

Sermon EcoDespair 1.5 Racism d3 to print: Racism in America

Thank you for attending Berkeley Friends Church today. I welcome the opportunity to speak once again from the lectern. There is a scripture reading, but it will come later in the course of this sermon. Get ready. This is a long sermon on a complex topic. Even so, there is a lot more to say than I can cover today.

During the turbulence of the past month, following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, I have felt some urgency to address the topic of racism in its specifically American context. I feel daunted by this task, due to the complexity of the racism, intertwined, as it is, with many aspects of our history and culture. It is inevitable that I will leave out important material, and it is likely that I have major blind-spots myself. Nevertheless, I hope that my thoughts today will provide some ideas for further discussion and study.

I would also position this sermon as a continuation in the series of sermons that I began in September 2019 on the topic of eco-despair. This refers to the despair that many of us feel due to the economic inequality on display almost everywhere, as well as the ecological disruption that we perceive. These economic and ecological factors are, of course, amplified in the context of the Covid-19 epidemic. But long before Covid-19 appeared, racism has been a central factor, certainly in economic inequalities, but also in the ecological impact of polluted water, air, and marginal food, found in many communities of color and communities of low-wealth across this country and the world. Therefore, racism is a central component of eco-despair. The persistence of violent racism 60 years after the Civil Rights movement provides yet another source of despair that may characterize our era. The recent demonstrations against the most overt forms of racism manifesting as police violence against Black men and women and demonstrators is an astonishing development. And it would be a dramatic improvement if the current outcry against police violence could generate lasting changes in both policy and behavior in policing. Even so, racism goes far beyond its manifestation in police violence, and we risk settling for too little if we seek to curb only the most violent forms of racism.

In discussing racism, I have been admonished that as a white man, I should tread cautiously and recognize that I know little about racism, having been insulated by

white-skin privilege. I take this admonition seriously, and most of the ideas presented here are drawn from contemporary writers and activists who have given racism serious thought and study. If I have anything useful to say, it is only because of these efforts of others to research, organize and condense a massive amount of information and experience into a coherent framework that we can begin to discuss. This is an amazing effort that spans several centuries but it has certainly accelerated over the past 85 years since the publication of WEB DuBois' book *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). In *Black Reconstruction* DuBois refuted the claim that the Reconstruction era following the Civil War was characterized by inept leadership from elected Black officials. He places the failure of Reconstruction on the white society that resented and hated competent Black leadership – something that we might find again in the current decade.

Where I may have something original to offer is with my interpretation of Biblical sources. While I am no great scholar of the Bible, I do approach it differently than do most Christians, as you will see later. In the contemporary dialog on racism, I have seen relatively little discussion of what the Bible may have to say on racism. I will try to explore the topic of racism in the Bible today.

It would be sensible, I suppose, to ask, “What is racism in America?” American racism is certainly not the only form of racism that the world has known, but it is the form that concerns us today. One contemporary spokesperson who we might consult is Dr. Robin DiAngelo, a sociologist and author of a book entitled *White Fragility* (A book, by the way, that some Friends at Strawberry Creek Meeting have begun to study). Robin DiAngelo says that racism is “multi-layered, complex, infusing everything. [You] don’t have to understand racism for it to exist. In fact, most racism is implicit and unconscious.”¹

Dr. Angela Davis, professor emerita at UC Santa Cruz, says that racism is a system of interlocking parts that burdens certain people, notably Black and Brown people, with economic disadvantage, psychological stigmatization, and bodily harm. Dr. Davis emphasizes that racism is not primarily personal, but systematic. “Racism,” she says, “is not a personal narrative alone. Larger forces are operating through individual emotions and consciousness. The social world always exceeds our ability to comprehend it.”² I take this to mean that no one can simply choose

¹ “Dr. Robin DiAngelo Discusses White Fragility” on YouTube [2018-6-28]

² “A conversation on Race and Privilege with Angela Davis and Jane Elliot” on YouTube

not to be racist; at best, one can choose to begin not to be racist. Before one undertakes a difficult task, it pays to ask what the task involves, and that in turn, may require extensive preparation. You can't become an astronaut simply by wearing a space suit.

