

Order of Service "What Difference Does Difference Make?"

Sunday, September 19, 2010 9:30 AM and 11:00 AM



Welcome

Choral Introit: "When Our Heart Is In a Holy Place"

by Joyce Poley

Chalice Lighting

Sung Response: #362 "Rise Up, O Flame"

Opening Words: "Let Us Worship" by Kenneth L. Patton

Opening Song: #318 "We Would Be One

Teacher/Advisor Installation (11:00 AM only)

"Learning" by Raven Sanders

Sing the Children to Class: "Go Now, My Children" by B. Campbell
(11:00 AM only)

Announcements: Board Host

Centering Meditation

Reading: #576 "A Litany of Restoration"

by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley

Celebrating with Music: "Sing a Rainbow" by Arthur Hamilton

Sermon: "What Difference Does Difference Make?"

Sung Response: #213 "There's a Wideness in Your Mercy"

Spoken Response

Candles of Joy and Sorrow/Offering

Prayer/Meditation

Closing Song: #1008 "When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place"
(verses 1 & 2)

Closing Words

Closing Song: #1008 (verse 3)

Please Greet Your Neighbor

Celebrant: the Rev. Dr. Gretchen Woods

Opening Words: "Let Us Worship" by Kenneth L. Patton

Let us worship with our eyes and ears and fingertips;

Let us love the world through heart and mind and body.

We feed our eyes upon the mystery and revelation in the faces of our brothers and sisters.

We seek to know the wistfulness of the very young and the very old, the wistfulness of people in all times of life.

We seek to understand the shyness behind arrogance, the fear behind pride, the tenderness behind clumsy strength, the anguish behind cruelty.

All life flows into a great common life, if we only open our eyes to our companions.

Let us worship, not in bowing down, not with closed eyes and stopped ears.

Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings, with the full outstretching of our spirits.

Life comes with singing and laughing, with tears and confiding, with a rising wave too great to be held in the mind and heart and body, to those who have fallen in love with life.

Let us worship, and let us learn to love.

Sermon: "What Difference Does Difference Make?"

Let us begin our exploration of difference with our selves. Take a moment to become aware of your body. . . Clear your mind of the busy thoughts of today. . . Now, let your inner knowing take you to a moment when, as a child, you first encountered some one or some thing that clearly was different from you, your family, your life. . . What was the difference you perceived? . . . Who told you what this meant? . . . How did you feel about the difference? . . . How did you feel about your self? . . . Now, let's return to present time.

I hope you will be able to hold this experience in your memory, exploring its impact upon you and upon your whole world view, for it is just such instances in our lives that set a tone for much that proceeds from it. Early influence is not to be taken lightly.

Dr. Thandeka, a Unitarian Universalist minister and scholar of systematic theology, has struggled mightily with understanding prejudice and oppression. Her work has been published in the book, *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America*.¹ Her research shows that prejudice and oppression within the dominant culture of the United States of America comes from what she calls "the white wound." In many intentional conversations with people of the dominant Euro-American culture, she consistently found that the first experience with a person of another ethnicity or cultural heritage was often confusing and shaming for the child. Most often, the Euro-American child was attracted and drawn to the person of another culture, fascinated by the difference in color or color of clothes or rhythm of music or style of art.

For example, my youngest granddaughter's current best friend, outside her family, is her African-American care-giver, Robin. Robin has returned to reading for the law and is not available as often to care for Lucy. Lucy grieves. Her mother, Tina, grieves the loss of a new and special friend. Fortunately, Lucy has not been taught that Robin is bad or less worthy of Lucy's love than any other human being. May she continue to live with this worldview. Certainly, Robin and Tina and Lucy have agreed to maintain their friendship as Robin's schedule will allow, and I am happy to say that is already arranged.

¹ Thandeka, *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America*. 1999.

There is no reason they shouldn't, but many other children have had a very different experience of difference that has shamed them because they were attracted to it. They have learned that they must not play with or spend time with people who are different. This leaves countless human beings feeling less than positive about themselves as well as feeling negatively about other human beings, just because of the color of their skins or the nature of their religion or the character of their music: "the white wound."

The crux of this, of course, is that difference is too often labeled wrong, shameful, "beneath us," when it is often attractive, inspiring, or, well, . . . simply different. And it is even more complicated when difference is invisible.

