

Look Away
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Because this is the third year in a row that I have spoken on Lay Sunday at the end of January, these instances have served as a kind of snapshot in time. Two years ago, I spoke in the All Souls sanctuary as we looked toward beginning in a few months our ambitious restoration project, to make sure that our fourth building didn't fall down from neglect as our first three had. Last year, we were in Friendship Hall, disappointed that we weren't already back in the sanctuary but looking expectantly toward being together there again by Easter. Today I speak with you from what has been called our "fifth building" - our online community. None of us could have predicted what 2020 would bring- the pandemic, the lockdown, the isolation, as well as a fast pivot to connecting as best we can virtually.

I think my love for New York City has been well established. I have even bemoaned not being a native New Yorker, but tried to mitigate that grief by quoting from E.B. White, who described those - like me- who were born somewhere else but came to NYC in quest of something, as "settlers," and said that we give the city our passion. This year has been very hard for this city that I love, a year of closings and preternaturally quiet city streets, a year of fear of a new pandemic illness and the loss of so many. But this was also a year where thousands of peaceful New Yorkers walked through the city streets to protest the death of George Floyd and others who have lost their lives due to racial profiling, and also the year when eight huge Black Lives Matter murals were painted on the streets of all five boroughs.

I do really, really love this city, and have generally tried to be evasive if I was asked where I was from. There could have been many reasons for that reluctance. For instance, LGBTQ+ rights were nonexistent when I was growing up, and I personally knew people who were expelled from their families for coming out. Women were definitely not equal to men - for instance, I never saw women in leadership positions in the church I grew up in, and wouldn't be allowed to do what I am doing today. But I think all along I knew the real reason I didn't want people to know I was from Montgomery, Alabama. I imagined the first thing people think of when they imagine Alabama is its history of slavery, Jim Crow era discrimination, lynchings, demanding that Rosa Parks go to the back of the bus, dogs and firehoses being turned on Black protestors, and on and on. Basically, I didn't want people to think I was racist.

But I was born in a state where the license plates as I grew up proclaimed proudly, "Heart of Dixie". As the song proclaims, I was born in Dixie, even early on one frosty morning in December. Dixie, a song written from the point of view of a supposedly happy ex-slave, looking back at better times. I can remember being taken to see the movie *Gone With The Wind* - yet another story perpetuating the myth of happy slaves and a noble lost cause - as part of our history class with my school. The large public high schools in Montgomery were - and are - named after Jefferson Davis (President of the Confederacy), Robert E. Lee, the Confederate Army general, and Sydney Lanier, the so-called "Poet of the Confederacy." Growing up, I saw the Confederate flag - the same flag that some insurrectionists who occupied the Capitol

Building on January 6th carried - not only flying over the state capitol building, but casually, proudly even, displayed widely. The story told was that it only represented pride in Southern “heritage.”

But as Ibram X. Kendi so clearly explains in his book *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, an excerpt of which was read earlier, it is simply impossible to be “not racist.” No one can be. One can only in every moment have thoughts, words, or actions that are either racist or anti-racist. And here is what I have realized: had I been born in New York City, this would still have been true. A New York City Commission on Human Rights report that was released just last year stated that anti-Black racism is present in almost every facet of life in the city. The report featured accounts from Black New Yorkers who have experienced racism in education, housing, health care, work and interactions with law enforcement and the criminal justice system, and described racism in the city as “inescapable and emotionally taxing.”

I still love New York City. But there is much anti-racist work this city needs to do, and I now realize that being a native New Yorker in no way would have protected me from growing up in a culture and society that, as Ijeoma Oluo explains in her book *So You Want to Talk About Race*, has white supremacy woven into every aspect of our lives.

