

## **The Color of Our Labor**

Text of sermon by Dane Smith at Unity Unitarian Church in St. Paul, Labor Day weekend, Sunday, Sept. 2, 2012. Bailey Webster, Worship Associate, Kathleen Bartholomay, musician.

**In the long sad saga of American slavery , racism, and white, Eurocentric, color-coded, exploitation, exclusion and malicious neglect of non-white humans and their labor, it is not easy to find a lot of uplifting humor. But humor is good medicine and good tonic to keep our spirits up in this eternal fight for justice, so here's a funny story, which I like in large part because it comes from baseball, in which metaphors can be found for EVERYthing.**

**The humor comes from Vic Power, now deceased, who was both an African-American and a Latino-American, born in Puerto Rico as Victor Pove. He was in the vanguard of players in the 40s and 50s who broke the color line and thus, not only integrated baseball, but raised American consciousness for the ensuing Civil Rights movement. Vic Power and his cohort of heroic athletes improved the game's quality, owing to the fact that ALL this previously excluded human potential was allowed to compete and enter the baseball labor force. These previously excluded ballplayers actually had to be more skillful than your average white players to be let in, and off the field they had to be paragons of polite, bourgeois deportment, not the least bit uppity or sassy or resentful.**

**Vic Power was a fine hitter, .284 lifetime, and a seven-time Gold Glove winner at first base, mostly for the As, and he had a couple pretty good years with our Twins in the early 60s. He had a buoyant irrepressible spirit, was less deferential than some of the early black or Latino players, and reportedly was traded out of the famously reactionary Yankees organization because he dared to publicly date a white woman. If true, this gives us yet another reason to HATE the Yankees, who with their undeserved aristocratic wealth and fame and power and huge payroll are born every spring on third base, and STILL stand for everything wrong about unfair advantage in America...but...I know...I apologize..... there's no hating in baseball, and certainly not in Unitarianism, so please forgive me, or, better yet, allow me just this one burning resentment toward one small set of fellow humans who wear pinstripes.**

**Anyway, Vic Power was not an angry hater, despite the racism and prejudice heaped on him off the field. Vic Power was perhaps most famous for this oft-told story on himself, about what he would always say when he sat down at a restaurant, it was in either Syracuse New York or Little Rock Arkansas, de facto discrimination was everywhere, and he got the all**

too familiar slap in the face....the admonition that he had to get up and leave the restaurant because....“We don’t serve colored people.” English was a second language for Vic and the sentence construction amused him. He said he always replied: “That’s OK. I don’t EAT colored people. I just want rice and beans.”

This rejoinder was brilliant of course. It’s clever and uplifting to meet hatred and prejudice with a laughing happy rebuke to its utter absurdity. The Bible describes the mild response as the best revenge for abusive behavior, as heaping fiery coals on your adversary’s head. And it was a glorious moment this summer to celebrate, with a new statue on our state capitol front lawn, the life of the Happy Warrior for civil rights, Hubert H. Humphrey. Perhaps no other white man in our national history did more in the battle for racial equity, and with more joy and optimism. Humphrey and black Minnesotans such as Roy Wilkins, joined by native Americans who founded the national American Indian Movement in Minnesota, joined also by Minnesota Latinos and Asians and gay rights advocates, put Minnesota on the map as a progressive state that would lead the way on civil rights, women’s rights and human rights regardless of sexual identity, as well as voting rights, more on that in a minute.

Former President Clinton was there at the unveiling and he hit just the right note, with a powerful message about the ECONOMIC uplift from racial equity and civil rights, and about Humphrey and Martin Luther King’s dream of... “a more perfect union...,” which by the way is THE first stated goal in the preamble of the United States Constitution. Clinton thanked Humphrey for transforming his once segregated state of Arkansas and the American South into a more equal AND MORE PROSPEROUS place. And then he added a touch of down-home Ozarks wisdom, with this dismissal of today’s sourpusses, who cynically say our own democratic governments are incapable of further improving our common good, or even that our democracy is illegitimate. The solutions to our nation’s economic problems and our stubborn racial disparities, Clinton said, will NOT come, let me see if I can channel him and my own southern roots, “from paypul who look lak they spent all mornin’... suckin’ on lemons.”

Clinton’s memory of an officially racist and less profitable Arkansas may be old news, and Vic Power’s story is funnier now because, we think, all of this was so long ago and far away. It’s tempting to think, after some remarkable progress has been achieved, that we’re past that. After all, the president of the United States is the son of an African \_ I loved it when he called himself a mutt \_ and the First Lady is descended from slaves. Let’s rejoice in this progress, something I thought I’d never see in my lifetime. A president who looks more like the majority of humans in rest of the world, who has brought a new international respect and sensibility to the sometimes ugly American face in foreign policy, who has done more to

advance a cleaner and greener global economy than any president since Marvin Gaye sang Mercy Mercy Me, is an astoundingly different and better thing. In my opinion, this president is a lot like the early black heroes who broke the color line in baseball. Not only is he more skillful and effective at the job than most of his predecessors and teammates, but he's better behaved in personal and professional ethics too, during circumstances that arguably are the worst and most challenging since the 1930s, almost never playing the race card, and getting not nearly enough credit. But the great irony about individual success like his is that it actually may foster impatience and misunderstanding and a lack of sympathy about the plight of the tens of millions left behind and struggling.

