

What We Can't Say; What We Don't Say; What Needs to Be Said
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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INTRODUCTION: No Admission, No Redemption

Here's a good question: Can the United States ever get past its racist beginnings: What many have called "America's original sin"?

When we look around, it's easy to despair. How many committee meetings in how many cities have occurred since the murder of George Floyd? Yet how many young people of color have been murdered since the death of George Floyd?

It's easy to despair.

Yet, #we are not a people of despair. The climate crises. Racism in America. Broken systems. Unjust systems. We are a people of hope.

We are a people who say, "Human beings can fix human. problems. What can we *do*?"

And, what we find when we embrace that sort of commitment to action is that there is always something that can be done.

ONE: From the Get-Go

After all, we believe in evidence. Here's some evidence we can work with from a website called *Pediatrics Nationwide*:

Researchers have shown that babies of color are just as likely to experience bias as adults of color. But very young children don't interpret that experience in the same way as older children.

Children become aware of differences in physical characteristics of human beings when they are 3 years old. They notice differences in sex (male vs female) height, weight, hair texture, skin color and so on.

These differences in physical characteristics are all normal human variations, and by age 3, children are aware of them," says Adiaha Spinks-Franklin, MD,

MPH, attending physician in Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrics at Texas Children's Hospital.

By age 4, children are aware of the social construct of race. They begin to recognize their own racial group and those of others. Depending on home and community experiences, they may start to discriminate between certain human variations in selecting playmates.

Children at 4 years of age are still in an early stage of racial identity development, where children of color tend to relate more to the dominant culture - in the United States, white American culture - rather than their own culture. This is called the "Pre-encounter Phase of Racial Identity Development for children of color," Dr. Spinks-Franklin explains.

Children at age 9 years become aware of their racial groups' status within larger society. For children of color, this is called the Encounter phase. By this age, children are aware if their group is treated unfairly or differently - or if their group is in a position of power. The Encounter phase is a big developmental leap because it occurs during many other aspects of identity development - including gender identity development.¹

Notice that:

Children at age 9 years become aware of their racial groups' status within larger society.

That's what I'm getting at here: Yes, we all know that "race" is a social construct. A *damaging* social construct.

Further, most kids figure it out by age four and figure out the social implications by age nine. (That's what *needs* to be said: Whether family and teachers talk about it or not, kids figure it out. *Early*.)

I'll come back to that . . .

¹ Abbie Miller, "How and When Do Children Become Aware of the Construct of 'Race'?" *Pediatrics Nationwide*, October 10, 2019.

TWO: My Bags are Packed

My bags are packed and I'm ready to go this afternoon, flying to Atlanta, Georgia. The Minneapolis Downtown Senior Clergy have planned a civil rights tour for this coming week—something we are calling The Pilgrimage: an Interfaith Civil Rights Journey.

I consider myself very fortunate to be invited along on this journey—and I'm invited because I represent YOU, the people of First Unitarian Society.

Tomorrow, Monday, MLK Day, we will be at Ebenezer Baptist Church in downtown Atlanta, the church that both Martin Luther King, Sr. and Martin Luther King, Jr. served as senior ministers. The current senior minister as you may know is U.S. Senator Rev. Raphael Warnock.

President Biden will be one of the speakers. Now, we downtown clergy are fortunate to get an invite to that historic church for the big event because the senior minister of Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church here in Minneapolis is a wonderful young pastor named Rev. Elijah McDavid III.

Elijah's grandfather, Rev. Elijah McDavid, Sr., was an influential leader during the civil rights era. Rev. Elijah has been kind enough to get our group invited to that historic church. Rev. McDavid is a person I want to listen to and learn from on lots of subjects, including racial justice.

(BTW, all of you will be getting an invite to Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church in April when we talk about the trip we are making.)

Also joining in the trip is a friend of FUS that many of you know, Makram El-Amin, the imam of Masjid An-Nur in north Minneapolis. From a historical perspective, Makram's father and mother were leaders of the Nation of Islam in south Chicago during the civil rights era, and Makram continues to be one of the most influential voices for racial justice here in Minneapolis in our own time.

Imam Makram is also someone I want to listen to and learn from on many subjects, including racial justice and what we can do here in Minneapolis.

Also joining us will be the new(ish) senior minister at Plymouth Congregational Church, Rev. Dr. DeWayne Davis. Rev. DeWayne is the child of two ministers and one of fifteen children; he grew in southern Mississippi. Some of you know that Rev.

DeWayne has been an advisor to the City of Minneapolis concerning police reform. Rev. Davis grew up both black *and* gay in southern Mississippi. Remember those stats about kids realizing their social status? I suspect that sometime during his childhood, Rev. DeWayne realized, "You're black; you're gay: get out *now!*"

Rev. DeWayne knows a lot that I want to learn.

