

“Identity is (Only) Skin Deep”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.

Readings

“Queries of Unrest” by Clint Smith¹

selection from Martin Buber, “The Social Dimensions of Man,” (p. 67), [On Intersubjectivity and Cultural Creativity](#)

Sermon

When does race begin to form one’s identity?

I look back trying to identify those formative moments in my own life.

Was it the time at our eighth grade graduation ceremony when I was awarded valedictorian status and the older brother of my Italian-American classmate commented that it was always the Filipino kids who got these awards?

Or, was it when in my junior year of high school one of my favorite teachers, a young, white woman, told me that I reminded her of a “china doll”?

Perhaps it was later, sometime in college, when I first heard the term Asian American and learned that I, as a daughter of immigrants with Filipino ancestry would fall into that category.

¹ Reading not included due to copyright. [The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race](#). Ed. Jesmyn Ward. pp. 99-100.

Or, perhaps race really started to shape my identity later still, when I would become affiliated with organizations that brought together Asian Americans for political power.

But, no, I think it must be earlier than that. My earliest memories show me that race, or at least culture, has always been front and center in my identity.

Like the time, when I was about 7 years old, my large extended family was having one of our parties with 30 or 40 people present. It was the summertime and we had set up a buffet table of food inside our garage. We were eating and talking and kids were running around everywhere. And, a photographer for the Chicago Tribune happened to be driving by and thought our event noteworthy, so he stopped and took a picture which later appeared in the Chicago Tribune magazine.

An ordinary moment in my family's life had enough cultural peculiarity to make it into the printed press.

For anyone, who comes from a non-dominant ethnic, cultural, and racial background, race is something that cannot be ignored. While race is a social construct, it is a construct that shapes life in very tangible ways. And, for me, this has been positive and negative and something in between.

As Clint Smith writes in his poem, there have been times when I have been in love with and have run from the color of my own skin. There have been times when my racial identity has been life affirming and also times when my racial identity has caused me stress.

I bring all of this with me into the present day.

I share this with you because I believe that we can't make much progress in our collective journey towards racial justice if we don't first examine and come to terms with our own unique identities and stories.

Part of my story today, and now a part of yours, is that as an Asian American woman, I serve a predominantly white religious denomination in a predominantly white state in a predominantly white congregation.

This is a unique relationship that you, as a congregation, and I, as your minister, have as I attempt to offer spiritual guidance on how to approach the topic of race and identity. Most of us do not share the same racial identity, and so it is across this racial difference that we discern our way to some truth and wisdom.

I believe that what is true for all of us, and what forms the backdrop for this conversation, is that we are part of a particular national story in which racial oppression is at the center. This is not something we can run away from. The recent presidential election brought this to the forefront after 8 years of what now seems like a dream, or at least the distant past.

Some have called slavery the "original sin" of America which is to say that our very origins are rooted in the enslavement of black people. This country's origins are also rooted in the genocide of native people. These wounds have caused pain and suffering not just for those who were the victims of these violent acts but also by the perpetrators.

All of us together are the descendants of a history rooted in racial oppression whose wounds have never been fully healed. This means that all of us together still suffer a spiritual pain based in racial division.

This spiritual pain is felt when people of certain countries are banned from traveling to the United States, when people with brown skin are targeted by

immigration officials, when another black person dies at the hands of law enforcement. This spiritual pain is felt when white Americans feel unsure of how to respond to such injustices or feel left out of “politically correct” conversation.

Healing this spiritual pain by any measure is a tall task.

It is one I believe that starts with each of us. It starts with each of us acknowledging our own racial identity - its formation and its continuing evolution. Part of acknowledging how our racial identity is formed is acknowledging the particular context we find ourselves in.

Here in Vermont, we have a particular challenge around facing issues of race and identity and racial justice. In an environment that is as racially homogenous as ours is, it is easy to make race a non-issue, to simply be able to ignore it. The relative homogeneity of our communities means that we can live our day to day lives without having to grapple with these difficult questions (or at least that is an illusion we can live with).

