

Justice Sunday

by Rev. Don Garrett

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When I was a boy, I loved my country. Growing up suburban in the 50's and 60's as a Lutheran, Cub Scout and Boy Scout, there was no doubt that we were the greatest country in the history of the world, a moral force for good – or, as Superman would put it, for “Truth, Justice, and the American Way.”

I was so sold on all this that when I attended my first protest march against the war in Viet Nam, I attended as a counter protester. I even wrote my first protest song in favor of the war: “Last night I fell asleep in this lousy bunker and I dreamed about my family back home. By day I'm on patrol, and by night I face my soul. And I wonder if its really right or wrong.”

Well, there you have it. Even back then you could see me coming. I was engaging ethical and philosophical ambiguities at the age of 16 and it seems that I haven't changed my ways yet.

But I was fully immersed in the American mythos: we were the good guys. Columbus discovered America. The Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. We had slaves but the Civil War set them free. The Indians were noble people who often did bad things so we had to kill them to save our homes and families. You know the story – it goes on and on and there appear to be many who still believe. Except that I'm no longer one of them.

For me, discovering the ugly truths behind the Viet Nam war was just the beginning. One by one, my beliefs were shattered as the veil of illusion slowly lifted. We annihilated the native peoples we found on this continent – no wonder they fought back. The Jim Crow era followed slavery, maintaining the historical oppression of dark-skinned people. We played king-maker in international politics, influencing elections and assassinating the leaders we didn't like. It turns out that we never really lived up to our ideals. Like many thirsting for self-esteem, we told a story about ourselves that served to mask the real intensions of our founders to create a nation of, by, and for, a privileged white male elite.

We're currently facing the ascendancy of the darker side of our nature that has been present all along. Hate crimes are on the rise. We're seeing growing anger and intolerance toward Muslims, Jews, and African-Americans in our midst. Groups that once operated on the margins in relative secrecy are flaunting their hatred publicly. We're seeing swastikas again. Jewish cemeteries vandalized, and the most needy amongst us – immigrants and refugees – are demonized as threats rather than welcomed.

There's so much of this going on around us that it can be hard to know what to do. But we do know that action is necessary. For those who doubt this, I offer this first-person account of a playground incident by a Kelly Brown Douglas, the Susan D. Morgan Distinguished Professor of Religion at Goucher College in Baltimore. This is just one example, but it's so good that it stands for many.

Douglas wrote: "My son was about 2 years old. I had taken him to the park to play in a Flintstones-like car that was in the park's playground. This particular park was next door to an elementary school. After being in the park for about 15 minutes, what appeared to be a class of first graders recessed into the park. Two little boys, one blonde-haired the other redheaded, ran down to the car where my son was playing. Seeing them coming, my son immediately jumped out. Soon the two little boys began fighting over who was going to play in the car. My son looked on with the fascination of a 2-year-old. The little redheaded boy, who seemed to be winning the battle for the car, saw my son looking. He suddenly stopped fighting for the car and turned toward my son. With all the venom that a 7- or 8-year-old boy could muster, he pointed his finger at my son and said, 'You better stop looking at us, before I put you in jail where you belong.' This little white boy was angry. A black boy had intruded upon his space. My son was guilty of being black, in the park, and looking.

"I was horrified. Before I could say anything to the offending boy the white teacher, who was in earshot, approached. She clearly had heard what the little boy said to my son. I expected her to have a conversation with the little boy and to make him apologize. Instead, she looked at my 2-year-old son as if he were the

perpetrator of some crime, and said to the little boys, 'Come on with me, before there is trouble.' At that moment, I was seething with anger. I took my son and left the park.

"As we walked away, I felt an unspeakable sadness and pain. At 2 years old, my son was already viewed as a criminal. At 7 or 8 years old the link between a black boy's body and a criminal had already been forged in the mind of a little white boy. If at 2 years old, a white teacher already regarded my son as a troublemaker, I feared what the future might bring.

"On that afternoon I was clear, if I had not been before, about the stories that I would have to tell my son if he were to be proud of his blackness in an America that, as James Baldwin puts it, 'spell[s] out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways possible, that [he is] a worthless human being' because of his blackness. I knew the stories that I would tell him if he were to be psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally whole when a white culture has been 'deliberately constructed to make [him] believe. . . ,' that he is inferior.

" 'In every generation,' James Baldwin says, 'every [black] mother and father has had to face that child and try to create in that child some way of surviving this particular world, some way to make the child who will be despised not despise himself.' And so it is, that every black mother and father has had to be nothing less than a griot to their children — telling the stories of people and their God.

"You are a sacred child of God. God loves you. There is no one greater than you but God." This was the first story that I told my son, even when he was too young to respond. I told him the story of his divine connection. It was this divine connection that assured his enslaved forbears they were not created to be chattel. For their African faith taught them two very important things: All that is comes from a great High God, and all that comes from this High God is sacred. Clinging to this faith, they knew that though they were enslaved, they were not slaves and that no matter how the world may treat them, God would always regard them as the sacred beings that they were.

"It was this fundamental story of black faith that I wanted to sow deep within my son. I realized that if I was to prevent the denigrating pieces of white inhumanity

from being ‘implanted deep within [him],’ then he had to know the story of faith that has helped black people ‘in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieve an unassailable and monumental dignity.’

“ *‘Remember, you are somebody. You come from a people who not only survived a history of terrifying assaults upon their lives, but triumphed.’* From the moment that he could take it in, I told my son the story of his people. These were stories ‘of men [and women] men who picked cotton, dammed rivers, built railroads ... [and were] some of the greatest poets since Homer,’ even as they faced the most horrifying realities of white racism. For I knew that if my son was to not be trapped in the mediocrity or criminality that white America wanted for him, then he needed to know that he had the DNA of a ‘a sturdy stock of people’ to triumph over the evils of whiteness.