Like the decision to be Christian, the choice to counteract racism is a lifelong commitment. A Christian cannot decide to be free of sin; at best, one can choose to begin to be free of sin, and that only with grace. Racism is not something you can easily remove like taking off a coat; it more like taking off your skin.

Dr. Robin DiAngelo argues for an expanded definition of the term racist. She feels that much of our resistance to understanding racism is due to a narrow and threatening definition of the word racist. Since the Civil Rights era, the term racist brings up the image of Governor Lester Maddox of Georgia, holding an ax at the Pickwick Restaurant, trying in vain to preserve segregation. In other words, the term racist has come to mean a murderous hatred of Black people. Given this association, most people recoil at the suggestion that they could be racists. However, Robin DiAngelo asks, "What if [the term] racist simply meant that you don't object to the current order of society and your place in it?"

In her presentations, Robin DiAngelo discusses ways in which she, too, embodies racism and expresses racist assumptions, presumptions, and behaviors. I think this is a constructive approach. As with Christianity, we need to recognize that all have fallen short of the glory of God and continue to do so, even if we are Christians. It is only by acknowledging our sins and failings that we can make headway in overcoming them – and that with grace. As Jesus said, Repent, and the Kingdom of God is at hand. To me, this means that whenever you repent, you get a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, and the more you search for things to repent about, the closer you will get to the Kingdom. But bear in mind that repentance is more than regret, it involves actual change in behavior. The same could be said, I think, of any decision to eliminate or to challenge racism. You have to actually search out racism before you can begin to alter it, and it is not a once and done affair. Moreover, you can make more headway if you assume that in a racist society, most people – including us Quakers – will have some racist attitudes and behaviors.

This perspective is amplified by Jane Elliott, a veteran in the trenches of resisting racism. She says that “the problem is not white racism; it is white ignorance about racism.”³ So let’s take a look at the origins of white racism in America.

The American form of racism is somewhat unusual, organized as it is around skin color. There are parallels in Australia and South Africa where English or Dutch settlers encountered dark skinned native peoples who were displaced by the settler colonies. In America, however, European settlers displaced Native Americans but imported Africans to work on plantations – when they could not coopt Native Americans into slavery. So in America, both the masters and the slaves were immigrants. Moreover, it took several decades for skin color to become the arbiter of racism in America and for slavery to become an intergenerational institution of servitude.

This is in contrast to slavery in ancient Rome, where skin color did not divide master from slave. Roman slavery was an equal opportunity employer. Anyone could become a slave, and wars were fought in order to enslave more people. As in American slavery, Roman masters could use slaves for sexual purposes, but unlike slavery in America, Roman masters who killed a slave could face severe penalties. Because Roman slavery was not confined to a particular group of people, it was not mediated by skin color.

When the first ship containing Black Africans arrived in Jamestown, VA, in 1619, they joined the colony as indentured servants, who were expected to work without pay for 7 years and then to be released from bondage with a certain amount of working capital. Apparently, this is what happened to the first Africans who arrived in Virginia: they worked side by side white indentured servants from Europe. Not only did they work together, but they often lived together and not rarely, they intermarried.

However, over the next decades, VA passed several laws that gradually separated European workers from African workers. In 1630, the Virginia House of Burgesses outlawed inter-racial marriages and made inter-racial sex a crime punishable by flogging. This law had a more harsh effect on women than men. White men who had sex with African women might never be detected, especially if the woman

³ Ibid.

was a servant in the man's home. However, a white woman who bore a mulatto child could be prosecuted under this law. Suddenly, the "protection" of white women took on a new urgency. This anxiety over protecting white women grew to hysterical proportions over the following centuries. It led to the death of hundreds or thousands of Black men at the hands of lynch mobs and vigilante justice.

In 1640, courts in Virginia recognized property rights in slaves and their unborn progeny. This indicates that Black slaves were being held in bondage for longer than the 7 years that applied to indentured servants from Europe, and that slavery was becoming intergenerational.

The laws of inheritance also changed, making the status of free or slave depend on the status of a child's mother. Previously the status of the child reflected the status of the father. This absolved white slave owners of the responsibility to provide education to their children born of enslaved women. Some men continued to care for their mixed-race children and in some cases to free them, but they were no longer legally expected to do so. They could treat them as slaves.

