

“Legacies of Injustice”

*A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
Part of the UU White Supremacy Teach-In
First Parish in Wayland
May 7, 2017*

As a child, I lived in a predominantly white, suburban town in West Michigan outside of Kalamazoo. Although there was a development of duplexes across the street, most of the neighborhood was comprised of modest single-family homes with small lawns. The streets were sleepy and most did not have sidewalks. Sometimes I accompanied my parents along these streets to walk Sarah, our poorly trained dog, a blonde cocker-spaniel/poodle mix. On one of these walks, Sarah began to lurch on her leash, barking at a black-furred dog loose behind a fence. “Sarah, stop!” I shouted. And with tentative playfulness added something like, “We don’t play with that kind of dog.”

I knew what I meant. It was an effort to convey racist segregation. I was 8 or 9. Maybe 10 years old. My parents were not overt racists. But my school was mostly white. And, as best as I can recall, my church was entirely white. However, my grandfather, whom I adored, often used what he considered humor to deride various racial groups. I can clearly remember him reclining in a lounge chair laughing at the TV show Archie Bunker whose cantankerous lead character also tossed around insults as humor. This is what I saw. This may be why I, too, tried racist humor.

Fortunately my mom quickly made it clear that such language was *not* ok. Her response was one of many counter-messages that taught me racism was *wrong*. And yet, other messages about race were more complicated. At church, I learned to sing, “*Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in God’s sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.*” Love, I learned, was inclusive. All children, all people are worthy of love. But, by raising money for the starving black kids in Africa or for missionaries to the yellow-skinned kids of Asia, I also learned that we—the white folks—were the helpers, the fortunate ones, who sent aid to those other races and places. While such efforts taught me the values of helping others, it also sent messages about who were the ones with something to share and who were the ones in need.

What were the messages about race in your childhood, your family, your religious community (if you had one)? How did you learn your racial identity? How did you learn which box to check on a form? Caucasian. White. Black. Hispanic. Asian. Other.

Knowledge comes to us in many different ways. We can read a book, watch a film, listen to a teacher’s lecture—or a minister’s sermon. We can talk with a neighbor or a family member. We meet a stranger on a plane or at an event. There are many formal and clear

ways that we acquire knowledge through education and conversation. Yet, knowledge also comes to us through culture. We learn through the music we do or do not hear on the radio or at a friend's house or in our religious community. We learn by driving around or images on television or movies what a 'good' and a 'bad' neighborhood looks like—the size of spaces, the level of repair, the presence or absence of certain features like in-ground swimming pools or iron bars over first floor windows.

How do we know what we know? How do we know who belongs in a car parked on our street? How do we know who is out of place walking down a sidewalk? In our U.S. culture, racial identity remains a significant marker of who belongs, who is safe, and whose life matters more.

For white folks, it's often easy to think of racial identity as something "people of color" have. As social justice advocate John A. Powell writes,

"The invisibility of whiteness means that one doesn't have to notice that one is white. So there are people, and then there are black people. There are people and there are Latino people. And people—just people, just folks—turn out to be white, but we don't notice it."

White people have the luxury of not having to think about race. That is a benefit of being white, of being part of the dominant group. Just like men don't have to think about gender. The system works for you, and you don't have to think about it."
([worship web](#))

Today is a challenge to think about race, about white racial identity, about a system that works best for the white dominant group. Today is a challenge to consider what it means to live within a system built upon the presumption that whiteness is the superior racial identity.

Honestly, I found writing this sermon to be very challenging. I don't have all the answers. And yet, I have this role where I'm the one who has been given a microphone to speak and a charge to lead. You may have heard it said that the role of a minister is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable? Well, today I too feel a challenge to my comfort.

Why, for example, did the organizers have to label this event a UU White Supremacy teach-in? White supremacy?! I feel comfortable talking about race or racial dynamics. I even feel ok talking about whiteness—to consider what a 'white' racial identity looks like. But, well, I found myself repeatedly shying away from the phrase "white supremacy." I was afraid that if I used it as a sermon title that some of you may have stayed away today. I worried what folks might think if they saw "White Supremacy" on the sidewalk sign announcing the Sunday sermon. Would people shut us out as too radical, too political, just "too"?

And yet, as I understand it, the organizer’s choice of the phrase “White Supremacy” was intended to provoke this kind of discomfort. To get some of us who are white to notice our discomfort and to ask why we wiggled and resisted.

Part of the problem is a matter of definitions. For some, “white supremacy” refers to a distinct political movement that openly claims and promotes whiteness as the superior race. These white supremacists are the hood-wearing KKK or, as some strongly argue, they are today’s Alt-Right. Such positions of racial superiority clearly conflict with our commitments to equality as well as the worth and dignity of every person. So, unless the white supremacy teach-in is to talk about how to resist these groups in the present or learn about their impact in the past, what does white supremacy have to do with us?

