

"With Malice Toward None"  
 Sermon Presented by Margie King Saphier at United First Parish Church  
 March 2, 2003

Our ability to identify racism and interrupt its cycle requires a high degree of compassion, and even more, internal vigilance ... internal vigilance about our own thought patterns, our own perceptions, and our own interpretations of what is going on around us. It is those thought patterns, those beliefs that determine whether we indulgently "savor the sweet taste of our own joy or share in the bitter cup of our neighbor," and choose to serve.

So I invite you this morning to listen to the many thought patterns - stories - that have shaped this country. In the following Buddhist saying, Listen to how we can be co-creators in the world:

The thought manifests as the word.  
 The word manifests as the deed.  
 The deed develops into habit,  
 And the habit hardens into character.  
 So watch the thought and its way with care  
 Born out of concern for all beings.

Mr. Jones [whose name I have changed] stood before me, tears streaming down his face, "You can't understand!" he exclaimed, "he is my man and they killed him." I stood there stunned. All day I had been grieving the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and now one of my clients who had shared so much of his painful tragic life, shut me out. "You can't understand! You are not Black!!" I stood there on a street in Schenectady, New York as a public health nurse, wanting to bridge the chasm that at that moment so clearly divided us, but I knew it was not possible.

My grief was real, but Mr. Jones was right. I was not Black. I had not been the object of racism. I had not experienced the personal pain and suffering that this mean-spirited sin causes. Being a public health nurse in Schenectady was my first job in my chosen profession. As I worked with the bureaucracy of city hall and various other agencies for the betterment of my clients, I learned only too well the ugly meaning of bigotry.

I knew that Mr. Jones shared a history with Martin Luther King, Jr. to which I had been a witness, and at times an unwitting contributor. As we stood there in the pain and awkwardness of that awful truth, I felt my shame rise. I remembered growing up in the 1950's in Haddon Township, New Jersey, a suburb of Philadelphia. At that time I thought I knew all about the injustices of racism. Whenever we visited my grandparents in Florida, my family talked

about the injustices of the Jim Crow laws in the South. We supported African Americans in their struggle for justice by donating to the NAACP.

My family and I were able to see the racism that prevailed in the South, but we were blind to the racism that happened right under our noses. Three blocks from my home was a tiny village known as Saddlertown. After the Civil War, Mr. James Saddler, a Quaker, deeded a portion of his land to freed slaves. When I was growing up, this little village contained at most ten, and maybe only five, very run down houses, that lined the only street in the village. The street was not paved; the homes had no electricity. Water was supplied by a central well at the end of the street; there was no indoor plumbing.

This little settlement was tucked out of sight. It was almost invisible except in two ways : The few children who lived there attended the public school and Saddlertown had more than its share of fires. Sadly I don't remember the children, except for "Shorty" who was great football player. Because of him our high school football team was undefeated. But the village was better known for the number of fires it had. I vividly remember the fire trucks with sirens blaring flying past our home. As they turned right to go to Saddlertown, we would all knowingly nod our heads, "Oh, it's Saddlertown."

I remember asking my mother why Saddlertown had so many fires. She described a grim picture of poverty, kerosene stoves and kerosene lamps that were less than safe. What amazes me to this day is that at the time we accepted this dismal state of affairs as "how it was." Although we were quick to point our finger at our white brothers and sisters in the South for their grievous sins of Jim Crow segregation, it did not seem to occur to us that the citizens of Saddlertown deserved the same town services as the rest of us.

So as Mr. Jones looked at me crying saying, "You don't understand, he's my man. You are not Black," I had to sadly admit that he was right. Mr. Jones had lived in cities, in which the color line was as well defined as it was in Saddlertown. I lived three blocks away from that color line. Those three blocks made all the difference in the world. I had running water, plumbing, electricity, telephone.

One might argue that my family's attitude of benign neglect reflected the times in which we lived. And I would fully agree. I think it is important to realize that "because of the prejudice and racism inherent in our environment when we were children, we cannot be blamed for learning what we were taught

intentionally or unintentionally. But I would argue that as adults we have the responsibility to identify and interrupt the cycle of oppression."<sup>1</sup>

We are a country that has struggled in the past and struggles today with the inherent tensions between two democratic beliefs: equal rights for all and the freedom of the individual. Historically, participation in democracy did not include women, slaves or those who did not own property. As radical as The Declaration of Independence was for its time in the promotion of individual freedom, our constitution made **unequal rights** legal. It is a legacy that still reverberates when we begin to address full equality under the law for the poor, for people of color and for sexual minorities.