“So now what are we supposed to do?” This was a text I received from my son after he saw the video of Philando Castile being killed by police officers for no readily apparent reason, even as Philando had followed the ‘strategies for staying alive’ (hands on steering wheel, say nothing, do nothing, comply) that black parents routinely give their children if ever confronted by the police. I called my son when I received his text, so I that I could really hear what his words were trying to impart. What I heard was a sobering awareness of what it meant to be black in America that could too easily become hopeless resignation. Hearing this in his voice, I recounted the stories I told him of the strong black people he came from who have never given up and stayed the course fighting for a different world — if not for themselves, for their children. I ended our conversation by saying, ‘Stay strong, be vigilant, guard your life, and keep fighting for yourself and for your children. And always remember, that I love you, and most of all that you are a sacred child of God.’ With that, he said, ‘Yeah, thanks and I am glad that I am black.’ At that moment I smiled, for I knew that the stories worked — that denigrating piece of white culture that tried to destroy his very soul had not taken root within him. Yet, even while smiling, I had tears in my eyes, because I knew that while his soul may be safe, his black body was still at risk. My mind went back to that day in the park.

“From that day on I knew with extreme clarity the stories I would have to tell my son to keep him safe and healthy. I wondered, however, what stories the mother of the angry white boy was telling her son. That young white boy who threatens to throw my son in jail will grow up continuing to see my son as a criminal who does not belong in his space without stories to interrupt the image that white America has fixed into his imagination of black bodies. And, that child will grow up to be more of a threat to my son than my son will ever be to him. And worse yet, without the stories to interrupt the ‘whiteness’ that is America, white boys and girls will grow up believing that the only way they can be who they are is by diminishing who my son is.”

Douglas agrees that “Audre Lorde is right. [She wrote that] ‘Raising Black children — female and male — in the mouth of a racist, sexist, suicidal dragon is perilous and chancy. If they cannot resist and love at the same time, they probably will not survive.’ Through the stories I have told my son, I have tried to provide him with the fortitude to resist the denigrating assaults of white America so that he can love himself regardless. But at the end of day, I cannot keep him home sheltered from a white world constructed to destroy him. And so I pray that white parents will muster the courage to tell their children stories to interrupt the lies of whiteness superiority and black inferiority that has been for far too long the American story. Until they do, none of our children will be safe. At the end the of the day, the stories we tell matter to the very lives of our children.”

Douglas indicts every single one of us who has ever regarded a black person as being uniquely dangerous. This is something we can do while still holding on to our belief that we are committed to equality. We can say things to ourselves like, “We’d like to be fair, but we need to protect ourselves.” How different is this from the thinking that led to the genocide of America’s first peoples?

Our American ideals can unite us and move us forward toward a future where fairness and justice are treasured and lived rather than used as window dressing for our darker feelings of scarcity, vulnerability, and fear.

But if we look at American history, the times when moral goodness was in the ascendency all have had one thing in common: they were moved by fundamentally religious values – even more, by the very best of Christian values. I believe that the road to reclaiming our essential goodness as a nation requires a groundswell of religious fervor. It's the only thing that has successfully motivated major changes in American culture. It's what has kept our darker side in check.

Outrage at the excesses of the late 19th century's robber barons and monopolies produced the powerful Social Gospel Movement, with its rallying cry, "What would Jesus do?" And it was abundantly clear what the answer was. Jesus would care for the poor, the sick, the weak, the prisoner, the widow, the orphan rather than choosing to profit from the suffering of the disadvantaged and oppressed.

This movement provided the moral basis for Teddy Roosevelt's trust-busting, breaking up the hurtful 19th century business monopolies. This fervor also led to women's suffrage and prohibition. Prohibition taught us that we can't legislate a narrow version of morality, but it was well-intended as a positive, compassionate change.

In the 1950's and 60's, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the American civil rights movement and helped to move us forward toward greater fairness, inclusiveness, and justice. But it's only too clear that the movement faltered after his assassination as it shifted to a more ethical issue rather than a religious one.

I believe that we need to make our peace about our differences with more traditional religious communities so we can join them in working for America's transformation and healing. When Dr. King was a student in Boston, he and his wife attended the Unitarian church there. He admitted that his personal beliefs were more like ours than those of the Baptists, but he believed that, in America, that Christianity was the only institution that had the passion, power, and depth to move us forward. He said, "I want to be on the field, not in the bleachers."

Today I invite you to consider whatever resistances you might have to Christian theological language and find a way to hear it and use it as a force for good as we unite to reclaim our American ideals. The Rev. Barber's Moral Monday

movement, now including the Healers of the Breach, are showing us the ecumenical way.

We're doing a lot of good right here in our congregation. Our Social Action program includes

- Fourth Friday Film series
- Syrian Refugee Project
- Food Pantry
- HAVEN - our LGBTQ teen social group that meets here weekly
- Bethlehem Emergency Sheltering - caregiving to homeless men in church gym every Wed., Dec-March
- UUPLAN - the UU Pennsylvania Legislative Action Network.
- UU UNO - The Unitarian Universalists have an office in the UN and this year we are sending a teen delegate to their spring conference.
- We also support LEPOCO, a local well-established organization that is politically and socially advocating for peace.

These are great projects that are already making a difference. But I invite you to think bigger, to dream more boldly, and to join together in common cause with the Christian community as well. We may have lofty ideals, but the history of America has shown us that – like it or not – religion is the only moral agent powerful enough to effectively oppose the forces of hatred and bigotry amongst us, and the only force brave enough to call those forces evil. May we find common cause and work together – not to make America great again, but to make America whole.

May it be so.