These are three leaders I deeply respect. And I look forward to hearing their reflections and stories, and, indeed, all my ministerial colleagues are people I listen to.

TWO: Pilgrimage

We will be traveling to Selma, Alabama—*if* we can: as you have read or heard, Selma suffered major damage from tornadoes this past week. If we do go there, I will be offering the city council financial help from my Minister's Discretionary Fund that many of you have contributed to. Again, I'm representing you.

We *hope* to go to Selma, where we will be remembering Jimmie Lee Jackson, whose murder by Alabama police due to his work for voting rights led to the events that we know as "Selma."

As many of you know, we UUs have two martyrs to the cause of voting rights in Alabama, Rev. James Reeb, a young UU minister. Rev. Reeb was murdered by white supremacists in Selma, 1965.

And Viola Liuzzo, a UU layperson shot by KKK members as she drove Selma marches back from Birmingham—a white woman with black people in her car. She had to die.

As always with history, the story is considerably more complicated than the thumbnail history that has come down to us. Some of you attended the memorial service for FUS member Rev. Bill Weir some time ago.

He, too, went to Selma in 1965 as a young minister. The confusion was such that Bill's wife got a call from the Unitarian Universalist headquarters in Boston that Bill had been shot and killed in Selma.

He arrived home safe and sound, having no idea that he had been reported killed.

These were brave human beings. Rev. Dr. King *knew* he was a marked man. MLK was 35 years old when the Selma march occurred. He was 39 when he was murdered.

An important thing to remember is that even though much of this seems like ancient history, it's not.

Yes, MLK would be 94 this birthday. All of us who remember those days are getting on in years. However, what we must remember is that the work isn't finished—that's one of the things that must be said.

We in the United States *still have not atoned* for "America's original sin."

Again, that question: How many young people of color have been tortured and murdered since the death of George Floyd?

And, when I read the news about the tornados this past week, the first thing I thought of was the poverty of that area.

Selma sits in what is known as The Black Belt. That has come to have two meanings. First, The Black Belt is about the quality of the soil. Farmers know that black dirt is the best dirt. The Black Belt was perfectly suited to plantation cotton agriculture. When you think about the Old South and its cotton, The Black Belt is what you're thinking of.

After the Civil War and the end of legal slavery, the counties in The Black Belt were majority African American. (The same was true of the Mississippi Delta.) The brutality and open suppression of African American personhood was most open there because whites were in a minority. Still are.

Consequently, another thing that needs to be said is that The Black Belt is *still* one of the poorest areas in the United States. The people there are *still waiting* for their solemnly promised forty acres and a mule.

I suspect that for most Americans, if you ask where the poorest place is in the US, they would answer Appalachia. But, as someone who grew up in rural poverty myself, I can say that The Black Belt is poorer.

What's the difference? Appalachia is predominantly white. The Black Belt is predominantly African American. (Things that need to be said.)

THREE: The Possible

Life is strange. You've noticed that. My civil rights journey comes while I am work on lectures for the Minns Lecture Series. My subject has been the intersections of religion and race and poverty.

One of the things I've talked about is my own experience during the civil rights years, living in the South. I was a tiny kid. But my experience was attending fully-integrated churches.

How could that be when people were getting killed in the South for simply sitting beside each other?

For one thing, we Pentecostals were super-poor. So nobody noticed or cared. How did we find each other? Well, you just know. Take "Dolly Pond Church" for example. (And, BTW, it is only an example—it actually exists on the Tennessee/Georgia border.)

This is a contemporary sign. The sign tells people what is going on inside: "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven . . ." (Matthew 16:19 KJV). Keys to a car are nice to have. Keys to the kingdom of heaven are better.

What will you find inside?

The church is clearly in the Pentecostal tradition: "Miracle of Salvation / With Signs Following."



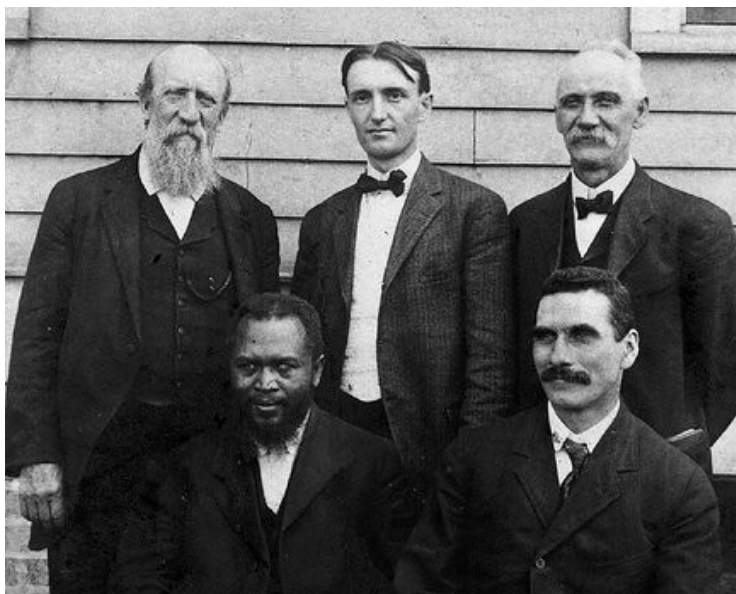
"With Signs Following." That tells those of us who know that there is speaking in tongues, slaying in the spirit, miraculous healing, exorcism, dancing in the spirit, and general holy-rollin' going on.