Take a look at the "Culture Toss" we handed out this morning. You will see all sorts of invisible differences that exist within each of us: preferences for music, religious experiences, levels of education, etc. Even in this monochromatic group of people, there are astounding differences that are essential to who each of us is as an individual. These are our cultural identities. Often, each of us is a culture clash *within our selves*, as well as in opposition to the world.

Some of these differences are sources of pride for us. Some are powerful expressions of our selves at their best. Some of them are sources of shame - or to be hidden because they might cause disapproval. Yet, each goes to a very deep understanding of who we are as individuals. When I was pondering my own sexuality, I remember a colleague saying, "You know the difference from being black or Hispanic and being gay? You don't have to tell your parents." We laugh - but think about the implications of that for a sensitive person, either way.

When I first was exposed to the concept of "cultural identity" by Marjorie Bowers-Wheatley, who created the "Litany of Atonement" we read together this morning, I realized how little I knew of my own cultural identity . . . and I had been studying the effects of oppression for decades by then. How rarely we begin with our selves! . . . especially if we are part of the dominant culture.

How does this come to be? Well, for starters, if we are part of the dominant culture, we have a certain amount of inherent power, just by virtue of a chance of birth. I shall never forget when my younger son came to me in tears when he was nineteen years old. He was distressed because he learned from a required class at the Evergreen State College that he had powers and privileges simply because he was born male and white. We will explore this a great deal more on November 7. He was devastated and ashamed. What will it take to change our world so this does not happen? We will continue exploring that for the rest of this church year.

Clearly, power combined with prejudice creates oppression of those who are deemed "less than." It allows certain groups to feel entitled to burn the Q'uran or to hang black folks or to beat up and leave for dead one small white man who was gay. It allows a few to determine "final solutions" for millions in the form of genocides. It instigates book burnings and the shooting of abortion doctors.

Who gets to decide what is good and what is bad among differences? That comes from power and the cynical wielding of it. One of the most horrifying stories of oppression writ by the powerful is the aftermath of the burning of Jamestown by "Bacon's Rebellion" in 1676. What is often not explained is that the burning of Jamestown was carried out by African slaves and white indentured servants who joined together to fight the oppression of their European "overlords."

It is not the rebellion that horrifies me so much as the aftermath. The Euro masters of Virginia at that time, white land-owners all, with power of land and money and weapons, cynically decided that they would divide this strong coalition by allowing the white servants to beat the slaves, thus putting them above the slaves. As Thandeka notes:

The Virginia Assembly gave the white servant a number of class privileges associated with the elite: the right, for example, to whip a black servant or slave. These laws also gave protection to the poor white against the white elite by forbidding the elite to strip their Christian servants and beat them naked.²

And, of course, the elite drove the Indians away with illness and guns, commandeering their land by force. It worked!

It worked all too well and set the stage for many similar land-grabs, while never really letting the poor whites into the game any further than being allowed to abuse the blacks. And the poor whites bought it! The coalition was destroyed and power restored to its "rightful wielders."

Do you feel better knowing this? I don't! But I do understand how it worked. Power was focused in white, land-owning males. No others - no other color, gender, class - need apply. Oppression was ground into the blood on the soil of this continent.

What is religion's role? I believe that oppression flows from the inherent religious need of individuals to be "justified," to be right with their world and their way of being. This need seems to be directly related to Niehbuhr's insight that control is original sin. Human fear and need for control within any culture or subgroup is linked to the need to be the one that is right. Religion often holds out the promise that it will make you right with the world, with your god, with your self. If you just join us, all will be well. So religion becomes a twisted source of power to decide. Most of us have heard scripture used to support terrible oppression of women, "other races," slaves, etc.

But the true religion functions totally opposite. True mystical leaders of every culture intuit, not separations and stratas of justification, but oneness that transcends high and low, better and worse, rich and poor. It is this deep experience of connection that can provide much that could heal the white wound. It really ties our lives back together with our world, functions as religion by "tying our lives back together."

² Thandeka, *Learning to Be White*. p. 46.

Unitarian Universalism has tenaciously maintained that what unites us is far more important than what divides us, that difference may be a source of richness and possibility. The Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed sums it up thus: " The central task of religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice." It inspires us to share, to enjoy, and to celebrate differences among us as adding to a greater whole where difference is essential to the tapestry of Life.

It is this we study, this we serve, this we celebrate for the greater good of all. So Be It!
Omain, Amen. Blessed Be!