In 1643, Virginia began to tax slave owners for both their male and female slaves, indicating that female slaves were considered as productive as males in terms of field-work. Meanwhile, free women in a slave owner's household were not taxed, indicating that they did not regularly perform field-work.

In 1669, Virginia removed the penalty for a master who killed a slave in the course of discipline. Not only was there no penalty, but the colony would reimburse the master for his loss. This indicates that the severity of discipline was increasing. Moreover, when a slave was no longer productive, a callous master could replace a slave by killing the slave and then purchase a new slave at state expense.

In 1676, Virginia experiences a civil war that lasted several months. This was called Bacon's Rebellion, because the rebellion failed when its leader, Nathaniel Bacon, suddenly died of dysentery. What was significant today is that Bacon's forces included both European indentured servants and Black slaves. This inter-racial effort frightened the planters who dominated the Virginia House of

Burgesses. They subsequently devised more laws and policies to drive a wedge between Europeans and Africans.

One example of this was a law in 1680 that prescribed flogging for Black slaves who resisted direction from white indentured servants. This indicates that white servants could bully Black servants and act as overseers. It also provided someone upon whom white servants could vent their own frustrations. Of course, white servants could only be entrusted as overseers if they were willing to abuse their privilege by inflicting harsh punishment.

As we look back on the origins of American racism, we should notice that the Virginia House of Burgesses created a two-tiered work force made up of indentured servants from Europe and Black slaves imported from Africa. It did its best to divide these groups and keep them from uniting. It did so by granting certain privileges to the white workers over and above the Black workers. And it generated irrational hysteria by criminalizing sex across the color line. In this sense, white-ness was created as a reward for not being Black, but the price of whiteness is that the Europeans lost the ability to communicate with African co-workers, and thereby to seek common redress from the wealthy planters in the House of Burgesses. You could say that whiteness was the booby-prize for being respectable, but ineffectual. According to Ian Haley Lopez,⁴ professor of law at UC Berkeley, racism remains the most effective strategy in disabling the American labor movement, and persuading labor union members to vote for Republican candidates.

This idea here is that whiteness is a social invention that appears to grant limited privilege which are granted the price of being ineffectual at challenging social elites. This idea is developed further by Thandeka, a Unitarian minister who has written several books on this theme of whiteness as a liability. She points out that the price of whiteness in for Europeans in America is to give up any ethnic identity they may have brought over from the Old Country and join the homogeneous melting pot of whiteness in America. People are expected to give

⁴ *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (2014) by Ian Haley Lopez

up their language, their accents, their holidays, their dress, their music, their customs, their ideas, and above all, to CONFORM to a patriotic celebration of the mythology of American exceptionalism, in which the Great White Fathers planted the tree of democracy, decency and decorum in the wilderness for all to enjoy. This involves, among other things, not going on-strike for higher wages. The badge of whiteness is not granted to immigrants until they can fulfill this civic obligation.

What does the Bible have to say about racism? After all, this is a sermon, and we should consult the Bible whenever possible. Well, first of all, the Bible is rather comfortable with the institution of slavery, as well as the institutional status of sexual slavery called concubines. The Bible has little to say about racism, because the American form of racism simply did not exist in the Biblical era(s).

At the same time, the Bible is remarkably color-blind, in the sense that there are only a few passages that make any mention of skin color. The most explicit verse is in Song of Songs [1:5], where a woman declares, "I am black and beautiful." However, there is an interesting passage in the Book of Numbers, chapter 12, that appears to revolve around skin color and about marriage across color divides. I'll read a condensed version of this passage:

12 [] Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman); 2 and they said, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it. [] 4 Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting." So the three of them came out. 5 Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward. 6 And [God] said,

"Hear my words:

When there are prophets among you,[]

I speak to them in dreams.

7 Not so with my servant Moses;

he is entrusted with all my house.

8 With him I speak face to face [].

Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?”

9 And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed.

10 [] [And see] Miriam had become leprous, [] as white as snow. 13 And Moses cried to the LORD, [] “Ana, El na, rafana la”, “[Please] God, please heal her.” 14 But the LORD said to Moses, [] Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again.” 15 So Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days; and the people did not set out on the march until Miriam had been brought in again.

