

How Radical Should We Be for Racial Equity?

Labor Day Sunday Sermon, Dane Smith, Unity Unitarian Church, Sept. 6, 2015

Recommended reading is hyper-linked with book titles in the sermon text.

Imagine a glorious summer morning, cooler than this, like we often have in June, in our fair city 160 years ago, the mid--1850s. Close your eyes and evoke the old photographs, and think about the smell of sawdust and fresh-cut lumber and wood smoke, the sound of horses and wagons and their drivers. Imagine the sight and sound of a wild and un-dammed Mississippi River, white water cascading through and between our Twin Cities until it calms down and flattens out at the Upper and Lower Landings, by the brand new and growing village of St. Paul, just one mile that-away as the crow flies, a town still referred to by some old-timers by its original and wonderfully ridiculous name, Pig's Eye.

Now try to picture this human drama, touched on in the reading a few minutes ago, from William D. Green's excellent books on the history of civil rights and racism in 19th Century Minnesota. A large steamboat is tied up by the Lower Landing and is discharging a load of passengers, amid much hustle and bustle. Many are immigrants but some are tourists, white southern plantation owners, coming to get a look at picturesque Minnehaha Falls and thundering St. Anthony Falls and all our beautiful cool lakes and rivers. They are here also to escape the oppressive heat downstream in Missouri or Mississippi or Arkansas or Louisiana, where all my ancestors were living in the 1850s. These southerners can well afford these excursions because THEY ARE RICH. Filthy rich, most definitely the 1 percenters of their era. Their wealth is entirely due to their aggressive exploitation of the cheapest possible labor, namely, the brutal bloody enslavement of their own beautiful black brothers and sisters. These 1 percenters stroll down the gangplank, in their ante-bellum finery, looking much more genteel and lacier than your stolid New England pioneers and the humble mixed-blood Metis and French-Indian traders who made up much of St. Paul's pioneer population. These 1 percenters actually have some of their African-

American slaves in tow, lugging their baggage, or otherwise slaving away and satisfying every demand and whim of their masters.

Greeting the southerners in not-so-Minnesota-Nice fashion are some local agitators, trouble-makers. They are the religious progressives of their day, Universalists and Methodists and Congregationalists, fire-breathing abolitionists. They are themselves freshly arrived from New England or the mid-Atlantic states. Their greetings to the 1 percenters are downright rude. They jeer at the slaveholders and shout out righteous slogans, perhaps something like “Black Lives Matter!,” pleading for them to repent and to free their human chattel. These protesters often follow the southerners on the road down University Avenue to their favorite lodging places, to the Winslow House, the first really grand luxury hotel in these parts, overlooking the Falls of St. Anthony. They also harass them on arrival at the hotel and haunt them in the lobby and hallways, calling out to the slaves themselves to simply walk away, because they are on free soil. Free black Minnesotans, already living here, also help out with this harassment. They make their own connections to the slaves, urging them to join them in freedom and these local black citizens actually helped hide and transport a few who dared to make the leap.

The slaveowners of course are furious. They howl in protest at this very offensive and probably illegal interference with their private property and their labor force. A little aside here about the law. Let’s never forget that injustice and discrimination, by the advantaged against the disadvantaged, at every step of our way on the road to progress, has often been sanctioned by the majesty of the law. And in the case of slavery, by the revered U.S. Constitution itself. Rule of law is a great and valuable principle. But thank God our Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution also contained lofty statements of principle that put supreme value on community and equality, not just individual property and privilege, and a clear intention that laws can and should be changed as humans progress.

Back to the Lower Landing and the Winslow House. Our protesters, these agitators, clearly were on the radical fringe, and just outside the law back then.

Most early Minnesotans and the more practical business-minded leaders, who also actually backed Lincoln and opposed expansion of slavery, were appalled by the protesters' behavior. They wrote in the local newspapers back then that this harassment was bad form, and uncivilized, and would most certainly hurt the tourist trade. It's easy to imagine the governor back then calling this protest "inappropriate," the word our own governor used to describe the Black Lives Matter march at the State Fair, in which some of us marched last weekend.