Dr. Anton Treuer, professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University, author of nine books and the editor of the only academic journal of Ojibwe language, has been giving a talk entitled "Native American Historical Trauma: Why don't they just get over it?" If you haven't plugged in to all the top-quality journalism lately on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Dakota conflict, do so.

"What's the problem, just get over it," is the understandable and all too human response for those of us who have never really faced daily discrimination, other than perhaps being short, and not rich enough, and having to compete with the Yankees and others born on third base, and especially if we have enjoyed some success as a result of our exertions. If you are somewhere within sight of the top, the world always looks like a meritocracy.

Today's leading theorists in the conservative movement led by Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, both of whom originally opposed civil rights legislation, then glossed it over later without ever really apologizing, will argue that equality under the law has been achieved and we can move on. The code word for this way of thinking is that we now can be "color-blind" which is an odd thing to want to be, since it actually is a rather serious and potentially hazardous physical handicap. Another argument is that too much consciousness about race differences or inequality fosters envy, or class warfare, or an "entitlement mentality" and I love this one, as it comes often from people who were born on third base, or at least first base, and who have their own obvious entitlement mentality when it comes to inherited wealth. And of course, the old standby, that we can't afford to make any of many possible taxpayer investments to equalize opportunity or outcomes, because it will hamper our job creators and inconvenience the one percent who own most of America, exactly the argument used by plantation owners, before the Civil War, to protect their cheap labor.

So what you will hear is that there is really nothing to see here. Racism thing fixed, officially and legally removed, and if too many of the rest of those people can't catch up to

Oprah and Jennifer Lopez and President Obama and Herman Cain, must be their own darn fault. No excuses now, it's all ancient history.

Well, really now, how ancient is this history? I am not old yet, I insist on believing that, despite my official qualification for Social Security this year, and I remember seeing with my own eyes, as an 11-year-old visiting my kinfolk in Texas, the Colored Only sign on a restroom. Some of my Texas kinfolk are what I describe as jokingly racist, covering it with a just kidding veneer and the assurance that they personally have one or two good friends of color. But racism, covert and overt, is most definitely not a joke and just this summer, we have the startling revelation, after the shooting of the Sikhs in Wisconsin, a rather large and growing racist hate music industry, among white youth. You don't have to be a computer expert to Google your way to dozens of websites that are virulently racist, xenophobic to the extreme.

The anti-Latino, anti-African and anti-immigrant animosity, anti-Asian too and anti-Islamic in particular, in our white body politic is an uncontested fact. Some would observe that increasing opposition in the South and in rural and suburban white areas, to taxes and government and the whole range of things we call economic security entitlements, arose at about the same time that people of color began to be cut in on that old New Deal, and to get more of the proceeds of a more perfect union. Most white voters in my grandfather's South loved the New Deal and big government work programs under Huey Long and Franklin Roosevelt, and the labor movement was a whole lot more popular in this nation when the major beneficiaries were essentially all white.

Minnesota has always been different, and let's be frank, our homogenous Scandinavian egalitarian whiteness made it easier to embrace equality, in the abstract. But as we change, and as we speak, too many markers of worsening disparity are a spreading stain on our community and represent a clear and present danger, at the same time that the selfish refrain \_ "leave me alone , and you are on your own" \_ grows louder.

Here's one marker. The Twin Cities actually ranks worst in the nation for unemployment rate disparity between African-Americans and whites, 18 percent to about 6 percent. An 18 percent unemployment rate, by the way, is not a recession. That's a Depression. And even when comparing blacks and whites at the same education levels, the unemployment rate for blacks is significantly higher.

Here's a second, perhaps more familiar marker. School success indicators are widely known. From poverty rates at birth, to early childhood readiness, to disciplinary disparities, all the way through to test scores and post-secondary completion, a success and achievement gap is separating OUR kids of color from the majority culture. Left alone, this gap will

literally grow up and blow up, and damage our economy well in to the future. Our composite complexion is changing very rapidly. While 3 percent of our population in Minnesota over the age of 85 is non-white, 30 percent, yes 10 times the percentage, of kids under the age of 5 are of color. If more of these children, who are OUR children, don't succeed, this place will NOT thrive and the quality of all our lives will decline. Economists agree that greater economic equity and social justice, creating something called aggregate demand, actually is the superior economic growth model.