In its growth and evolution our democratic process has had to wrestle with the conflicting interests of individual freedom and the inherent equality of all people. In the story of the Amistad, the slave ship, in which the slaves mutinied against the crew, the issue was the freedom of the slave holder to have slaves versus the inherent dignity of the slaves. Because of Steven Speilberg's movie production of The Amistad, many of us were able to witness the legal arguments of the time.

The two men who defended the opposing points of view were, by the way, Unitarians. John C. Calhoun of the South argued that to make slavery illegal interfered with the slaveholder's individual freedom. On the other side, John Quincy Adams defended the inherent dignity of the individual and his rights.

Our democratic process has become more inclusive since the days of Adams and Calhoun. Gender and race are no longer determining criteria for the right to vote. But a dynamic democracy is more than the right to vote. How do we bridge the tensions between the equal rights of all individuals and the freedom of the individual? How do we create a community that holds these often conflicting interests?

When John Adams drafted the Constitution for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, he believed the answer to this question was public education. Adams wrote, "Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people" was necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; therefore he declared it was the duty of the government not only to provide education but to "cherish" its interests. Adams understood that inequities within society were inevitable, no matter the political order. Therefore Adams was adamant that the survival of the rights and liberties of the

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Talking About Race," Harvard Education Review, (Vol. 62, No.1, Spring, 1992), p. 4.

people depended on the spread of wisdom, knowledge and virtue among ALL people.

In his Second Inaugural Address Abraham Lincoln understood what was needed when he said, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and for his orphans, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." Lincoln was talking about healing of the wounds of a nation that had just come out of a Civil War. We, as a nation, are still in need of healing. We have not lived up to the generous spirit of those words. African Americans have fought in every war, starting with the American Revolution and including the Civil War. Time after time, war after war, African Americans fought and died for the nation's agenda only to see the nation ignore or reject their issues - their basic rights. On the Op-Ed pages of this week's New York Times (2/24/03) and Boston Globe (2/26/03), there were three Op-Eds that serve as clarion calls warning that our democracy is at risk.

Derrick Jackson wrote "the nation has yet to truly join African -Americans on the mission to rid the United States of its quiet weapon of mass destruction: bad schools for the poor and discrimination for striving African-Americans with the same qualifications as white Americans."

Once again as the U.S. is about to go to war, President Bush recently initiated action that results in the thwarting of the socio-economic rise of African Americans and people of color by filing a brief to the Supreme Court opposing University of Michigan's affirmative action program. I might add this action is from a president who benefited from affirmative action in the form of being granted admission because he had "a legacy" - his father is a graduate of Yale. He doesn't understand that his white privilege is institutionalized affirmative action.

Bob Herbert of New York Times (2/24/03) suggests that at first glance the current challenges to affirmative action in higher education are nothing more than some white applicants asserting in court that they were illegally denied admission to law school because of preferences given to racial or ethnic minorities. But Herbert states this effort is far more insidious, treacherous and dangerous. He refers us to a book by Lee Cokorinos, "The Assault on Diversity: as Organized Challenge to Racial and Gender Justice." In preparation for this sermon I tried to get a copy of this book, but it will not be available until April. Cokorinos documents that these initiatives are largely driven by a huge, complex and extraordinarily well-financed web of conservative and right-wing organizations that in many cases are hostile, not just to affirmative action, but to

the very idea of a multi-racial, pluralistic society. The driving force behind the Michigan University cases is the Center for Individual Rights, a right-wing outfit that in its early years received financial support from the Pioneer Fund, an organization that spent decades pushing the notion that whites are genetically superior to blacks.”

Fortunately there are many mainstream individuals, groups and some of the nation’s largest corporations who have filed briefs with the Supreme Court IN SUPPORT of Michigan’s effort to save its affirmative action programs. They know the United States is a better place after a half century of racial progress. BUT we cannot rest on the efforts of others. If we do not oppose these efforts they may succeed in rolling back a half-century of progress toward social justice and a more inclusive society. Our democracy is like a breathing system that expands and contracts. We always need to be vigilant, especially when democracy begins to contract. This is a time of contraction.