This radical protest for racial equity, then and now, was not and is not some trivial sideshow. Back then the radical opposition to slavery, the and sheltering and harboring of slaves on the Underground Railroad, was creating legal disputes in which local courts and officials in northern states were deciding that free states had no obligation to hunt down and return slaves, and could give them refuge, and higher courts finding for the slave-owners, including the infamous Dred Scott decision, whose story was played out right here a few miles away in Fort Snelling. This fast-spreading moral outrage, combined with the southern determination to spread slavery west, led to Lincoln's declaration in 1858 that our nation could no longer live half-slave and half-free, in a house divided against itself. Those words, his top assistant later said, made him president. This growing radicalism for equality and Lincoln's election hastened the southern rush to secession, and the violent assault by South Carolina hotheads on our nation's federal troops at Fort Sumter, near Charleston, where the confederate flag finally came down this summer, after the murder of nine more African-Americans by a white racist.

Looking back, most of us would be proud of our spiritual ancestors at the Lower Landing, who dared to speak out directly and to get literally in the face of racial oppression and injustice. But as with everything in the rear-view mirror, it was harder then than it looks now to figure out what how radical to be, exactly what to do and not do.

We are a faith that treasures balance and reason, and peace and love and non-violence, and we know full well that there must be limits and boundaries to most things. What were the ethical and moral limits to activism in those days? All of us I think would still condemn the terroristic violence of the wild-eyed John

Brown, a white zealot who took up arms and participated in the killing of slaveholders and their sympathizers in the reign of terror called Bloody Kansas. John Brown then launched a violent attack on United States government at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in a botched effort to lead a slave revolt, without much coordination at all with slaves themselves. One of the very hardest moral questions of all time is when, if ever, we meet unjust violence with violence. I don't think there's an easy answer as to whether and which revolts by slaves themselves were justified, seeing's how we celebrate our own American Revolution, a violent overthrow of the arguably lesser evil of monarchy and taxation without representation. The persecution and ostracism of the black people and the black government of Haiti, by both our governments and white European powers, after its successful slave revolt, just a few years after our own glorious revolution, is a sad and tragic story, with consequences still unfolding.

In this context, pretty clearly those Universalists and abolitionists who were at the Lower Landing to confront slavery and racism, were well within the bounds of social justice advocacy. And to answer the question posed by the title of our sermon today, How Radical Should WE Be for Racial Equity, you can see where we're headed here. The answer is, to borrow a term from my Texan father, "pretty dad-gummed radical."

I believe that It is right and proper that the leadership and membership of this congregation is at the ramparts again, taking chances, getting pushy. It is right that we were at the bridge in Selma last spring. It is right that we were with Black Lives Matter a week ago at the State Fair, to draw attention to the institutional and structural racism that lingers everywhere in a state that by many measures is most definitely UN-fair. To borrow from Lincoln, we can't live in a state that is four-fifths fair and one-fifth unfair. This is a state that soon will have 20 percent people of color, up tenfold from 2 percent when I first arrived in Minnesota and went to the State Fair in 1971, and already a much higher percentage in the Twin Cities, reaching 40 percent of the workforce by the year 2040. The continuing disparities in employment, income and wealth, educational attainment, health and wellness are not just morally unacceptable. They represent a clear and present threat to our long-term economic vitality, as we move in this century

toward a white minority in this nation and state, and a complexion that resembles the world at large.

Some worry that a stronger more radical and pushier posture will do more harm than good, that it will scare the white voters, God forbid, and we all know what fraidy-cats them white folks can be. I think our progressive political leaders have been walking on eggshells with white voters long enough, that they are in fact ready to face the larger truth about racism, and we have some hard data to back this up. In the last year, since the Black Lives Matter protest began dominating the news on issues of policing and criminal justice, white attitudes have actually improved. The latest Pew survey shows that in just one year, the percentage of white Americans who think more changes are needed to afford equal rights to blacks has jumped significantly, from 39 percent to 53 percent, to an actual majority of whites. And of course, when people of color are counted, the total percentage of Americans who think more ought to be done rises to a convincing 60 percent. I'd say, we have a mandate.

