

## **Sermon: “What’s Race Got to Do with It?”**

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I can’t really express how grateful and relieved and encouraged I was when I first read the text of then-Senator Obama’s speech about the significance of race in America today. As you will remember, he made these comments in response to the uproar over statements made by his pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. But, forced by circumstances as Obama may have been to make a statement on the subject of race, I was so excited to read it because race seems to be the great taboo subject in our country these days. Certainly more forbidden to talk about than sex or religion or money or even death. And here he was, talking about this complex puzzle that is race, -- not in sound bytes, but in terms both candid and subtle, in nuanced language meant for grown-ups.

Race, or more exactly, racism, is the great gaping hole in the heart of America – the reality that undermines our ideals and our vision; the great unmentionable that divides our country – not into racists and non-racists – it’s nothing that crude or obvious – but into those with hope and those without. Until this speech of Obama’s we heard very little about race from any of the candidates.

How could this be? How could no one be addressing the reality that the majority of our black children languish in schools they can’t wait to leave, schools where their minds and spirits are deadened? How could it be that no one was talking about the reality that a black man has a one in four chance of ending up in prison, where his future as a contributing member of society will be virtually nullified? How could it be that no one was talking about the reality that murder is the leading cause of death among these same young black men? How could it be that no one was talking about our willingness to just throw away thirteen percent of our population? How can it be that we are not talking about it?

Well, for one thing, race and racial equality are dangerous topics. They’re dangerous because they are so emotionally loaded for us as Americans. They’re dangerous because of our violent and shameful shared history. We don’t talk about it because the subject provokes angry responses, responses of shame and fear. Because we’re afraid of saying the wrong thing, of revealing ourselves to be angry victims or secret racists.

We don’t talk about it because we don’t really know what to say about it. We don’t understand the complex intertwining of racial identity with class, with employment, housing, education, crime, drugs. We don’t even really know what race is. We talk about it as though it were a biological reality even when we are aware that studies of the human genome have shown how closely related we all are. We act as though race defines us even though we live in an increasingly mixed-race world in which such distinctions are becoming moot. We know that race is a social and cultural and political construct. That racial categories were invented for purposes of social and economic control.

We know, for example, that the concept of “Hispanic” is virtually meaningless. It excludes those of Portuguese descent; it includes people of all shades of skin colors and those who speak Spanish as well as those who don’t. We know that the category “Asian” is meant to include people who appear to be as unrelated in terms of appearance, history and culture as the Bangladeshi Muslim and the multiple ethnic groups within China.

And yet, it would be disingenuous to pretend that we have anything less than a clear intuitive sense of racial identity, that we unhesitatingly assign people to racial categories every day, including people we have never met and know nothing about. And it would be hypocritical to pretend that race is not a determining factor in our life chances as Americans, bearing heavily on what job we will have, what neighborhood we will live in, what kind of health care we will receive and how we will be treated by teachers, police, bankers and store clerks.

Now how are we to reconcile this reality with our election of Barack Obama as our first African-American president? Will Obama’s election encourage us to conclude that race is no longer an issue in American life? That ours truly is a “post-racial” society, despite all the evidence to the contrary?

Well, first of all, despite the fact that the majority of white voters did not vote for him, it’s very clear that much – very much – has changed since the days of Martin Luther King, whose birthday and whose dream of a color-blind society we are about to celebrate.

Overt racial prejudice is no longer the norm in this country. Even where they exist, it is no longer socially acceptable to express such attitudes. Anti-discrimination laws of the past fifty years have gone a long way toward equalizing opportunity. The black middle class continues to grow. And yet, I cannot go along with the notion that racism is a dead issue. All you have to do is drive down Meadowview or portions of Florin Road. It’s hardly a coincidence that nearly all the faces you will see are black or brown. I don’t want to minimize the really significant strides we have taken toward racial equality since King’s day; but neither do I want to minimize the effects that race continues to have on how we live and the opportunities that we do or do not find open to us. The most powerful person in the United States and, arguably, the world, is now a black American. At the same time, the vast majority of black Americans enjoy little power at all, of any kind.

Now, there are many theories about why this is. Those who are referred to as “racial realists” take the view that if Americans of color, and particularly African-Americans, continue to suffer from poor education, broken families, substance abuse and disproportionate incarceration rates, poor quality homes, unemployment and poverty, this can be explained in one of two ways. Either black Americans are deficient in character, or black culture is deficient in values. In other words, if blacks fail to thrive, they have only themselves to blame.

While this point of view originated with conservative social scientists, it has become an opinion shared by the majority of white Americans, according to a survey on

racial attitudes conducted by the *Washington Post*, the Kaiser Foundation and Harvard University in 2001. Furthermore, according to this survey, 71% of white respondents believed that blacks had equal or greater general opportunities than whites, while 65% believed this about Latinos. 43% of whites believed that blacks were no worse off economically than whites. 61% of whites believed that blacks enjoyed equal or better access to health care and 50% believed blacks suffered no employment discrimination.

According to this view, discrimination is neither common among employers and other individuals in a position to grant us opportunities; nor is it a factor in the institutions of society. If opportunity is equal, the racial realists conclude, the failure of so many African Americans to thrive within society can only be explained as just that – a failure of personal self-discipline, ambition or intelligence – qualities that are innate -- or a learned propensity to fail – community traits that discourage initiative and responsible action. If this were the case, those with power and privilege would not need to do anything to remedy it – Indeed could not remedy it if they were so inclined.

Contrary to the view that racial discrimination no longer affects us, other researchers are showing us that, controlling for factors of class and gender, racial discrimination is alive and well. It is especially virulent in its appearance in our institutions throughout society, from real estate and mortgage lending to police practices and the criminal justice system. This is institutionalized racism, the kind of racism that is harder to see and harder to rectify or compensate for than any simple individual prejudice.

So what is the solution? According to the multiple authors of *White-Washing Race: the Myth of a Color-Blind Society* and others who challenge the idea that we have achieved racial equality, we need to demand private and government investment in communities of color and the institutions that serve them. We need to step up investment in schools, jobs and critical services such as hospitals and clinics and alternatives to incarceration such as drug-treatment programs.

Secondly, we need to enforce laws against redlining, racial profiling and other discriminatory practices.

Thirdly, we need to demand universal health care, housing subsidies and tax laws that reward job training and ensure decent unemployment benefits. We need to support affirmative action in education and jobs training programs.

If the source of the problem is primarily institutional, so must be the solutions. And we need to educate ourselves in order to see this subtle form of racism and act upon it. In order to become more informed and aware of the present-day realities of race in America, we need to be able to discuss them freely. We cannot do this if we are afraid of being divided into racist and non-racist camps – of unwittingly identifying ourselves as “the problem,” the enemy of justice. White people of good will, the would-be allies of people of color, need to be welcomed into the discussion, in spite of our ignorance and

unconscious prejudices and, to this end, we need to educate ourselves about the realities of living on the other side of the color line.

As our soon-to-be president has said, we have been stuck in a racial stalemate. But “working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds. In fact, we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.”

*Sources mentioned or consulted:*

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