

YOU HAVE TO BE CAREFULLY TAUGHT

Sermon by Petra Thombs
Father's Day and Juneteenth 2018
All Souls Church, New York City

Reading:

Juneteenth is the oldest known celebration commemorating the end of slavery in the United States. It was on June 19th, 1865, that the last of the enslaved population in Texas received notice from General Granger that the war had ended and they were now free. This took place two and a half year after the Emancipation proclamation was issued by Abraham Lincoln.

It is believed that the enslaved were prevented from being free because the messenger was murdered on his way to Texas or that slave holders deliberately withheld the news to maintain the labor force. In 2014, President Obama declared that Juneteenth be a recognized national day of observance. It is a day of celebration and commemoration, a reading and discussion of history and a day of engaging in cultural traditions.

Dr. King in his American Dream commencement address to Lincoln University graduates in 1961, advocated for, "both legislation and education are required...even though morality may not be legislated, behavior can be regulated. And this is very important. We need religion to change attitudes and to change the hearts of men. We need legislation and federal action to control behavior. It may be true that the law can't make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important also".

"I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever."
Thomas Jefferson, Notes

I tremble for my country, thinking about those victimized by mass incarceration, or those who are homeless and vulnerable, hungry and unsafe, and most recently the children ripped away from their mothers and fathers at our southern border. This is history repeating itself, for we have always done these things; incarcerated the innocent, left people without proper shelter and sold African children away from their parents and sent Native children to boarding schools to unlearn their language and culture. But we have been carefully taught about a kinder, gentler America, one of hope and opportunity. Both of these pictures have been true to a degree. And careful maneuvering has allowed us to only see the picture that pleases our mainstream society.

I have spent my life's career in the New York City school system teaching special needs students their history in classrooms that I designed to be safe havens for learning, with a no bullying policy and opportunities for creativity and innovation. Children learn, especially those whose talents may be difficult to notice, to open up and blossom, gain new understanding and new skills and a growing independence; they learn when they know that they are loved and respected. Their progress is as enriching for the educator as it is for the student. My training was at Teachers' College, and I can remember all of the delicate fine points needed to understand human development. You have to be ^{carefully} taught to observe the nuances, the small moments when a flicker of light becomes the gateway to accomplishing a goal. You have to be carefully taught to see it, just as your students have to be carefully taught to experience it.

You have to be carefully taught; your attitudes, your perceptions, your beliefs. My mother would send me to visit a neighbor from time to time, an elderly, frail Jewish woman, who lived down our tree-lined block in Brooklyn. Her name was Winfred Crost. I would listen to her talk, often repeating the same stories she had told me before. My mother wanted to instill in me a sense of empathy for others. We are in need of empathy, justice and action.

You have to be carefully taught to love, to give, to have faith and to believe in a power greater than yourself, so that you will have that light to guide you in dealing with so much of the world that is loveless. I am reminded of the words of the song from the musical *South Pacific* whenever racism infects another situation and innocent people are impacted; when the police are called for Black men simply waiting in a Starbucks, or questioning a bill in a Waffle House, or barbequing in a public park, or falling asleep in the common room of Yale's dormitory. Where does the right to call the police on innocent people come from?

*you've got to be carefully taught,
to hate and to fear,
you've got to be taught from year to year,
it's got to be drummed in your dear little ear,
you've got to be carefully taught,
You've got to be taught to be afraid,
of people whose eyes are oddly made,
of people whose skin is of a different shade,
you've got to be carefully taught.*

We, as a society, have been carefully taught the history of our country in a particular way, that borders on fantasy. Or should I say alternative facts? We have been told a narrative about our origins with certain key factors omitted, left out, made invisible. Even now, the plight of the children is being constructed in such a way, that the Bible is misquoted in order to justify this outrageous policy of separating families.

When we argue over the Second Amendment and gun rights, we forget, or we have not really been told, that the Second Amendment was based on the need for landowners to prevent their enslaved people from escaping. It was required by law that every male from eighteen to 40 own a gun and keep a supply of ammunition for the purposes to participating in rolling patrols. According to author Howard Zinn, the system of slave police has not disappeared with the growth of the country — it was soon reborn in an even more violent form: the Ku Klux Klan. As historian Sally Hadden, author of the definitive book on slave patrols, explains, “The Klan is an extension of slave patrols in most direct, obvious ways... they've changed the names from patrols to Klan, they've put on sheets, but the activities and the purpose remain pretty much the same.” When we see video of police taking down unarmed black men and women or caging children, we need to be reminded of this background.