Good old-fashioned public protest, from the Lower Landing to the State Fair, is important, but not enough of course. It's just the beginning of lots of hard work on reparation and reconciliation and this work must be prioritized and accelerated. But hearts and minds, as well as policies, have to be transformed too.

William Green's books move from describing that original radicalism to showing how Minnesota often was at the very forefront and ahead of other states in passing civil rights and equality laws for people of color, especially in those egalitarian pioneer days, and by fits and starts over the next century. But then, as huge waves of white European immigrants poured in, people of color were consistently excluded from meaningful property ownership, from acceptance into skilled trades and jobs, and access to memberships in key social circles and networks. These various forms of exclusion and discrimination are described by Green as the "cold shoulder." I think this is the perfect term to describe how Minnesotans can be. As a state we often were and are proudly on the cutting edge of official laws and policies that forbade discrimination and extended full

legal rights. In the clinics and in real life in countless ways, against our original American Indian hosts, against our immigrant Latinos and Asians and Africans, and perhaps worst of all against native African-Americans who have been here longer than many of our own ancestors, we discriminated, we segregated, we excluded, we neglected, we failed to love and give, we refused to embrace, we turned the cold shoulder.

I choose to believe that both minds and hearts are changing again for radical change. For the education of our minds and our conscience, the very good news now is that we are experiencing an explosion in good research and literature on the legacy of this oppression. We're beginning to see many more honest portrayals of slavery and oppression in the arts and cinema. Mountains of recent research and study show how structural and institutional racism have replaced overt racism, how people of color were excluded from many of the great sweeping progressive reforms, from the Homestead Act to the GI bill and housing programs, which built middle-class white wealth and assets and privilege. We seem to finally be coming to grips with how bad and damaging the ancient history was, how deep the stain and trauma was, but also and how it continues through very recent history to today, leaving a very large unpaid debt.

Here are just a few great books that document the extent of the reparation that is owed. [“Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America”](#) describes the centuries of systematic exploitation of Mexican and Spanish-speaking people. Another great book, [“The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism”](#) is one of my very favorites and shows how the entire Industrial Revolution and the vast structure of the Anglo-American capitalist system, South and North and in England, was built on slave labor and King Cotton, and colonial plunder. The implication is that our entire economic system still owes a debt to slavery and slaves, and that we are debtors to our people of color. The book [“Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II”](#) describes how after the Civil War, northern capitalists and southern sheriffs put together a sweeping and pernicious system in which they could routinely arrest young black men for petty crimes and enslave them for years at great profit, as convict labor. The book *The New Jim:*

Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness” describes the last 50 years and how whites in backlash against the civil rights movement have come up with yet another elaborate system of punitive measures that have produced the highest incarceration rate in the civilized world, enormously stacked against black males in particular, but which unfairly imprisons Latinos and Native Americans as well. Finally we all have to read the various books and articles by Ta-Nehisi Coates. He wrote an earth-shaking Atlantic Monthly article this last year, making the case for reparations, and I’m now reading his unsettling and inspiring book, [Between the World and Me](#).

We need to embrace the radical notion _ and of course it’s not actually radical at all _ that all our sisters and brothers of color are our creditors, to whom much more is owed. Our people of color deserve at long last must be made full partners and shareholders in our society, not given some shaky mirage of equal opportunity. And they deserve more equal outcomes, a roughly equal share of God’s bounty, since we are all her children, and we can assume that she wants her resources shared fairly, for all her children to have a set of toys and belongings of comparable worth.

Put another way, our sisters and brothers of color deserve a roughly equal or a much higher minimum share of the inheritance that all our mothers and fathers worked for and left us, and that too many white mothers and fathers took from the mothers and fathers of our sisters and brothers of color. Figuring out who took what, and how much exactly is owed over the last four centuries will be difficult, impossible to adjudicate perfectly. That will be hard, very hard. But we can begin by ending the denial that much more is owed.