In the early-1960s I attended integrated churches. Why? Because . . . Pentecostalism.

No: the Universalists and the Unitarians did not achieve integration in 1904. But the Pentecostals did.

The Azusa Street Revival was sixty years *before* the civil rights marches in Alabama. Most people who look at the photos now probably don't even see how radical they are. As someone who grew up in the Jim Crow South, I can promise you that a photo of a black man sitting down while white men stood—totally unacceptable. That's a lynching offense.

The black man is William J. Seymour. Chances are you haven't heard of him. That's because we live in a racist nation. William J. Seymour *created* the Pentecostal moment that is now the fastest growing religious movement on the planet.



In photos of the Azusa Street Revival period, we see black and white people sitting down together.

Black and white people; women and men. This is 1904. The height of the lynching era in the US. Yet, in photos, you see a black man sitting beside a white woman and a little white girl. In the South of those years, that was a lynching offense. Yet, there they are, human beings together. Some of them even smiling a little, something else people didn't do in photos in 1904. In my imagination, I think one of them just said, "God is mightier than ol' Jim Crow."

White supremacists were chewin' their teeth, as we say in the South, to see something like that.

Remember that I mentioned that Rev. Dr. DeWayne Davis is the child of two ministers? As a Southerner, I don't even have to ask: Given his



age, it's because Brother DeWayne's parents were Pentecostal. His mother was a preacher.

Now, how could a bunch of poor, uneducated people achieve something that we *still* haven't accomplished in this nation more than a century later?

The answer is very simple: They believed in their bible.

Galatians 3:28 says this:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. (King James Version)

Remember that handwritten church sign: "Miracle of Salvation / With Signs Following."

Brother William J. Seymour (Pentecostals don't use honorifics like "reverend;" everybody is "brother" or "sister.") Brother Seymour, the child of formerly enslaved people, believed that "salvation" implied the loss of racism and sexism. He thought that racism and sexism are sins that can be miraculously healed with those "signs following."

CONCLUSION: Your Covenant

The title of my talk today is "What We Can't Say; What We Don't Say; What Needs to Be Said."

Now I'm going to tell you something that almost nobody knows. But it needs to be said.

Paul. As in Saint Paul, the guy the city is named after, was a good writer and a strong philosopher. Many Christians think that's because god was talking to him. I think it's because he had a unique education.

Yes, he was trained as a rabbi. He was also trained in Stoic philosophy.

#When Paul wrote Galatians 3:28, he was using a Stoic concept known as *convēnientia naturae*.² *Convēnientia naturae*³—that’s where we get the English word “covenant.”

(By the way, that’s Latin; the Hebrew and Greek figure in as well.)

#For the Stoics, we human beings must realize that we are born into *convēnientia naturae*. A covenant with nature.

What does that mean? It means that we are part of nature and we do well to live in agreement with the laws of the universe. It means getting outside our subjectivity and realizing first what it means to be human; then what it means to be conscious; then what it means to be part of the warp and weft of all of nature.

#Four year olds and nine year olds know a truth that we too soon grow up to forget: *It’s all social convention*. Nature says that there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female—because those concepts are all human creations within social structures!

The early Pentecostals figured it out. They left those pernicious human prejudices and stereotypes outside the church doors. (That’s how I grew up, even as a white kid.)

#And here is the spiritual truth that Paul and William J. Seymour knew: You can too. All of us can leave the lies that we have been told outside these doors—and out of your life.

#It’s hard work. No, we are not going to be able to escape the constant messages of difference and suspicion and even hatred.

But some people *have* managed to love, despite it all.

We can too.

² Troels Engberg-Petersen, editor. *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

³ Paul actually wrote in Greek in which the term is διαθήκη, *diathéké*. The third chapter of Galatians is about the *diathéké* through Christ back to the covenant with Abraham, ברית, *berith* in Hebrew.

SOURCES

Abbie Miller, "How and When Do Children Become Aware of the Construct of 'Race'?" *Pediatrics Nationwide*, October 10, 2019.

Troels Engberg-Petersen, editor. *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.