

## **RACE, POLITICS AND SPIRIT**

A Sermon by Rev. John Morehouse

Jan. 20, 2008

I came to Chicago just before Harold Washington won his second term as the first African American Mayor of Chicago. I can remember the powerful feeling of this victory, all the sweeter since no one thought he would win the first time, defying as he did the powerful political machine of the Daley family. The University of Chicago is located in the heart of Chicago's south side, except for the neighborhood of Hyde Park where the University and its many schools sits like an oasis in the black sea of poverty, the South Side is home to some of America's gutsiest politicians, including Harold Washington. Washington came to office defying the machine by telling it like it is. They didn't want to hear from a black man, telling them they were corrupt and broken. He won his first term by a margin, his second by a landslide. Harold Washington had defied a political machine to raise the hopes for a city, half of whom were African American. Four days after his second inauguration, Harold Washington died of a heart attack at his desk. Chicago returned to a white mayor. (Climbing a Great Mountain: Selected Speeches of Mayor Harold Washington edited by Alton Miller)

We have come a long way since then. Now there are many more African American mayors than before, now we have black congressmen, now we are considering a black candidate for President of the United States. If Harold Washington, or even Martin Luther King, were still alive though, I know they would be worried. Because we are still a racist nation. For a while there it looked like Obama could dodge the race card, but then came New Hampshire and a vote that defied what people in the polls claimed. The race issue is still alive, as much as the female issue, I might add, and we still have spiritual work to do if we are to overcome it. I am not endorsing any candidate here. In fact, this is really above the politics... I am asking instead what do we have to do to make race a non-issue, or gender or religion? As Timothy Eagan wrote in the New York Times this week:

“For a while, it looked like Obama could be the rare African American leader whose race was nearly invisible – and he may still be. He’s post-Civil Rights, Oprah-branded, with that classically American blend of a mother from the heartland and a father from a distant shore. And after that Iowa victory speech, people felt something had passed into our collective rear-view mirror, without actually saying what that something was.

Now it looks like every mention of race – from the overblown dust-up with Senator Hillary Clinton this week to the calculated comments comparing him to Sidney Poitier – is bad for Obama. A victory in South Carolina, with its heavy black vote, will be seen as one-dimensional.

He needs people to look at him and see John Kennedy, or The Beatles, or Tiger Woods in his first Master's tournament. He needs people to see youth, a break with the past, style under pressure.

When they see black this or black that — even a positive black first — it's trouble.” (NYT 1/17/08)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. - whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow - once penned, “The racial issue we confront today is not a sectional problem but a national problem. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (Delivered at the Conference of the National Urban League, 1960 as quoted in I Have a Dream: Writings and Selection that Changed the Word, MLK Writings).

And justice is our moral concern. In fact, I would argue that in the Free Church, justice is the expression of our faith.

What will it take to overcome “the racial issue” now these many decades since MLK has passed on?

It will take us renewing our call to, as Harold Washington would say, “climb that great mountain of hope”. We are not going to see it simply dawn upon us, we will have to take this to our neighbors and friends, and say for instance “I see no reason why race has anything to do with Obama’s candidacy.” To challenge the racism of those we know who say he can’t be elected, and in fairness to say the same thing of a woman, Hillary Clinton, or a Mormon, Mitt Romney. If we believe as we do in the inherent worth of a person, then their race, gender and religion, while they inform their actions, are not grounds to reject their abilities.

What will it take to hold up what Dr. King called the “network of mutuality”? Standing down fear comes to mind.

We have the power, each of us in this room, as we prepare to cast our vote and when we are talking with those we know, to echo these words, regardless of who we see as the ideal candidate, “judge them by their character”. It is our spiritual imperative to challenge this racism today. If not you, then who? If not now, then when?

But there is one other dimension to overcome racism or any other ism in politics today. We must remember that our civil liberties are deeply ingrained in our civil religion.