The Klan came into power after the Civil War, Lincoln's Vice President, Andrew Johnson had pardoned former confederate generals and gave them back their guns. They grew more emboldened at the end of Reconstruction when federal troops were removed from the south. A blood bath of lynching took place as the tide turned against African Americans. Policies of protection, such as the 14th and 15th Amendments, to support citizenship and voting rights failed and the march towards segregation began. In our reading, Dr. King refers to education and legislation, both are needed to create a just society. We tremble today, in seeing a resurgence of the Klan and other white supremacists' organization, especially seeing their close ties to high offices in our government.

All of this unfolding history is the evidence of what we have been taught. What has been left out are the accomplishments of enslaved Africans, these were rarely noted; that we had fought and defended this country in every war, that our labor, though stolen, provided this nation with its wealth, that the knowledge and skill in farming yielded American profits and our knowledge of plants and herbs provided healing for enslaved and master alike. No, those facts would not fit the narrative that justified enslavement. What we have been carefully taught were characterizations showing unflattering, exaggerated cartoons, elevating negative and demeaning stereotypes such as calling immigrants animals. These are acceptable norms to describe us as other, useful tools to further divide us.

Jefferson stated in his Notes on the state of Virginia, that he felt the native people to be noble and could possibly be assimilated into European culture. The Blacks, however, he saw to be inferior in beauty, reasoning and intellect and that their mixing should be avoided. His beliefs seemed to run contrary to his actions. His book was considered the single most important publication of the era. His writings on government and on race had a very strong influence – it was used to carefully teach ideas of race and racism.

The concept of race is not a biological entity; it is merely a **social construct**. It was created to keep Africans and Europeans from interacting in the way humans usually do - forming alliances around common interests, such as work, marriage, having children and preparing their offspring to survive in the world. Bill Nye was asked, "What do you get when a Swede and a Nigerian produce offspring?" His answer - a human being!

Race, therefore is not real, but racism is real. Deadly real. It is designed to divide people from each other and it does that across all lines - making distinctions personal and hurtful, causing individuals to question their self-worth. In the 1700's, a plantation owner from the Caribbean was brought to Virginia to inform slave owners on how to more effectively handle their slaves so they would be distrustful of each other and be less likely to form alliances to rebel or to run away. These tactics were designed to divide people from each other, to further denigrate and subjugate enslaved people. Slavery has existed all over the world, but slavery in this country reduced individuals to property. An important part of reducing ones' humanity was stating that children, by virtue of their birth from an enslaved mother, would themselves be enslaved. British Common law had always provided for a child's lineage to follow from the father -even if the parents were not married. This change was made in Virginia in the mid 1600's, allowing masters to produce as many children as they needed for profit by their enslaved women, in order to keep their offspring in bondage. A child whose mother was a slave had no protections, even if his father was the master. Are we repeating this history with these babes at our borders?

The words of the 3/5 compromise were written to ensure that Blacks had no voice in the new government, but their worth was counted by slaveholders and reported for taxes - as with any other property. They were considered to be 3/5 of a person. This policy lasted until the end of the Civil War, but the poisonous effects were firm in our society. We had been carefully taught that slavery was not only necessary, it was to be the cornerstone of our economy. Where would our country be without it?

Thomas Jefferson explained the practice of slavery this way, "The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this and imitate it; for man is an imitative animal." He describes the effects of slavery on the owners saying, "With the morals of the people, their industry is also destroyed...no man will labor for

himself if he can make another labor for him.” When Jefferson states, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever,” he knew the totality of the awful nature of enslavement; he feared that the enslaved would rise up and take revenge and it would be reasonable to imagine because their treatment was so horrific. Jefferson hoped that total emancipation would come about with the consent of the masters, rather than by their demise.

