

CRIBBS<S>NOTE – May 18, 2008

John Thomas, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, has invited UCC congregations to participate in a “sacred conversation about race and racism in America.” This may be one of the most difficult discussions we can have with each other since it requires placing ourselves in a very uncomfortable space. The history of racism in America is painful and filled with denial. We tend to blame each other for the nation’s failure to properly address issues that cause racism to fester.

The other night I talked on the telephone with Evan Golder, editor emeritus of United Church News, the denomination’s newspaper. He wanted to know my thoughts about Reverend Thomas’ call for a sacred conversation. Evan and I had worked together in the UCC Office of Communication. He had a pretty good idea where I might be coming from with my answer.

“What makes this an important opportunity,” I told him, “is the call for a ‘sacred’ conversation. Sacred means we honor each other by speaking without fear and listening without judgment.”

In the brief interview between two journalists, we explored ways in which John Thomas’ idea of congregations engaging in a discussion about America’s unfinished business on race could take place without people exposing themselves but making no progress.

We have been invited to step into an arena at a critical moment in our nation for the purpose of improving human relations. It requires courage and compassion; the ability to reflect on harsh realities while we image new possibilities. It would be a mistake to dwell only on old, rehearsed conversations and not dare to pursue a different course that encompasses the future.

At the same time, it would be disingenuous if we refused to acknowledge the issues that brought us to this point and ignore the gross impact of neglect and denial. The unfinished business of race and racism has caused brutal suffering among too many Americans. Crushed hope and deferred dreams plague elders and youth who are almost paralyzed by their experiences in American cities.

American-style racism is as fresh as the border fence erected between the United States and Mexico. It is demonstrated in the American prison system that houses a disproportionate number of Black and Latino inmates. The continued disparity of pay among people of color compared to whites with less education and skill sets also reflects common practices at play in the country. Market values of homes in neighborhoods with predominately African Americans and other people of color pale when compared with similar housing construction in predominately white areas.

Institutionalized racism is alive across America in banking practices, financing, insurance, healthcare, and nearly every measurable means to

determine quality of life. These are just some of the categories that give credence to the prophetic ministry of the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., former pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. The call for 'sacred conversations about race and racism in America' was issued because media personalities and pundits were not intellectually, socially, or ethically prepared to accurately report the truth of Rev. Wright's sermons.

The American public has shown immaturity when it comes to the subject of race. We apparently are not able to delve below the surface and grasp the deep well of wretched, inhumane treatment against our fellow citizens.

So, the conversations begin here at San Marino Congregational United Church of Christ. We start by telling our stories. Who are we? Where have we been? What have we seen, heard, and done that shape our perceptions and understandings about race and racism in America? What do we fear? Why?

How do we imagine tomorrow? What kind of world are we preparing for our descendants? Where will we begin our journey toward a more equitable, just, and humane society? Can we see ourselves in a world that is shaped out of reconciled relationships and perpetual acts of mercy and compassion?

The past gives us grounding to build a future that is brighter and different from what was handed to us. The circumstances of our existence allow us the opportunity to extend our hands in friendship to neighbors who have come here recently from distant lands. Any notions of returning to a former time are out of order and have no place in the conversation because they represent romantic memories of illusions for some, and tragic reminders of cruel encounters for others.

Let us begin the sacred conversation by honoring our truths and opening our minds to understand the range and depth of human facts that are personalized in the stories we share among us. Let us commit ourselves to eradicating racism in America by starting with ending the racism in us.