There are several features to point out in this passage. From our perspective as Americans, the problem that Miriam and Aaron had was the marriage of Moses to a Cushite woman, the land of Cush being located in east Africa. The presumption is that the wife was Black. However, the text does not actually specify a reason for the uproar. Could it be that Moses did not marry a Jew? Not likely; his first wife, Zipporah, was also not Jewish. The Talmudic commentators also did not seem to recognize a racial issue in this passage; instead, they focused their attention on evil speech – what we would call slander and gossip. Miriam, they said used evil speech in criticizing Moses, and this is why she was punished. As we reflect on American racism, we should notice that a massive amount of evil speech is an essential element in maintaining racism, so this passage in Numbers is indeed relevant to us, as we grapple with racism in America. Miriam’s punishment is instructive as well; Miriam was turned white. This indicates that Miriam was not originally white; in fact, she is horrified to find herself as white, and so was everyone else. Whiteness is viewed here as sickly. Another thing to note in this passage is that Moses had married a woman from East Africa. This alone indicates that the prohibitions on interracial marriage, a central feature of American racism, are not based on Biblical practice nor on Biblical instruction. If the pre-eminent prophet of the Old Testament can marry an African woman, then how can you say the Bible is opposed to interracial marriage? Of all the prohibited marriages listed in Leviticus, Chap 18 and 20, none of them involves skin color or ethnicity. Strange then, that in the system of racism that developed in America, sex and marriage across racial lines was the pre-eminent offense and provocation for summary execution. However, there is nothing logical in the working of the human mind, particularly when it involves group psychosis.

This passage from Numbers is confusing and strange, but it is far more coherent than the principle Biblical passage that has been used to justify enslaving Black people from Africa. This is the so-called “curse of Ham” found at the end Gen 9, just after the Rainbow is specified as a sign of God’s covenant with Noah. The “curse of Ham” episode does not mention skin color at all; the only association with Africa is that the Bible associates the descendents of Ham primarily with Africa, including the nation of Cush. Without dissecting the “curse of Ham” in detail, suffice it to say that Noah suffered – or perpetrated – an unspecified offense of a sexual nature while intoxicated. When he sobers up, Noah curses, not Ham, but Cana’an, Ham’s son, with perpetual slavery. Somehow the curse directed at Cana’an applies to Ham as well, even though this is not found in the Biblical text at all. The Biblical text offers no reason for Noah to curse Cana’an. Moreover, the descendents of Cana’an are not associated with Africa, but with the Middle East. In short, this is a confusing, nearly psychotic text about the curses of a drunkard; it has been applied in self-serving ways to justify enslaving people from Africa. It does show that the Bible can be misused to justify horrific policies and behaviors. And moreover, there are many passages in the Bible that are vague, misleading, or overtly inhumane. As Elias Hicks reminds us, the Bible is a dangerous book when it gets into the wrong hands. And those can be Christian hands. The “curse of Ham” is a prime example of how a confusing passage of scripture was used to justify a system of slavery that terrorized millions of people and haunts us to this day. There are parts of the Bible that should be excised, but it is easier to change human nature than to change the Biblical canon. Therefore, all we can do at present is to approach the Bible with some level of suspicion even as we study it carefully; for the Bible is a flawed document.

As we reflect on the legacies of racism in America, I think it is both pertinent and inevitable that we would think about original sin. Indeed, slavery is often called America’s Original Sin. There is something tenacious about slavery and racism that defies logical or rational analysis. Could Original Sin be the hidden culprit behind racism?

So what is original sin? The music I selected today, [In Adam’s Fall All Men Fell]⁵ provides a quick review of Augustine’s theology of the Fall. Regardless of how we explain the Fall – or whether we call it a Fall – we are left with the glaring evidence of our collective and individual failing, particularly in the realm of race relations. Not only are race relations vexing, they appear to have regressed since the Obama presidency, and perhaps in reaction to the Obama presidency. The

⁵ Originally “Durch Adams Fall Ist Ganz Verderbt.” The text by Lazarus Spangler predates 1525.

stubborn persistence of racism is a separate evidence – beyond the racism itself – that we are unable to extricate ourselves from deep-seated sin. We have indeed fallen below our own expectations of our capabilities, not to say that of God’s expectations.

