, the list of atrocities we vicariously relived goes on and on and on. These were true cases of terrorism on our domestic soil; told to us by people who bore the bruises and scarred flesh, people whose hearts were broken by it. We heard far too many of the stories during those days and yet, we know, everything that we heard represented just a fraction of what our history holds from those years.

Story after story related unmitigated hatred poured out on a people who dared to stand up. It was quite nearly impossible to accept and internalize. But one of the harshest realities was realizing the extent of the complicity of the law enforcement and state and federal governments. In so many of these ghastly cases, the perpetrators were soon charged with a crime - but in each case, the jury's sham deliberation lasted a very brief time before they glibly rendered their Not Guilty verdict.

Can you imagine how it felt to be the parent, sibling, or friend of one of these victims – so brutally beaten and murdered - and have those men grin at you as they casually strode past, back into their freedom? Time after time, there was no justice to be found for the victims and families. YET – and this really got me – yet they fought on. Yet, their spirits were not ever fully broken and yet they persisted in relentlessly seeking justice and asking this country to live up to the claims of our constitution: demanding fair, humane treatment for all.

The leaders were devoted to attaining these goals through non-violence. They trained intensely in non-violent tactics as a clear and effective strategy. It was not happenstance – they were organized and schooled in it because they truly believed that non-violence was a more powerful weapon than hate. It was not a limp, cowering

response in any way. In their heart of hearts, they knew that only love is powerful enough to cast out the hatred that engulfed them.

I cannot possibly take you through each of the heart-rending stories we heard, but I want to lift up a few that, for me, exemplified the substance of this trip. The first was the story of Jimmie Lee Jackson. In Marion, Alabama, on a February night in 1965, there was a peaceful march demanding the right to register to vote. I want to read you a bit of the story:

*About 9:30 the night of February 18, more than 200 marchers began walking in pairs out the front door of Mount Zion church. Before they had even walked a block, they were confronted by a line of state troopers and the police chief, who ordered them to disperse.*

*The marchers halted at the chief's order, and suddenly all the streetlights on the square went out. A black minister at the head of the march knelt to pray, and was struck on the head by a trooper. Other troopers began swinging their clubs, and the marchers panicked, running for cover wherever they could find it.*

*Viola and Jimmie Lee Jackson hurried into Mack's Café and were huddled for safety when they saw Cager Lee come in, beaten and bleeding. Shocked at the sight of his grandfather wounded, Jimmie Lee tried to lead him out the door to take him to a hospital. But they were quickly shoved back into the room by a crowd of club-swinging troopers and terrified marchers. The troopers began knocking out the café lights with their clubs and beating people at random. Jimmie Lee saw a trooper strike his mother, and he lunged for the man to protect her without thinking. A trooper clubbed him across the face and slammed him into a cigarette machine. As Jimmie Lee was forced against the machine, another trooper pulled his pistol and shot him in the stomach.*

*Wounded, Jimmie Lee managed to escape the café, but the troopers continued to beat him as he ran up the street. Eventually he collapsed. It was two hours before Jimmie Lee arrived at Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma. He died eight days later.*

*[...] Three days before Jackson died, the Alabama state legislature passed a resolution supporting the state troopers' actions in Marion.<sup>2</sup>*

Well, for our group the story of this murder was described to us by Jimmie Lee Jackson's cousin, Shirley. We ate lunch with her and others at that Mount Zion Church and she led us as we somberly walked the short distance to the place where the café had stood and back to the spot where Jimmie Lee finally collapsed. And, then we all drove to his gravesite -- far out of town (as was mandated for all non-white burials). She told us tearfully that his gravestone had been toppled and that they'd had to put up special reinforcement to prevent vicious people from defacing it further. But the most unforgettable scene in my mind was when she stood by that gravestone and slowly fingered the bullet marks -- there were maybe a ½ dozen of them, to the point where the etched face of Jesus was obliterated. As she traced the damaged stone, she quietly expressed her bafflement, "Apparently, they wanted to kill him even after he was already dead. They wanted to murder him even in his grave!" .....This is a scene I will long remember.