Our civil liberties are being compromised. Anthony Lewis of the Times warns that President Bush has taken steps that radically impinges on fundamental civil liberties. The measure that gravely threatens constitutional rights is the arrest and indefinite detention of Americans without trial and without access to a lawyer. The president has power to seize and hold any American whom he designates an “enemy combatant.” Two Americans are now held in solitary confinement under this asserted presidential power. One, Yasser Hamdi, was found under unexplained circumstances on a battlefield in Afghanistan. The other Jose Padilla, was arrested on arrival at O’Hare International Airport in Chicago after spending time in Egypt and Pakistan. Both are being held in isolation. They are not allowed to speak to a lawyer. They may not see their families. Lawyers appointed to act for Mr. Hamdi and Mr. Padilla challenged their detention. The United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, in Richmond, VA, made the first appellate ruling – against Mr. Hamdi. It held that the constitutional guarantee of the right to counsel in “all criminal prosecutions” did not apply because Mr. Hamdi was not being prosecuted. That is truly a specious Catch 22 argument!! He could be there forever!

I find it noteworthy that the one other American citizen arrested while fighting with the Taliban was John Walker Lindh, but he had right to counsel. I guess we can assume he had access to legal representation because the U.S. government chose to prosecute. But it is also worth noting that Lindh is white and from an educated and affluent family. My jaundiced inference regarding the handling of Lindh is speculation, but it is based on the historical racists actions of this country that persist to the present.

I often think of my former patient, Mr. Smith, because there was another reason he was right when he said "He is my man," meaning I did not have a claim to King. Of course none of us can claim another; but we can be a kindred spirit. The last year of King's life, I was uncomfortable with his message. I no longer felt we were kindred spirits. On April 4, 1967 at the Riverside Church in New York City, King declared his dual citizenship to the United States and to the world community - "To the brotherhood of man." For the first time he publicly declared his opposition to the U.S. waging an immoral war on the people of Viet Nam. King urged us to move beyond "interrelated flaws of militarism, materialism, and racism." I didn't get it. Even though I was not for the Viet Nam War, I wanted King to stay in a box in which I perceived him to be. I wanted him to only talk about injustices to African Americans - where he belonged. I didn't realize King was talking about the injustices, as well as addressing the CAUSES of these injustices. He was RIGHT where he belonged. BUT at the time, I found his words overwhelming.

I have Dale Bryan to thank for reminding me just how uncomfortable I felt with Dr. King's message. At the UU Social Action Council commemorating Dr. King, Dale preached on King's Anti-militarism legacy and how difficult it was for most white Americans - even liberals - to accept. King was a prophet calling us to see the inherent injustices in our way of life. During King's last year of life, he called for "a revolution of values ... for a significant change in American life and policy. He told us we had to change from a "thing-oriented society" to a "person-oriented society."

Listen to his prophetic words now:

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies.... A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: 'This is not just.' It will look at our alliances with the landed gentry of Latin America and say: 'This is not just.' The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: 'This way of settling differences is not just.' America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war."

It is hard to believe that those prescient words were spoken two generations ago. They are even truer today.

As I stand before you today, I can say I am no longer uncomfortable with King's words. I am not overwhelmed by the magnitude of what he asks us to do. Instead I am hopeful! We can make this time of risk into a time of opportunity. This does not need to be a time in which democracy contracts! We need to be committed to the belief that each person's inherent dignity requires equal treatment. There is much work to do. But we can take comfort from the knowledge that there are people who do not want to lose the gains of the past 50 years; instead they want to build on them. In Friday New York Times, ExxonMobil had a large printed statement explaining why they promote affirmative action in the business place while stressing their belief that the government has a central role in promoting racial progress.

We can never take our democratic system for granted. We need to enter into communication with the democratic belief that each and every one of us is distinctive, singular, and unique. People are making their voice heard. I look at the pictures of the people through out the world and in the U.S. demonstrating for peace and I think of the words spoken by Dwight D. Eisenhower, U.S. general and 34<sup>th</sup> president, "I like to believe that people in the long run are going to do more to promote peace than governments. Indeed, I think that people want peace so much that one of these days governments had better get out of the way and let them have it."

May it be so.