When emancipation came, the four hundred million rose up, not to enact revenge, but to unite with their loved ones, to seek out those who were sold away from them, to find their mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters and any possible relations. They condemned the degradation of the past, advocated for and won universal education, fought for land rights, and won seats in congress - a people who had been given nothing, sought first to heal their spirits, by finding their families, then continued to organize their lives ushering an era of tremendous growth. We have all been carefully taught that Reconstruction was a failure, yet these facts of their success showed the opposite was true. Professor William Dunning of Columbia University, promoted the idea of a failed reconstruction. He, like other supporters of Southern Redemption, felt that great harm was done to the south. He promoted the disenfranchisement of the freedmen and the legitimacy of Jim Crow.

We may have been taught that African Americans fought in the war, but we may not know that their fighting gave the Union its victory. We have been prevented from knowing that the Statue of Liberty was originally created and designed to represent that victory which the enslaved had won in the war. The artist, Bartholdi was an abolitionist, and yet nothing in the displays speak to that history. This particular issue is very controversial, and yet as one who has studied history, it odd that the idea of the statue, which came about in 1865, the end of the Civil War, followed by his first visit to the US in 1871, had nothing to do with African people. It took years for it to be completed with many fundraising efforts on the part of the Black community, only to finally have the statue and exhibit, with no evidence of that history. Dr. Joy De Gruy visited the monument and asked the tour guide about the chains on the statue. He answered the question by showing a photograph of the chains at the foot of the statue. They are there. However, there is no path to the base for visitors, they are not shown in the display cases for everyone to see, and they are not visible in any of the literature of the monument. And had he not been asked specifically about the chains, would this tour guide have mentioned it for the benefit of the group? You can only see the chains if you happen to be in a helicopter getting an aerial view. These chains are invisible to the millions of people who visit, especially to the many students of color who come and see no representation of themselves. The proof is there, it's just hidden. The artist was forced to make numerous changes, but insisted that the chains remain.

We are invisible. In the Ellis Island exhibit, the history of enslavement is made invisible. It is sanitized by the use of the term “involuntary immigration”. We clearly have an issue with the truth. Remember the narrative being constructed around separating immigrant children. This is just more of the same. Today in New York City, our school system's ongoing dilemma with equity and fairness for children is on display. Our specialized schools have enrolled only 10% of Black and Brown students, while they make up 70% of the population of students in the city as a whole. Black alumni of these institutions have complained of experiencing a hostile atmosphere in schools, from being called the ‘N word’ to having their competency questioned by students and teachers. They are being carefully taught in a place where learning about justice and social responsibility should be modeled and practiced. Given this glaring instance of segregation in our progressive city, what lesson does this teach them? Whether at the border seeking asylum or in our public schools, children are being hurt by racism. And what are we doing about it?

From our policies around policing, guns and the creation of the Klan, to the national dilemma around race and racism, our history is fraught with contradictions about how we even discuss, let alone support freedom; we need to ensure that we hold ourselves accountable.

The greatest fallacy ever promoted is that any group of people would be less than anyone else. Could any group of people be considered inferior if you need them to build your home, your plantations, your very way of life? Can they be trusted to nurture and rear your children? Can you say they are less when you entrust them with all that you own? The lesson is more about exploitation, than a presumed inferiority.

Today we encounter so many issues regarding race and, of course, the news does not cover it all. There is a new boldness to the attacks. It is disheartening. But I know what my ancestors have lived with. We continue to strive forward because we have been carefully taught to never give up and to persevere. I felt called to Unitarian Universalism because of the activism present during the Civil Rights movement. That willingness to step up and be involved made me appreciate a religious activist home dedicated to learning the truth, active in seeking justice and willing to go forward bringing light against the difficult forces in the world.

We knew Martin King's message resonated for UUs with the adoption of our seventh principle: all life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality; tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. As long as there is poverty in this world, no one can be truly rich... As long as diseases are rampant... no one can be totally healthy... Strangely enough, I cannot be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way the world is made... this is the interrelated structure of reality.

As Unitarian Universalists, we hold to this belief, pointing us to what is greater than ourselves. We have to be carefully taught to understand it, to live by it, to actively bring it into the world, for us to be made whole, and for our humanity to heal.

A blessed Father's Day and commemoration of Juneteenth. May it be so. Ashe.