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<sup>2</sup> Free At Last, A History of the Civil Rights Movement & Those Who Died in the Struggle, Sara Bullard, Executive Editor (Montgomery, AL: Teaching Tolerance ), 2005, pp 70-71

Another of our pilgrimage sites was the infamous Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. Only a few weeks after Jimmie Lee's death – which occurred, of course, in a string of such deaths - at this bridge, on Sunday, March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1965, hundreds of people had gathered intending to peacefully march from Selma to Montgomery to make visible their plight.

The construction of the bridge is somewhat arched and people who were there that day noted that as they crested that arch, all that was visible on the road ahead was a sea of police cars and blue uniforms – some officers on foot, some on horseback. (While on this trip, we were told that in some municipalities, the only requirement to become a peace officer was a willingness – a desire - to beat Negroes.)

As the marchers moved ahead together, the police demanded they disperse and, as can so easily happen when tensions are high, things abruptly got out of hand. Potent tear gas that burned their skin and seared their lungs was fired directly into the crowds, officers' batons began flying, and horses were urged forward into the crowd. A marcher reported that she will never forget the sound of bones cracking under the horses' hooves. Participants described how the state and local troopers hemmed them in on both sides of the bridge that day, squashing them in a crowded panic. One spoke of the terror she felt as a young girl when an officer chased her and her companions all the way back to their neighborhood several blocks away, striking wildly with his baton and calling her vile names.

That first attempt to cross the bridge rightly earned the name, “Bloody Sunday” and we were solemnly mindful of these stories and images (which were indelibly imprinted on our minds) as we slowly made our own march across to the other side of that bridge, remaining a long time at the monuments that have been erected there. One of them is inscribed with an old African proverb: “**When you pray, move your feet.**”

And, despite Bloody Sunday, they did keep moving their feet. It took two more attempts in subsequent days to finally get across and march all the way to Montgomery – and in the continuing violent assaults made in those intervening days the Rev. James Reeb, a UU minister who'd come from Boston to help and Viola Liuzzo a UU lay person from Detroit both lost their lives. We lingered a long pensive time on sites of those attacks....

These are true and horrible stories. But we must remember that there's more to this region than these stories alone. We also visited the UU Congregations in Neshoba and Jackson and Montgomery and Birmingham where much great work is still being done. These and other kind folks were eager to make sure we knew that the south has changed and is changing. We heard words of hope over and over again – from white persons and persons of color who have joined together now to collaboratively work on reclamation and reconciliation. And more than a few people pointed to our youth as the primary holders of that hope. One Mississippian who was a particularly inspiring speaker, who lived through all these things and has never stopped his full time justice work, told us that the best thing we can do is to get out of the way and let the young people take over. The younger one is, he felt, the less powerful grip racism seems to have. His observation seems true in the south - and perhaps here as well.

It's interesting to me that those not of the south often click their tongues and vilify the confederate states, shaking their heads about how on earth those folks could have been so filled with hatred and fear. But, I need to tell you that in my travels I also had a chance to read portions of James Loewen's book, Sundown Towns. And, I wonder if you know that our own Appleton was one such town?

A Sundown Town is one that is intentionally white, where it was explicitly known to be unsafe for a person of color to be present outside of daylight hours. You've heard with repulsion about ethnic cleansing in foreign lands – well, there's very good evidence that right here in this region there was deliberate, intentional racial cleansing.

Not surprisingly, people don't talk much about these things, and in Loewen's research, the data was not easily unearthed. To verify the anecdotal evidence he had, he retrieved historical census data and compared that over several decades. The results were telling. In this Northeast Wisconsin region, there were 389 black people recorded in the 1890 census. By 1930, that number had diminished by 78%.<sup>3</sup> This is even more surprising when you note that the white population increased by 45% during the same period!<sup>4</sup> Regional growth was happening – jobs were being created – but, strangely, the black population decreased dramatically while the white population skyrocketed. Ours is just one of many, many towns that reflect this sort of puzzling evidence. The harsh truth is that Appleton does not lack diversity by accident. What we know is that the same sort of brutish power that attempted to crush the souls of black persons in the south was at work up here too – a bit more subtly perhaps but still quite active.