This rings home for me personally. My ancestors were all southern, and at least one, a pioneer on the Texas frontier in the late 1850s, owned slaves. My great-great-great grandmother stitched together the first confederate flag in Brown County, Texas. I’ve gone over many years from being detached and amused by this to being genuinely ashamed of it, and it definitely feeds my personal passion for the racial justice cause. I know firsthand how I’ve benefitted from white privilege. A great redeeming force, however, has been my beloved father, one

of many white southerners actually, who accepted and embraced the civil rights movement in the 1960s, and taught me from an early age that we had a debt to repay. My father, get this, his name was actually O.K. Smith, passed away earlier this summer at 90. Going through a fairly small stack of papers he obviously treasured, I was thrilled to find the full text of Martin Luther King's Letter from the Birmingham Jail. What a thrill that was. Thank you, O.K. Smith, I can only hope to press forward in your honor, for racial equity and justice.

As a closing argument, here are some fascinating facts from a recent infographic I highly recommend from [Yes!](#) magazine, to which civil rights leader and CNN commentator Van Jones, who recently rededicated our church, frequently contributes.

At the end of the civil war, General William Tecumseh Sherman and black leaders of the southern states introduced the idea of reparations to slaves, giving each household 40 acres and a mule. It never happened, and instead the nation paid reparations to slave-owners. If we made good now on that excellent original idea, the value of 40 acres and a mule has been calculated at about \$6.4 trillion. And remember that our debt for reparations continued to pile up after slavery, due to convict labor and discriminatory laws and private-sector predations. During the Depression, our government extended 1 million low-interest loans to white farmers to avoid bankruptcy and foreclosure. Blacks got little or none, and instead, a policy of redlining to deny credit began, and continues to this day. All this wrongdoing has directly resulted in a much bigger wealth disparity than income disparity in our nation. While African-American incomes are on average about two-thirds what whites make, they have on average only one-tenth of the wealth of whites, despite all those centuries of forced and under-compensated labor to create our common wealth.

This is the part in my preachy Labor Days sermons when I spell out exactly what little things you can and should do next, in partnership with some very effective and committed groups right here in our community. The organization Generation Next just issued a call for reading tutors. Voices for Racial Justice has a sweeping agenda for racial equity in Minnesota, from criminal justice system

reforms to housing policy. The NAACP, Black Lives Matter, the Minnesota Education Equity Partnership, the Council on Crime and Justice, Take Action, ISAIAH, and the Urban League are all hard at work on dozens of policy initiatives. Growth & Justice is advancing a Workforce Equity agenda. Check them out, figure out how you can help and do more.

But what about more radical ideas and aspirations? What about large-scale reparations that repay the debt and begin to transfer assets and wealth to communities of color. What about bold ideas like “baby bonds” an investment asset of say \$10,000 held in trust for every child born in the United States, for investment in adulthood in property or education? Why not build as a moon-shot goal, a declaration that Minnesota will be world model for how to achieve an equitable multi-racial society?

As we learned from William Green’s books, policy and law are never enough. In the end we’ll need more than body cameras for police officers, restored voting rights for felons on parole, and debt-free higher education for any young person who needs and wants it, important as those measures are.

We have to work on our hearts, on our smiles, on the warmer embrace, putting an end once and for all to the cold shoulder, and then putting our money where our mouth is. We need to change ourselves and instill this in our children too. It is fitting that we dedicated new lives today at the same time we face up to the debt and sing about the lives lost in Birmingham and the lives plundered by racism and slavery and exploitation of labor. We must dedicate a larger portion our lives and our children’s lives to this righteousness. We can be assured that we will all be happier for it, that we will all do better when we all do better.

Rather than the usual AMEN, I’d like to close with a few lines from a great song of the 60s, Get Together, by the Youngbloods. The melody will come to you as you hear the words.

**Love is but a song to sing
Fear's the way we die
You can make the mountains ring**

**Or make the angels cry
Though the bird is on the wing
And you may not know why**

**Come on people now
Smile on your brother
Everybody get together
Try to love one another
Right now**