There are different ways to answer that question. Firstly, our Unitarian and Universalist history does have plenty of examples of folks who did act from a place of white supremacy. Along with the examples of prophetic men and women, white supremacy is part of our legacy. For example, in his recent Minns Lecture in Boston, scholar Mark Morrison-Reed enumerates late 19th and early 20th century congregations began by and for African-Americans that didn’t receive support from the larger White institution and floundered. One such effort was made in 1860 when the Rev. William Jackson, an African American Baptist preacher, converted to be a Unitarian. However, he was turned away. With passion in his trembling voice, Morrison-Reed asked the audience,

“But, suppose, suppose the Rev. [William] Jackson had been welcomed [by the Unitarians] in 1860 or that the funds had been forthcoming when Joseph Fletcher Jordan wanted to start a theological school to train young African Americans. They would have been fanned out across the South to preach the gospel of the larger hope of God’s all embracing love. \$6000. \$6000 is what they needed to collect. In 1911-12, Jordan traveled around the Northeast raising money, but in the end raised less than \$1500 toward the goal. To put this in context, in April 1890 the Universalists began a mission in Japan. The Japanese mission was given at least \$6000 a year, often more, and over several decades more than \$275,000. During the same years, the Universalists couldn’t raise \$6000 for their mission to the colored people. What does it suggest? Black Lives Don’t Matter.

But imagine. Imagine if Jackson had successfully brought his Baptist church into the [American Unitarian Association] or if Jordan had established his theological school.”

Morrison-Reed continues in this vein—a link to his [full lecture](#) can be found in the posted text of this sermon online. Hearing his words challenged me to reconsider whether or not the whiteness of our wider Unitarian Universalist community could have been different.

What would it mean to have numerous member congregations that were predominantly African-American? What would our hymnals look like? Or our shared worship at regional or national assemblies? What would our national leadership look like? Or our pool of credentialed ministers?

I am also left wondering what would have happened if Joseph Fletcher Jordan visited the sleepy town of Wayland in 1911-12. Would he have received any funds? Would an African American preacher have been allowed into the pulpit? If a visit or funds were denied, what would their reasons be? What beliefs about racial identity would have influenced their choices?

I point to these examples as a reminder that white supremacist assumptions and attitudes towards African Americans *have* shaped the development of our larger faith movement. We may often feel isolated as a single congregation, but we are indeed part of an association of congregations with shared traditions such as chalice lightings and hymnals, principles and sources, ministerial credentialing and the *UU World* magazine. In what ways has our local congregation been shaped by this larger, largely white, tradition? What does it mean to be a part of a tradition that is so largely impacted by white *culture*?

These questions give us another way to answer what this White Supremacy Teach In has to do with us. In what ways might we be shaped not only by white culture, but by presumptions that this culture, this *whiteness*, is simply . . . better? Or, to approach the issue from a different angle, what might remain of who we are if the impact of white culture were removed? Do we know what is our faith and what is our culture?

Such questions are neither simple, nor quick to answer. Today is not meant to give answers, but to provoke the need to ask questions—to call out the need for questions that take seriously the ways white supremacist ways of thinking continue to shape us as individuals, as a local congregation, and as a national association of congregation.

While I do not have all the answers, I do believe that for those of us who are white the search for answers begins by naming our whiteness and exploring what this racial identity means. What would the impact be if white was no longer the default, the unmarked race? You may have noticed that in my remarks today, I only named the race of White authors/composers/speakers. *Did* you notice? Did you notice your response—your thoughts, your feelings?

My hope for us all today is that we do make an effort to notice whiteness and to think about our racial identity if we are white. I hope that we white folks, that I, continue on a path of curiosity and humility so that, as Dr. Glen Rideout calls out, we might be able to be present to Black lives *and to all those who are not white* in a way that we deserve to be called allies.ⁱ

White abolitionist, author, and activist Lydia Maria Child wrote that love can cure all the ills of society.ⁱⁱ For me, the power of this life-giving Love emerges from developing the capacity to see the worth and dignity in all lives—especially the lives that too many of us who are white have been taught to see as lesser than, not quite as good, as promising, as helpful. Let us grow in our capacity for such love. Let us be courageous in our reflections and in our action. Let us learn to see and to say “white supremacy” when we see it *still* in action.

So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ At the 2107 General Assembly closing ceremony on Black Lives UU, music director Dr. Glen Rideout introduced the song “I Need You to Survive,” with these words: “One of the most powerful ways the church offers us to be one with another is through music...And I’d like to say that as we endeavor to be a community standing together, affirming the worth and dignity of black lives, we must enter the songs of black lives with humility, curiosity, and first we must endeavor consciously to resist the temptation to colonize it with the changes that make us more comfortable inside of it. If we can be present to black faith and black faiths, then in solidarity we might enter into the blessed relationship that allows us to deserve to be called allies. In this sense, sing this song with me with curiosity, with humility, and with joined faith.” [See video](#) at 34:35 mark.

ⁱⁱ A reference to the song, “In that one word, Love” composed by Ted Pease for First Parish in Wayland with lyrics adapted from Lydia Maria Child: “In that one word, Love lies the cure of all the ills and the wrongs, the cares and sorrows, the crimes of humanity. From the highest to the lowest, everyone feels the influence of love. (*Refrain*) There is no limit to love’s power. Love can banish crime and make this earth a Garden of Eden. *Refrain*: Love is the divine vitality/ That everywhere produces life/ Restores life. Love gives to each and every one of us the power of working miracles, if we will.”