There are reports that Manitowoc actually had a posted a sign saying in crude and specific language warning that negroes (not the word they used) should not let the sun go down while they were in that town. There is also credible evidence that there were signs posted out on Highway 41 near Fond du Lac (in similar racist language) saying that persons of color were not welcome to travel north of there. It has been established that black singers and musicians who came to perform here were not permitted to stay in our hotels overnight.

That was decades ago. Yet, here and elsewhere, there is plenty of evidence that racism continues to be a major problem facing our country. The current media flap over the fiery sermons of a presidential candidates' minister and the provocative dissecting of his response to that that minister supports this notion, I think. If we are alert, we can see it every day – the multitude of ways that race issues are used to manipulate the public.

We have come so far and yet there is so much work to be done.... So very much truth-telling work to be done.

And it is my opinion that the people who draw a very close connection between racism (all –isms in fact) and class issues are right on target. Dr. Thandeka (a theologian and then a professor at the UU seminary in Chicago) published a paper<sup>5</sup> about 9 years ago where she wrote about our hesitation to take a firm stand against the racism we observe. She hypothesized that this was not because in our hearts we value the person of color any less than we might a white person, but because we fear losing our own social standing. Too often, it seems, we fail to speak up or act against the injustices we observe because, simply put, we lack the courage to do so. We fear being ostracized or ridiculed or somehow being bumped down a notch in our own societal peer group. Speaking our truth – standing up for what's right - sounds so simple! We teach it to our kids every day. And yet, if it WERE simple, and if it were our constant habit, I'd wager our world would look and feel to be a very different place.

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<sup>3</sup> Loewen, James W., Sundown Towns, A Hidden Dimension of American Racism, (NY: Touchstone), 2005, pp 68 ff

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 141

<sup>5</sup> Thandeka: *Why Anti-Racism Will Fail*. [http://www.meadville.edu/journal/1999\\_thandeka\\_1\\_1.pdf](http://www.meadville.edu/journal/1999_thandeka_1_1.pdf) . Last accessed April 4, 2008.

On this Civil Rights Pilgrimage, I had the honor of visiting the graves of many martyrs who died for the sake of justice – some of our own Unitarian Universalist faith. These were people who willingly gave the ultimate sacrifice, knowing that no one is truly free until all are free.

And it was particularly poignant as I carried these Unitarian martyrs' stories so freshly in me and I participated in our UU201 class here last Thursday night. As the group pondered together the question, "What would YOU die for?" (a very heavy question indeed) it occurred to us that perhaps a far better question to ask is "What would you LIVE for?" What sense of rightness holds so much power over your heart and mine that we would willingly risk being ostracized or ridiculed over it? Troopers' batons and tear gas are not current threats to us, but their shadow forces me to wonder how much the principles of my personal faith truly guide me? Those core beliefs that I claim as my own soul's truth – with how much devotion to those principles am I willing to live? At this point, no one is asking us to die for our faith, but the far more pertinent question seems to be: are we willing to LIVE for the ethics and values our faith?

In a lonely Meridian, Mississippi graveyard far outside town, James Chaney - one of the many martyrs' has a gravestone that reads:

*"There are those who are alive yet will never live,  
there are those who are dead yet will live forever;  
great deeds inspire and encourage the living."*

So, may we, the living, have the courage to follow our convictions without reservation—that we may avoid reliving the terrors of the past, and knowing we are the ones being asked today to create the just, equitable and compassionate future that our Unitarian Universalist faith so vigorously and mightily beckons us toward.

May it be so. Amen.