"Intersections of Power"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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"It was the 1960s, and the civil rights movement was something happening on TV. We didn't think it had anything to do with us." So writes Doug Muder, a white man, in a recent UU World essay entitled, "Of Course I'm Racist."

In his indifference and in his racism, he was not alone. Did you know that in the 1960s, a Gallup poll showed that only 28% of Americans thought ""sit-ins" at lunch counters, "freedom buses" and other demonstrations by Negroes" *helped* "the Negro's chances of being integrated in the South"? 57% felt such activism was *hurting* their chances. Then, in a poll Gallup took two years later about the proposed March on Washington, 60% were *unfavorable* to the mass march. Indeed, in a 1966 survey, 85% of whites felt that mass demonstrations by blacks had hurt their advancement of civil rights.

I wasn't alive in the 1960's. But I grew up hearing stories from family about race riots in Pontiac and Detroit. These stories left a clear impression of my family's fear of black men and women...as Doug Muder wrote, "wariness and suspicion were just common sense."

But, as I grew up, I began to hear other stories. When I was 13, Martin Luther King Day was observed for the first time in the nation. Stories of the March on Washington, the sit-ins at lunch counter, and of mass marches conveyed King and the Civil Rights activists as heroes. In becoming a Unitarian Universalist, I proudly discovered our history of engagement in the 1960's civil rights. Dr. King himself spoke to the UUA General Assembly 51 years ago, delivering a talk entitled, "Don't Sleep Through the Revolution."

Looking back, I begin to wonder what future generations will say of our current moment? How will *our* activism on issues of race appear in 50 years? Will they be dismayed to learn the statistics of support for the Black Lives Matter protests—that 55% of those surveyed thought the movement distracted from real issues of racial discrimination or that only 32% had mostly positive views of the movement?

I wonder what those of us who may be alive in 2067 will remember of our current moment . . . of a Trump presidency. . . of a white supremacy gathering in Charlottesville that left one women dead. Will we look back at 2017 as the beginning of a resurgence of white supremacy or as an era of fierce resistance? Or both?

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What if we look back a *hundred* years to 1915 when President Woodrow Wilson welcomed the showing of the film, *Birth of a Nation*, to the White House. As I have described in another sermon, this film's portrayal of hooded white knights rescuing pure white women from the threats of crazed black men is recognized as fueling the 20th century resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan. Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, a black woman, references this connection in her comments following Charlottesville, "The white supremacist movement in the United States believes it is on the verge of a comeback, 100 years after one of its constituent groups, the Klu Klux Klan, first enjoyed the favor of the White House—just as it does now."

Now we are here. 2017. 100 years from Birth of the Nation. 50 years from the March on Washington. 5 years from the shooting of Trayvon Martin, a black teenager in a hoodie walking home with a packet of Skittles. Where do we go next? Does it have anything to do with us?

As you may know, the Town of Wayland is very, very white. According to the census.gov 2015 figures, Wayland is 86.2% white and 11.8% Asian. The remaining 2% of residents identify as mixed race (either Asian/white or African-American/white) or as Native Hawaian or other Pacific Island. Additionally, 2.2% identify as Hispanic or Latino/a of any race. That's a pretty white context.

Of course not all of us live in Wayland. Some of us live in Weston, Lincoln, or other nearby towns that often have similar, very white, demographics. As a community, First Parish in Wayland reflects this predominantly white context. This raises a number of questions. *In what ways is our culture shaped by whiteness?* Rev. Karen Armina writes,

> "Culture is simply everything that's around us. At some point in our lives, we learn that there are other ways of being. Our human tendency is to think that ours is better than theirs. When we are white, thinking that ours is better is supported by the fact that our social and political systems have been built through the same frame through which we're looking...Simply put, this is white supremacy culture."

Is our (white) way always better? Have we silenced or rejected other ways of being as lesser? Do we make space for multiple ways of being? Do we make space for non-white ways of being in our world, our town, our pews?

Our predominantly white context also raises the question of whether race issues *are* our issues. If we don't have many people who are directly impacted by issues of race in our community, does it mean race is not our issue? Is it rather an issue for diverse, urban cities, for multicultural communities? For non-white people?

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You may be familiar with the feminist slogan, "the personal is political." This idea emerged in the fight for women's rights in the 1960's and 70's. In sharing their personal struggles with each other, they began to see patterns that reflected larger social issues. Then, they harnessed their *personal* struggles into *political* issues.

But this activism rooted in personal identity had a shadow side. Black women in feminist circles found that too often the personal experience of white women dominated the political agenda. For example, while white women were fighting for the right to choose an abortion, black women were fighting for the right to *have* children without policies of forced sterilization that sought to reduce 'their kind'. Despite slogans of sisterhood, race too often divided the experience of women. So also, in the fight for black Civil Rights, black women too often found themselves treated as support staff for men rather than as leaders in their own right.