Here's a third marker. Evidence is mounting showing continued and widening inequality, concentration of wealth in the top 1 percent, and a general decline for the bottom half for people of all races, is increasingly a life-and-death issue. The Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation for years now in Minnesota has been keeping track of health outcomes by income and color and zip code. Here's a life-and-death fact for you. Children born into the highest income zip codes in the Twin Cities live 8 years longer than those born into our poorest communities, in Frogtown and the North side of Minneapolis. The Blue Cross research found that social and environmental determinants may have more impact than personal decisions one makes to eat right, exercise and avoid risks. "While debates over health insurance, fad diets, and the merits of various exercise regimes continue to capture the popular imagination, national research suggests that a person's health is strongly influenced – as much as 50 percent or more – by social determinants."

I say this every year before Labor Day, and this congregation is full of activists who already walk this talk, but the very best antidote for liberal guilt is sweat equity, doing stuff to help, to help others help themselves, and to change public policy.

Here are just three things that need doing right now.

One thing is particularly urgent. The ballot amendment will be labeled photo ID, but it's actually a huge travesty, dismantling a system in place for 40 years and considered one of the best in the world. This amendment requires one very specific type of ID, and it's likely to install a system of provisional voting that will disenfranchise or discourage voting by tens of thousands of perfectly eligible voters, disproportionately, we know, among communities of color. This voting rights infringement is a civil rights violation, an outlandish and a direct affront to communities of color, and for that matter, a whole panoply of eligible voters, from the elderly to veterans to college students. Communities of color, already at a distinct political disadvantage, will lose ground if this becomes law and virtually all those communities are on board against this and are among more than 60 non-partisan entities, opposing it. Google Our Vote Our Future and find a way to prevent this outrage from

happening in this state, that is again, one of the best in the nation in turnout and accessibility and integrity.

Second thing: Find a way to make a difference on educational equity. Tutor or mentor kids and get to work for maintaining our school district levy in St. Paul. I spend a lot of time working with data and policy and progressive abstractions, and I've found that tutoring at my local school to be one of THE most rewarding things I do, a form of inoculation against ennui or cynicism. The best tonic you can imagine is to sit face-to-face with boys and girls who are actually eager to learn and succeed, and teachers and school workers who are striving hard every day to overcome obstacles. When you take your training as a tutor, you will be told that the best payback is that the kids you tutor tend to regard you as a hero. It's true.

Three: Our own Minnesota Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Association is in the trenches and on the very front lines of the employment disparity issue. Every meeting I've attended of the HIRE coalition, which has enjoyed good success recently lifting minority hiring for light-rail and stadium projects, somebody from this church or another UU church in the Twin Cities is in the room. We have some ownership in leading this effort, we can broaden it. The thing to watch for is a new Twin Cities regional effort, called Everybody In, a strong and growing new coalition of business, community, religious groups focused as never before on reducing the unacceptable disparities in unemployment and workforce development.

Our religion is not an easy religion, because it compels us to act for equality and justice. This requirement is bound up in those words: integrity and service. The faiths of my southern forefathers was steeped in a dark and shameful advancement and justification of racism. Economic arguments came first and foremost in the creation and defense of slavery, and racism itself was pretty much invented by wealthy merchants and plantation developers who were desperate to cut costs for the hot and labor-intensive sugar and cotton and tobacco economies of the New World.

Further justification for exploiting labor, by color differentiation, came all too eagerly from Christendom. My overtly racist southern Baptist ancestors, along with Mormons and a whole range of other fundamentalist churches, cooked up elaborate Biblical explanations for slavery and labor differentiation, including the outlandish interpretation that God cursed either Cain or Ham, the bad sons of Adam and Noah, with dark skin and that this was the mark of his disapproval and the eternal curse that they serve others. This poison was dispensed well in to this century. The leading white conservative southern Baptist organization did not get around to an official apology for this disgusting foolishness until 1995.

**We have our own deep roots on the opposite side of this struggle. Lord knows our foremothers and forefathers in the Unitarian Universalist tradition were imperfect, and we still are, but our tradition was at the radical vanguard of civil rights and our ministers actually led the abolitionist movement, which is STILL not given proper respect, and considered kooky and extremist, by white historians. Recall the words of Pastor Little in the reading, from 1824, forewarning unending grief from this original oppressive sin of slavery and racism.**

**So civil rights is as foundational for us as anything else we believe. When people joke, as they often do, about us not standing for anything, it's helpful to firmly remind them that no other mainstream faith in this nation has a stronger or earlier record on civil rights and racial equality than our own.**

**We need to fight this battle with joy and optimism, with a minimum of self-righteousness, and with a sense of humor, if at all possible. Let's not get too full of ourselves, holier than thou. But on this great truth, the equality of humans before God and in the divine order of things, WE...ARE...FUNDAMENTALISTS! And if we want to be true to this faith, we really have no choice but to step up our fight for civil rights and human rights and labor rights and voting rights, right now and forever.**

**AMEN.**