I would suggest that the core aspect of original sin, regardless of how it came about, or how it is transmitted from one generation to another, is acquisitiveness. We cannot resist the alluring beauty of forbidden fruit. But more important, we cannot resist the advantage that we might gain over another person to get their obedience and labor. Once we get that advantage, we usually hang on to it for all it’s worth. This advantage may consist of academic titles, royal titles, professional privileges, a lower tax rate such as the capital gains tax, a V-8 engine, or a rent-controlled apartment. Whatever floats our boat keeps us alive, and in some cases, prosperous. Certainly, few things are more advantageous to prosperity than access to perpetual servitude embodied in slavery. Little wonder, then, that the Confederacy was willing to wage a brutal war to preserve slavery, and when it lost the war, it continued to recover as much perpetual servitude as it could from the descendants of slaves. And the Confederacy was not the only group that sought advantage from the servitude of Black, Brown, or poor people. Even though slavery is officially past, low-wage work is growing in popularity as the next-best thing. It is almost incomprehensible to imagine how economic life could exist without a high degree of servitude born of desperation and despair. So, this too, is evidence of a deep disconnect – a Fall -- in the social fabric in which we live.

[Note: my point in the last two paragraphs is to suggest that “Original Sin” is inseparable from human motivation and the economic structures of a society. The boundaries are porous. Ultimately, “Original Sin” is an empty concept, but one that is hard to avoid.]

Similarly, the hope for a post-racial world is hamstrung on a basic contradiction. We want universal inclusion of races, but can we tolerate others who don’t share this particular value? And moreover, can they tolerate us? After all, “they” have more guns and know how to use them.

Where we can go from here is not clear. Many Christians have the conviction that the Jesus has already repaired the human condition by His sacrifice and resurrection. He has fatally wounded the Powers and Principalities that control

our world from on High. All we have to do is to wait for this fore-ordained victory to manifest. But this same theology can lead to a dubious optimism that bypasses the need for genuine effort required to repair and change the world. I take direction not from this airy speculation,⁶ but from the example of Wm Penn, who said that true religion does not lead people out of the world, but into the world to repair it. And Penn practiced this precept in a way that few have surpassed. Even so, our predicament is more complicated than Penn would have anticipated. And dare we say it, Penn also owned a few slaves himself.

In Conclusion: I will summarize in 10 points:

1. Racism is both an individual and an institutional construction.
2. We cannot end racism if we only address the individual component through conventional morality.
3. Even so, we cannot omit personal responsibility in the equation, so change will require both individual conviction as well as a broad and sophisticated analysis.
4. Conventional Christian morality, which is based in shame, fire and brimstone thundered from the pulpit, cannot rise to the challenge we face in ending racism. In fact, violent racism has co-existed quite comfortably with violent religion for centuries in this country.
5. Moreover, a close study of the Bible will not help in ending racism for the simple reason that the kind of racism which developed in the United States was never present in the Biblical era(s). The Biblical writers would have been astonished that anyone would claim moral superiority on the basis of skin color; they would have thought it to be completely insane to do so. But because they never encountered this form of insanity, they did not address it.
6. However, intergenerational insanity is exactly what we face with American racism, and therefore the Bible will not be a great assistance in confronting it, because the Bible does not address it. We should not be surprised, then, that one of the bastions of racism is fundamentalist Christianity. Fundamentalist are entirely correct to see that the Bible does not forbid racism, and it actually endorses slavery.
7. Even so, God has inspired contemporary prophets who are grappling with this complex social dysfunction. In terms of practical direction, I think we would do well to support the National Poor People's Campaign, a Call for a National Moral Revival, organized by Rev. William Barber and and Rev. Liz Theoharis. And if you don't have time to read a lot of books on racism,

⁶ In early Quaker speech, "airy speculation" was term of derision for speculative theology.

you can learn a lot by listening to KPFA Radio on a regular basis. Then, there is a tremendous amount of information on YouTube.

8. We would do well to pay attention to the signs of *our* times⁷ and to discard the deranged apocalyptic Sci-Fi found in the Book of Daniel and in the Book of Revelations. They were written for another age and serve only to distract us from the issues we confront today.
9. None of this will happen easily; be prepared for a long haul.
10. Even so, we should be encouraged by recent developments on the streets of this country in recent weeks. This is indeed a time to reinvigorate our search for an end to racism in America.

⁷ See Mt 16:3b: You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.