Faced with such experiences, black women spoke out for an activist vision that spoke to *all* of who they are. In 1989, black legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw wrote an article on *intersectionality* that would change the direction of many activist theorists. Rather than focus on a single identity, Crenshaw argued women are impacted by multiple social identities—race, class, gender, citizenship status, sexuality. These multiple social dynamics intersect with one another so that "Different things make different women vulnerable." In other words, the struggles of a black woman with money will be different than the issues facing a poor white woman. It's not enough to focus on only race or only gender or only class. We need to explore how these dynamics *intersect*.

Rather than remain an academic concept in a book on a dusty shelf, nearly 30 years later you can find intersectionality alive in activist movements. It shows up explicitly in signs at protests that declare, "my protest will be intersectional or it will be nothing." And it shows up as the philosophical basis in signs that refuse to be limited to one issue. For example, in signs with a rainbow of colors that proclaim in each of the multicolor stripes a different message: "Love is love. Black Lives Matter. Climate Change is Real. Immigrants Make America Great. Women's Rights are Human Rights."

While critics denounce protests with multiple messages as unfocused and ineffective, proponents might explain how the issues of gay civil rights, black civil rights, climate change, immigration, and women's rights intersect with one another. They might explain how climate change impacts people of color more significantly or how gay civil rights, Black Lives Matter, and women's rights are linked by a resistance to the white, heterosexual male as the norm for what 'human' means.

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Rather than relying only upon one's own personal experience to motivate activism, an intersectional framework calls us to consider *how to make the political personal.* What does the experience of an unarmed black teenager killed in Florida or Ferguson have to do with us? How do we take a political issue like mass incarceration and make it personal to our lives?

Becoming a divorced, single mom marked the turning point in my own understanding of social systems and the inequality of power. Until that point, life as a white, middle-class, Christian girl who excelled at school was pretty easy. Doors opened relatively easy for me with education, employment, and a sense of possibility. Then, as a single mom, I began to see how my grad school assumed students did not have children or did not have sole responsibilities for their children. From academic expectations of attending evening lectures to inadequate financial aid for a family, I struggled. I began to understand that social ideals of what a family looked like shaped institutions and social expectations.

As I came to see social barriers that I never noticed until they impacted me, I began to wonder about the barriers I could *not* see . . . the barriers to race, to being truly poor (not just grad school poor), to being gay. I began to see the dynamics of power and oppression.

And what I saw wasn't a simple picture of single issues. In my research on single parents, I learned that the median income for single parent households was lower than married households in every racial category. What I did not expect was that a white, female-headed, single parent household had a higher median income than married African-American household. While my marital status could be a source of oppression and lost possibility, my racial identity still gave me privileges. Exploring single issues would not be enough; an intersectional analysis was needed.

An intersectional analysis of the dynamics of power operating today in the U.S. makes clear: racism *is* our problem because racism is part of *the* problem of inequality. Our U.S. culture and our UU culture emerged from assumptions and institutions of white superiority over the lives of black and indigenous persons. This white supremacy is woven throughout intersecting dynamics of power that continue to have implications for who is more likely to have inherited wealth, access to good schools, or spend time in jail.

There is work to be done to battle legacies of white supremacy as well as an active resurgence of an ideology that believes some humans are better because of the color of their skin. Whatever our racial identity, this fight belongs to all who believe in a world in which human lives are to be valued with worth and dignity. It is a movement that follows

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the banner of Black Lives Matter not because only black lives matter, but because black lives have been those oppressed as 'less than' by a system where white lives are seen as better...as supreme.

Rev. Bray McNatt writes, "If you didn't know, now you know." What do we do with this knowledge? We are in different places in our understanding and in how we might learn to understand more. *Perhaps we pick up a book from the social justice library on mass incarceration, immigration, or Dog Whistle Politics. Perhaps we volunteer at the UU Urban Ministries and build deeper relationships with people of color. Perhaps we speak out in support of affordable housing in our town, especially housing that prioritizes marketing to people of color. Perhaps we try to understand the intersecting dynamics of race and class in the string of mass shootings by white men. Perhaps we pick up a Black Lives Matter button or sign during Coffee Hour today. Perhaps you approach the Lydia Maria Child committee with an idea for deepening our community's understanding of race and white supremacy. Or, perhaps you help to start a Racial Justice Task force at First Parish or in your town.*

I don't have all the answers, not for myself personally as a white woman and not for us as a congregation. But, what I do know is that racism and white supremacy are not simply happening out there on T.V. or on Twitter. They do have something do with us, with all of us who seek to build a more just and equitable world.

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