

The Next Step in the Work of Antiracism

UUCSC Service Homily Text * May 29, 2022

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Good morning! Thank you for taking time from your holiday weekend to come today. What a beautiful day and a welcome opportunity to share with all of you what our Anti-racism Group is doing. Thank you everyone who has had a part in bringing this service together: Barbara and Barbara, Mike and the choir, Nick and Penny. And Johnnie Rodriguez - always over my shoulder, encouraging and guiding all of us in this work.

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Preparing this service has made all of us who are involved appreciate the work of our staff and Worship Committee, who do this regularly and make it look so easy.

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I am feeling both excitement and discomfort at this moment

- excited to bring some of the work of our Antiracism Group to you,
- but also discomfort — knowing that some of what I say today may bring up for many of you strong feelings, conflicting feelings.

Warning, this is hard, uncomfortable work - being anti-racist.

Our group was initiated on Zoom - in June 2020 by then Rev. DL Helfer, in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd by police. While countless other Black people - Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, Elijah McClain, just to name a few - had met a similar fate at the hands of police — this time there was a overwhelming feeling of urgency to do something more - something more than our ongoing Racial Justice work.

The isolation during the Pandemic slowed us down - it created a space and a need for community - a community where we could process this event historically and currently.

So we came together and with lots of hiccups and bumps in the road, we mastered meeting on Zoom. During the first year we met every Monday. Now, we are meeting twice a month on Mondays and continuing our work to become anti-racist.

We began to see differently, as we listened with new, willing ears to personal stories of current mistreatment of Black and indigenous people at the hands of the police -- in schools -- and in public places. We quickly realized that the problem was much bigger than a policing issue.

The underlying tenet of antiracism, according to scholar Ibram Kendi who, by the way, is the Ware Lecturer at the UUA General Assembly next month, is the

basic belief in our humanity - that all races and ethnic groups are equal and deserving of the same **opportunities - key word, opportunities.** But he says, we must do more than **believe** that premise: **the most important part of anti-racism is to do something to make it so.**

We at UUCSC have begun - we have adopted an 8th principle - and I repeat it here as a reminder that this is spiritual work:

The eighth principal reads - *we are journeying toward spiritual wholeness -- by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community -- by our actions that accountably dismantle racism -- and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions."*

How do we do that? How do we move beyond reading and believing it? How do we **live** that 8th principle? I feel that is clearly stated - **By our actions.**

One action to start with is to **seek the truth**, and realize that sometimes it hurts, but we must know it in order to move forward.

As we examine our present day institutions for historical inequities, we come to understand how - the tendrils of slavery, including the period of **separate but equal**, - and the **Jim Crow era** stretch into the present. Most **glaring** is how we have been complicit by looking away, and how **we did not pay close attention.**

As we learn and understand that things are wrong, it is harder to look away and accept the status quo. Listening to Black and Indigenous Americans tell their stories of insult--, discrimination--, and suspicion—based on their skin color, helps us respond with appropriate and supportive action.

But, the far-right resistance is strong, well funded, and pervasive - cleverly framed linguistically to stir up **emotional responses on the face** to hide the underlying issue of racism.

All of this backlash is a clever distraction to occupy us from focusing on undoing systemic racism. Our challenge? To **NOT** look away again in silence. We need to be at full attention to this development.

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Perhaps you recently have seen news reports of reparations and reconciliation efforts for US slavery. If we are serious about undoing systemic racism, the next step is to rise above the chaos and have a discussion about **REPARATIONS**.

How many of you know what REPARATIONS for slavery is about?

REPARATIONS is generally defined as the making of amends for a wrong one has done, by paying money to or otherwise helping those who have been wronged.

Black and indigenous Americans were NEVER paid for the labor they provided that made white people rich and built the American economy. They were kidnapped, beaten, raped and worked to the bone to in order to increase the wealth of their

masters, valued less than people with white skin – a myth that perpetuates today in some circles and influences personal behavior and policy.

Even after the institution of slavery was abolished, the myth of Black inferiority persisted, most remarkably in the denial of Black citizens the same opportunities as white citizens to build wealth. Black and Indigenous Americans have been asking for centuries to be seen as fully human and to be paid back for all the ways that we, collectively the United States of America, have benefited and continue to benefit from their exploitation. **They want justice, as well as equitable representation everywhere.**

You may notice some visceral reactions in your mind or your gut to my suggestion that reparations are the necessary next step. I invite you to be curious about your reactions as you consider what we're being asked to do by Black and Indigenous Americans. Does it feel right? Unfair? Scary? Impossible? I'm asking you to pause and consider what it would mean to take the next step in righting the wrongs...

Reparations is a concept rooted in international law. It involves specific forms of **repair** to specific individuals, groups of people, or nations for specific harms they have experienced in violation of their human rights.

There are several precedents where cash reparations have been paid: to individual Japanese Americans who were wrongly **interned** during WW II, Holocaust survivors and their children, and in post Apartheid South Africa. The concept of reparations is not new.

Talk of reparations in America goes back well before slavery was even abolished, starting with the Quakers and other abolitionists.

In the final months of the Civil War, an effort toward reparations was made - 400,000 acres of land from Confederate landowners was ordered to be divvied up into 40 acre parcels and given to newly freed slaves and their families. Immediately following Lincoln's assassination President Johnson rescinded that order and Black **people who were already settled on the land, were turned out without remorse.**

What a missed opportunity in so many ways! Can you just imagine what our country would be like today, if that immediate compensation had been paid? That 40 acres could have given the previously enslaved people a chance to provide economically for their families and a chance at "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," our founding principle. We could have moved toward a more perfect union.