This is, of course, not true for all of us. Five percent of the population in Vermont identifies as non-white.² And within many of your families, the story of race is more complex as adoption or marriage have created diverse, multiracial families.

It is still the case, however, that the overwhelming whiteness in our state creates a dominant narrative of the racial experience that keeps the experiences of people of color hidden and at the margins.

A recent project called “I am Vermont, Too” seeks to change this and bring visibility to the lives and stories of people of color living in Vermont. It is on

² <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045216/50>

view right now in the State House cafeteria. In photo after photo, you are able to see a lively portrait of a person of color living in Vermont and read about that experience in their own words.

The humanizing nature of this project is moving, educational, and profound. And, I think the project speaks to a universal human need.

The need that is at the heart of the “I Am Vermont, Too” project is one of being seen and recognized and having others say, “You are worthy.” “Your life and your story matter.”

This kind of recognition and affirmation is especially needed if one’s experience is relegated to the margins, to the empty edge of the sheet of paper, as Clint Smith writes. Yet, this is also a universal need. It is a need we all have regardless of our racial identity.

The theologian Martin Buber points to this in his work and writing. Buber asserts that we need to have our very beings confirmed by others. We watch for a “Yes” that allows us to be.

It is the “Yes” we seek out in our parents’ eyes from the earliest moments of our lives. It is the “Yes” we long for from friends and classmates even in our moments of play. It is the “Yes” we desire from lovers and life partners. It is the “Yes” felt in the embrace of a friend whose words aren’t needed to communicate that they understand you.

This need to be recognized and to feel as if we belong can be a root motivation in many of our actions and behaviors, whether conscious or unconscious.

The writer and social change-maker, Courtney Martin makes this point well in an article written just after the November election. Like many

commentators and thought leaders, she ponders the question of why white American voters voted for our now president in greater numbers than other groups.

She writes:

“This election has surfaced the reality that many people in this country are hurting: financially, emotionally, spiritually. Much has been made about poor, white Americans — the abandoned working class — those good old boys with no way to channel their deep desire to be respected providers... [It] is fundamental economic and demographic changes that have left these men and women...feeling left behind. So it’s not change writ large that we crave — change like globalization, change like natural disasters, change like aging. It’s change that we somehow feel in control of — change like redemption... The change we crave, it seems, is actually belonging. We elect leaders that, by some mysterious emotional calculation, we decide symbolize our own worthiness. At a time when whiteness is losing its power, that question of worthiness becomes even more desperate.”³

In order to begin to heal the spiritual pain caused by our lack of reckoning with racism’s deep and broad reach, I believe we must first start with the question of worthiness. Specifically, we must ask ourselves how our sense of worthiness is tied to our experience of being white in America or black in America or brown in America. And, I believe that those who identify as white, must especially reckon with the desperation of a loss of identity and power that Courtney Martin points to. In this desperation, it is easier to see ourselves as separate from others and to fall into the trap of believing that worthiness is a zero-sum game. To think that centering the experiences of people of color means there is no room for the white experience or an affirmation of white identity.

³ Courtney Martin, "When the Question of Worthiness Becomes A Quest for Identity," <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/when-the-question-of-worthiness-becomes-a-quest-for-identity/>

We are all desperate to belong and to feel worthy in the eyes of others.

Looking back at the formative moments in my own life, I see that the question of worthiness is complicated.

Having my friend's older brother note that the Filipino kids always get the academic awards felt both like an affirmation of my gifts and also a narrowing of my identity to one singular aspect.

When my high school teacher told me I reminded her of a "china doll," I know that she meant this in a positive way, and yet, the reliance on a stereotypical trope for Asian women still stung.

Grappling with our racial identities means acknowledging the complicated ways in which our very worth and sense of belonging is shaped by our life experiences and in a larger narrative about race.

Each of us has this work to do, and it is work that needs desperately to be done.

I hope that this can be a place where we do this work together, where don't have to run from the things we love, where we can face one another with all of our uncertainties, all our pains, and all our longings, and say, yes, you are worthy. Yes, you belong.