We need to challenge any infraction of civil liberty as the backdrop to overcoming prejudice in our social and political lives. Any of the candidates we will be choosing on Feb. 5 in the primary and then in November need to be measured against their stand on civil liberties. This is our moral concern. And it goes so far beyond the identity of the candidate her or himself.

I would be asking any candidate black or white, male or female, Mormon, Jew, Christian or Unitarian, “What are you going to do to protect our freedoms?” What I don’t want is for the race issue to become a smokescreen for the real issues facing our great nation; security of food and shelter, the rights of all to dissent.

We are morally responsible for questioning what is happening here. Not as a right but as a responsibility. And if you think, well that is all well and good but my personal life is mess, try protesting and see how it helps you cope with your own life. We are all of the same cloth. It just depends on where you look at the pattern. You can look at the individual threads and see they are frayed or you can look at a piece and see that it is bright and worth fighting for.

This is the right of conscience and the true use of democracy in our congregations: to work towards the freedom of all people to be whom they are, to express their truth and to have their consent. It

is not so much whether we follow our by-laws and procedure but rather whether our moral laws call us to freedom.

Martin Luther King, Jr. like Harold Washington, strived to overcome racism by the character of his actions: providing for the poor and protecting the civil liberties of any of us to speak out, this was their platform beyond race. It is our spirit as well. It is required of any of us.

I recently took a cab ride, and the driver, a Latino, started talking about the presidential race. “You know, imagine that, a woman and a black man running for president. But really, what difference should it make, you know? What not Bill Richardson, a Latino? When do you stop looking at their bodies and start changing this mess? You know.” Wise words from someone making \$15 an hour.

When, indeed. Shelby Steele, a conservative African American and author of The Content of our Character: A New Vision of Race in America was on Bill Moyers last week, talking about Obama and the race card in politics. He had some interesting things to say about how Obama, like Oprah Winfrey, accommodates to our white culture. That was enough to worry me. Then he said this: “(there was a) survival mechanism (depending) on slavery and segregation. And we are still using it. We will get tired of that. Our children...will get even more tired of it. And will understand

I think that the challenge of the collective is to produce individuals.  
“(Bill Moyers Journal, 1/11/08).

I may not agree with Mr. Steele’s politics but I share his dream: that we will get beyond race and judge people by their characters. I just think it will take a long time -- it’s a tall mountain. But it starts with us as Unitarian Universalists. Are we prepared to stand against racism, to discount it as a measure of character in this political year? Are we prepared to demand instead candidates who uphold the needs of the marginalized and the right of all to dissent? Are we prepared to engage our neighbors and friends in a conversation that goes beyond race, perhaps beyond politics to the Spirit of human worth that is so intrinsic to our faith? I want to believe we are.

In one of Dr. King’s last speeches, to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967, he united his call for desegregation with the need to battle poverty for all and an end to the Vietnam War, which he saw as a machine keeping the status quo in place. He talked about “divine dissatisfaction”; it’s not enough to be satisfied with the way things are, being part of a faith means working towards the satisfaction of God, to make the crooked straight and the high places low, to make the wrong of any “ism” right by our efforts. He knew this was a task far greater than

one lifetime, a task we are all still engaged in as people of faith.  
(Ibid., MLK).

The day before he died Dr. King spoke in a Masonic Temple in Memphis, TN where he pronounced: "...I've been to the mountaintop...I would like to live a long life...I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know...that as a people we will get (there). (ibid., MLK)

We are still climbing. It's a tall mountain. While I share Dr. King's vision, I am tempered by the more down to earth words of Harold Washington "We are climbing a great mountain and we've taken the first firm steps. We may not reach the summit in our lifetimes, but men and women of good will a century from today will look back on ...this movement and say: 'I wish I had been a part of them. They had the courage to fight. The will to win. They sought goodness and they did good.'" (Ibid., Miller)

I pray that it can be said of us, that we to had that courage, sought goodness and did good.

Amen.