Further constitutional rights were stripped away in the Jim Crow era, when Black people were subjected to a regime of racial terror and were **legally** systematically disenfranchised and economically strapped through the GI Bill, redlining of neighborhoods, loan discrimination, and educational inequities, which persisted into the 1960s.

With the passage of the Civil Rights Bill in 1965, discriminatory practices became illegal - but a 13th Amendment loophole and the “war on drugs” created another legal **pipeline to prison** for **mostly Black men**, who were again exploited by American corporations for free labor while incarcerated.

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These legal policies created an enormous **racial wealth gap** between average white and Black Americans today. I’m not talking about salaries or wages here, but how much wealth a family accumulates over time - generation to generation - it’s called **median family wealth**.

In 2019 the median family wealth for white households was \$171,000 compared to \$17,600 for black households. **\$171,000 - \$17,600**. Just think about that gap.

You might be thinking... **Things appear better today and we often hear**, “We’ve come a long way, we’re getting there.” For example:

- redlining is now illegal and being enforced;
- We've elected a Black president and now a Black/Asian VP;
- an official Juneteenth National Holiday has been established that marks the end of slavery;
- implicit bias training and race relations work has begun in business and industry.

While these are all good things, and some Black Americans have achieved much, but so far they have not affected the bottom line - **the racial wealth gap**. We are not getting there.

Data since 1982 shows the racial wealth gap is widening. And I repeat ... **\$171,000 vs \$17,600. Average Black Americans are not making up for the years of economic oppression no matter how hard they work.** Systemic racism must be addressed in substance at this economic level, not just in symbols.

It's wealth, not wages, that gives opportunities for **owning homes, establishing businesses, and getting through unexpected crises.**

The injured are becoming more vocal, and for good reasons. As uncomfortable or painful as it is for us to listen to the frustration in their voices, we must. **Are we willing to explore our own discomfort, or will we look away again?**

There are several approaches to reparations for slavery in America. It is not an easy task and is fraught with complications, disagreements among and between Blacks and whites.

Reparations can be approached from both the national and local level. Let's look at the national first...

The National Reparations movement, founded in 1898 focuses on recognizing **descendants of enslaved people** for monetary compensation. On the other hand, The Black Lives Matter movement pushes for payouts for all Black people.

There is a bill in the US House of Representatives to create a federal commission to study "the lingering negative effects of the institution of slavery" in the U.S. - HR 40, harkening back to the original 40 acre promise. After being introduced for 32 straight years with no action, HR 40 was moved out of committee in 2021, and is awaiting a floor vote. Black scholars of reparations want the bill strengthened and push to keep the emphasis on a **national solution** for the debt America owes.

Local initiatives bring a different perspective to reparations. They are trying to repair damages by mitigating the effects on targeted areas with a more recent emphasis on urban renewal and its effects. - Evanston, Illinois, California, and even our capital city of Providence are tackling the issue.

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Some reparations experts worry that these city and state efforts will detract from the need for national reparations - the need for the US government to **acknowledge, assess, and compensate** Black Americans for the harm that the institution of slavery and subsequent federal laws and policies have caused them. Only the Federal government can afford the payout of this debt. However, other activists think it is worth supporting local efforts to keep the focus on the need for reparations across the board.

Some argue that **not reparations but reconciliation** - the restoring of friendly relations - should be the focus - Reconciliation is the healing of a relationship after a wrong or a hurt has been done. But Black thinkers, academics, and writers are clear: **Repairing the damage as much as possible has to be part of the restoring of friendly relations.** Just saying sorry or feeling bad while avoiding accountability for individual or collective contributions to the violation is not reparations; there must be monetary compensation for the harm done, accompanied by **acts** of repair and restitution, combined with **efforts** to leverage power, influence, and resources to ensure cessation and non-repetition. Simply writing a check is not reparations.

No one can dispute that reparations and reconciliation is a process - much easier to achieve between two people, and harder when groups of people have been wronged, and even harder when the injury was so long ago.

The work of the UUCSC Antiracism group has been threefold:

1. **First, to LEARN - Learn** by exploring antiracism literature and our own histories as they relate to benefiting from the labor of enslaved people;
2. **Second, to EDUCATE - Educate** the congregation and share the antiracism resources that our congregation and others can use to unearth and acknowledge their own histories; I encourage you to explore the resources on the UUCSC website, under the Black Lives Matter link. And to go to sources you don't normally go to: black and indigenous writers, playwrights and screenwriters, even of fiction - a good source of new perspective.
3. **Third, to ACTIVATE - Activate** UUCSC to become an antiracist congregation!

We encourage you to:

- a. Please join our Antiracism group on Zoom for discussion at any meeting, as you are willing and able. We are an open group and welcome newcomers or drop inners.
- b. Be vigilant about who you support for public office.
- c. Bring up reparations in conversation with friends and relatives to stimulate thought about it.
- d. Support Black and Indigenous Americans' success in business, politics, and education.

- e. Be generous today as we pay it forward to a local group - the Mixed Magic Theatre, whose founders are here today.

The Racial Justice Committee sees our becoming an antiracist congregation as love in action. Not love as a feel-good sentiment, but love as rubber-meeting-the-road action. Our 8th principle calls for it.

It is obvious what we have to do, **if we are to save this old house metaphorically**, as Barbara mentioned in the opening words. The foundation needs shoring up, before the rest can be reconciled.

May it be so.

For Video clips from the May 29, 2022 Service, please visit our [YouTube channel](#).