

# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from May 18, 2008

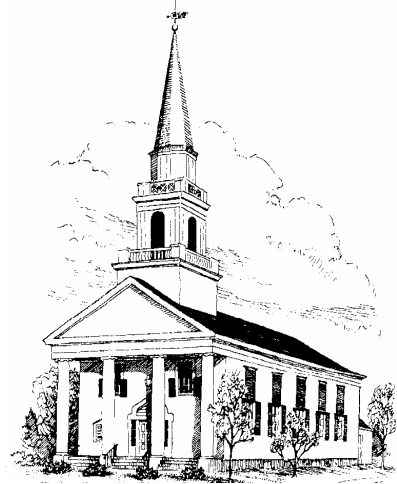
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

### “Starting a Sacred Conversation About Race”

Scriptures:

Psalm 8

Genesis 1:1-2:4a



**T**his Sunday, many pastors across the United Church of Christ are preaching on racism. Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, has encouraged this national dialogue in order to foster a spirit of healing and unity in our churches and in our communities.

While much has been said during the past few weeks about the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., this dialogue among our members is intended to be a larger conversation, one not focused directly or exclusively on the recent controversy that has been in the news, but we acknowledge this controversy has certainly been influenced by it.

Let me be clear as I begin. This is not a political discussion about candidates or their pastors. My decision to open this sacred conversation is not to debate the issues of this year's election or to argue about the wide variety of views that have made the press and television coverage of the election.

In my opinion we have reached a tipping point about race in this country. It seems to me that this tipping point has been brought about by a host of quite varied events. Yes, the current election has been a part and so has the fallout from Hurricane Katrina and our increased awareness of the vast inequalities in this country.

I believe that the building of the ship the Freedom Schooner *Amistad* and all the bringing to awareness of events and pieces of history surrounding that ship and its cargo have raised consciousness about racism in this country. I believe that the ongoing education and attention to the Holocaust helped raise consciousness around the world to racism. I believe that the civil rights movement of the 1960's and the powerful work of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. contributed to this tipping point. I believe that situations of ethnic cleansing in various parts of the world have also brought to our attention the ongoing effects and injustice of racism in its many forms. I believe we can no longer ignore the matter of racism and not bring it into the light of day for discussion.

Gatherings of UCC clergy around the state of Connecticut have, in recent days, begun a similar dialogue and conversation as we prepared for today's focus on racism in our churches. Many of these clergy gatherings have agreed that we need to do more work together on these issues, and so we have agreed to continue to meet and carry on these conversations around Connecticut.

It is my hope that we begin a much needed and sacred conversation on racism because it's time. It's time that such a dialogue take place because this sort of dialogue and conversation needs to happen in our homes, in the hallways of power across our country, as well as in our pews and with our congre-

gations. My hope is that Mystic Congregational Church will begin an ongoing process in order to set aside the necessary time and attention needed to continue this sacred conversation about race and racism in our lives here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will look for your feedback on this matter.

These sorts of “sacred” conversations are never easy. Such sacred conversations are not easy, especially when such conversations clearly ask us to confront our own nation’s painful past. Such sacred conversations are not easy because they ask us to speak directly to the injustices of the present day and our own implicit part in those places. Sacred conversations can, and often do, honor the value of diverse life experiences. These sorts of dialogue and conversation require an openness to hear each others' viewpoints. Growth in each one of us happens when honest conversations are communicated in a respectful environment.

We cannot wrap up sacred conversations about race and racism in a single sermon or in a single conversation. This morning, we are just beginning what I hope will be an ongoing dialogue about race and racism.

How do we begin to talk about racism? How do we define racism? How do we get a handle on such a huge subject?

Our reading of the creation story from the Book of Genesis for today invites us to begin by taking seriously that all human beings were, and continue to be, created equally in the image of God. In the 1<sup>st</sup> creation story that opens our Bible, we watch God create an orderly world, a world that God deems good over and over again. We see a world where God assigns tasks to each part of the creation and only after much is created does God then create we human beings in God’s image.

Please note that this vision of a divinely created world does not talk about humans of different ethnicities or races. This vision of a divinely created world starts with the idea that all human beings (all earthlings) are created equal and in God’s image. If every human being bears the image of God then we each stand in a special and protected relationship with God. If we are all created equal, then racism suggests that something is broken in the human relationship when we do not treat one another equally.

Let’s acknowledge first, then, that racism is something that keeps us separate from one another. Another way of looking at this is to suggest that we human beings exist in and for relationship. Our “calling”, if you will, is to be in good relationship with one another and with all of creation. Genesis reminds us that God created us to take care of the creation and one another.

Racism is a denial of relationship. Racism separates us from what God calls us to be. We know that racism then is when we don’t treat one another as equals or when others don’t treat us as equals. One common definition of racism is culturally-sanctioned strategies that defend the advantages of power, privilege and prestige.

We all know that subtle and not-so-subtle forms of racism, prejudice, and discrimination cause great difficulty and heartache to billions of people not just here in the United States but around the world. I think we can agree that there are inherently racist systems, structures, and attitudes in the larger society of these United States as well as around the world.

There’s nothing new about racism. Racism has been around for a very long time. Racism exists and is perpetuated for any number of varied reasons, not the least of which is that there are advantages to having power, privilege and prestige. Racism exists because there is power, privilege, and prestige in this world and we earthlings seem to thrive on power, privilege and prestige. Racism exists because we

seem to want to control others, because we may like to think we are better than others in some way or another.

Jesus acknowledged in his own culture and time that there was rampant racism. He spoke about the inequities among the various peoples of his day. Jesus knew that his day had issues of racism and sexism and ageism and Jesus spoke strongly against these inequities that his culture in the first century perpetuated.

I do not believe that any of us here are overt racists and yet I do believe that we have much to learn about our own racism. Perhaps in the coming weeks we can begin to share our own stories about how racism has impacted our lives. Perhaps we can share our own stories about how we came to acknowledge and awareness of our own racism.

One way we might become more aware of our own racism is to consider what it is like to be of a different color in this country. Even in the year 2008 there are clearly things that we may never have to face as folks of mostly Euro-American descent. As a “white” person, here are some of the things that I have never had to experience, never had to really even think about, because I live in the cocoon that my white skin affords me (*these examples come from a book called Racism in the United States by Miller and Gar-*ran):

*I can consistently expect to be in the company of people of my own race—at work, at church, at school, in leisure.*

*I can expect not to be followed when I shop.*

*I see people of my race widely represented in the media in a positive light.*

*I was taught from the get-go that people of my race had created a civilized and advanced culture.*

*No one thinks of me as a “credit to my race” when I excel at something.*

*When I buy “flesh-colored” band-aids they actually come close to the color of my skin.*

*No one expects me to carry the burden of educating other races about being white.*

*Being white and understanding white culture is taken for granted and I do not have to explain what it is like to be white when I am in the company of people of other races.*

These are only a few examples of a place we might start as we begin to think about our own inherent positions of power and privilege and prestige as mostly Euro-American folks. God created each of us in God’s image and God wants us to be in relationship with one another. As we begin this sacred conversation about race together, let us strive to share each other’s pain and joy, let us remember our unity in Jesus Christ, and let us remember that we all belong to God. Amen.