Just as a person isn't ever all racist or all not racist, a city can take anti-racist steps while not forgetting its racist actions and policies. I don't go back to Alabama much. Feeling about New York City as I do, I much prefer people I love who live there to visit me here and allow me to share my city with them. The last time I was there was September of 2018, to attend a 90th birthday celebration for my father. Going to Montgomery years ago with my daughters when they were young, we had visited the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where the Montgomery Bus Boycott was organized, and seen Maya Lin's Civil Rights Memorial, letting the water rush over our hands while touching the names of martyrs in the movement carved into black granite. This time, a family member had encouraged me to go with her to the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which had opened a few months earlier. These are projects of the Equal Justice Initiative, created by Bryan Stevenson, the author of *Just Mercy*. The museum is housed in a building where enslaved people were once warehoused, a block from the site of one of the most prominent slave auction spaces in Alabama. It brilliantly and devastatingly illuminates the progression from slavery to lynching to racial segregation and the mass incarceration of Black persons, often using Montgomery's history as an anchor for telling the larger narrative. Outside the museum, in a six acre grassy park, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice uses sculpture, art, and design to contextualize racial terror. I won't go into detail about what a pilgrimage to these sites is like, but I strongly recommend the experience as a transformative one. I also visited the nearby Kress building, once a segregated department store but now a center for businesses and entertainment, including luxury condo apartments. The developers of the space left the water fountains labeled “white” and “colored” in the space in a display along with information about the building's segregated past. Rather than taking them away and pretending it didn't happen, the fountains have been left there to remind people not only of the past but of the battle that still needs to be fought for equality.

So Montgomery, like all of us, is not just one thing. Last year, the Montgomery City Council voted to change names of those three schools that were named after Davis, Lee, and Lanier - but what the new names will be or when they will be changed has yet to be determined. Perhaps as an even more potent symbol of a mixed message, "Heart of Dixie" still exists on the Alabama license plate - but now small and almost but not quite hidden, a white on white tiny heart in the lower right corner.

When the insurrectionists stormed the Capitol on January 6th, so many people said "This is not America." David Bowie's song of the same name from 1985 even was one of the top searches on LyricFind in the following week. But America is not just one thing, just as none of us are. Childish Gambino's song and video "This is America" makes the clear statement that gun violence and the destruction of black bodies is woven into the very fabric of this country. Just as our country is not one thing, a person can strive to be anti-racist and yet still sometimes have racist thoughts and actions. I am an anti-racist work in progress. Our board is. All Souls is. Montgomery is. New York City is. Our country certainly is. We must keep working. The All Souls Board is going to work together in March using the Widening the Circle of Concern materials from the UJA, with a focus on governance, and there also will be many opportunities for anyone in the All Souls community to focus on and explore racial justice in this year to come.

Many have speculated on why racial justice seemed to have momentum last year that it hadn't before. It certainly wasn't because there had been nothing to rally around. So why in 2020? Michael Eric Dyson, suggests the following in his recent book, *Long Time Coming: Reckoning with Race in America*:

"The pandemic forced us inside our homes while forcing us deeper inside ourselves, deeper inside our thoughts about how we have lived, and deeper inside habits of mind or spirit that have nourished or harmed us. . . .When images of George Floyd lying on the ground and pleading for his life flooded our screens, we had already adjusted our expectations of what lived experience was like. With our senses heightened, we saw him, yes, but we felt him even more."

When told what I planned to talk about, one of my daughters was concerned and said I was bound to offend someone. I suppose it is possible that this will go viral with the title "Clueless White Woman in Manhattan Pontificates About Racism." There are so many other things I could have talked about today, and I have been uncomfortable at times while determining what to say to you. The people developing the Kress building in Montgomery have spoken honestly about the discomfort they felt when deciding whether to remove the segregated water fountains from their site. But a society designed for white comfort is going to require some white discomfort for any positive change to occur. As Michael Eric Dyson states in *Long Time Coming*, "When you come to think of it, so much of the nation has been built to establish and preserve white comfort."

I have faith that this year holds great promise. It is easy to look forward to getting back to normal with the vaccine holding the promise of immunity later this year. We imagine what it will be like to be together again in person in our gorgeously renovated sanctuary. We have an exciting new

administration. But normal can't mean letting racial justice slip to the back burner, even though it would be so easy to do so.

At the Inauguration on January 20th, National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman delivered her brilliant poem, "The Hill We Climb." In it, she noted,

**Somehow, we've weathered and witnessed
A nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished.**

Instead of patting ourselves on the back because we don't look away with longing to "Dixie," we need to look toward "Lift Every Voice and Sing" or perhaps better yet, Childish Gambino's "This is America." We can't look away from the work that needs to be done. All of us, like our nation, are unfinished.