



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Our Fellow Felons

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The first time I wrote and delivered this sermon was in early 2004, during my internship in Austin, TX. The church had just begun a Worship Associates program, in which members would come up with the topic, and along with the minister's sermon, deliver a faith statement about why this topic was important to them. The member who chose the criminal justice system for a topic was a probation officer, and there was no shortage of disturbing Texas prison stats to trot out in my sermon.

Seven years later, much of that sermon is still relevant - the rate of incarceration has stayed the same or increased, but there are at least two differences now. One is that our country has reached a boiling point in terms of *space* for prisoners - California has been ordered by the Supreme Court to clear 30,000 prisoners because the overcrowding has become so inhumane that it's unconstitutional, and two, we have bold new perspectives about mass incarceration that have been articulated so well, such as Michelle Alexander's *New Jim Crow*, that they cannot be ignored.

Let me mention that you don't need to buy this expensive book and read it cover to cover to get the highlights. If you go on U-Tube, you can find a ten-minute presentation by her that will do just fine. Some of you are aware of her work, many of you are not, and perhaps even more of you are wondering if you really want to sit through this sermon that addresses such a difficult topic.

But in these difficult times, living in a world that, if we're honest, is in decline, it's easy to make the mistake that we are entitled to escapism and denial to 'get us through.' Brain candy and escapism certainly have their time and place, as does focusing on our personal well-being, whether that be physical, emotional, or spiritual - but today's sermon is about reminding us that we are better off if we *don't* tune out completely to the suffering of our fellow human beings. In fact, if you really want to give your spiritual life a shot in the arm, one of the best things you can do is to educate yourself and others about severe injustice. To scrutinize our country's "racial caste system," as Alexander refers to it, would be a good choice.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time today trying to convince you how racially unjust our criminal justice system is. What I want to be sure to do today is to reflect on why talking about what keeps these racist systems in place is so difficult.

But if I had to explain in a nutshell what's basically happening, I'd say this:

In the last 50 years or so, while many African Americans have entered the middle class and the elite class, the poverty rate has stayed the same, at 25%. Commentator Eugene Robinson, author of last year's book *Disintegration*, calls this group "a large, abandoned minority with less hope of escaping poverty and dysfunction than at any time since Reconstruction's crushing end."

Because of the ways laws have been set up that makes racial bias extremely hard to prove, it's this group of people who make perfect targets for creating an underclass of felons. Even though the rates of drug-dealing and drug-using occurs equally among different races - (think weed here) whites deal to whites, blacks deal to blacks, Hispanics to Hispanics - it's the people of color who get busted. And once you're labeled a felon - and denied access to employment, housing, and other rights, your chances of returning to a straight and normal life are extremely low. It is a system designed to keep felons felons.

One has to ask, do these felons remain our fellow citizens? How much of an American citizen are you when, not only can you no longer vote and participate in democracy, but you are also no longer counted in the country's economic picture - felons are not included in unemployment rates. By my math, if they were, the unemployment rate could be as high as 13 or 14 percent. Spending great portions of their lives warehoused behind bars, these people are literally, out of sight, out of mind.

But our fellow felons are making a lot of people a lot of money - whether that's by creating jobs for prison guards or profits for corporations - and it's one powerful reason why these laws remain firmly in place. The prison lobby is one of the most powerful lobbies there is, and they are making sure our laws stay punitive, that the War on Drugs is not altered against their interests, and that subsidies for farming prisoners are as strong as subsidies for agriculture.

Investigative journalist Eric Schlosser says, "The spirit of every age is manifest in its public works." C.D. Wright adds to this, "So this is who we are, the jailers, the jailed. This is the spirit of our age."

Let us now address why it's so difficult for us to admit and talk about the disturbing reality that Jim Crow has not gone away, that it's only been adjusted with the times. As Martin Luther King Jr. pointed out, this is not merely a social issue. If it were only social or cultural, I wouldn't be bringing it up from the pulpit. At the heart of racial injustice and the resulting oppression and suffering is a blindness that allows it to occur and persist. Martin Luther King Jr. said that this blindness is due to spiritual ignorance - an ignorance that permits a callous indifference to suffering.

I for one like to believe that religious liberals are less spiritually ignorant in this way, that we are sensitive to the suffering of others, and that's why we're motivated to help make the world a better place. But are we just as indifferent to the suffering of the black underclass as others?

Because the black underclass is so out of sight and out of mind, our indifference is in part due to a gross lack of awareness about what's really happening to them. Michelle Alexander said herself that before her investigation, she didn't blame the broken criminal justice system on racial injustice. Remember we are living in the age of color-blindness, where blatant racism is no longer acceptable, and therefore, it's harder to see and prove that it's alive and well.

After all, we've got President Obama and Oprah, and the norm of plenty of blacks in the middle class. I mean, isn't it politically incorrect or at least impolite to talk about black people being victims of injustice? Black people can 'make it' now. Isn't this really more about class than race? And if it is a crisis of the black community, why aren't *they* doing something about it?

Back in March, when Michelle Alexander made her presentation in the Pasadena Library, it was standing room only, filled with the people whose community this issue most affects. They do know it's a crisis, and they are trying to find help, solutions, and change. But we don't hear about these hopeful and positive efforts in our media because the media has to focus on what sells. And what sells is the story that people already believe - that when you hear about poor black and brown men, it's because they've committed a crime.

You know, during these difficult times we live in, as it becomes harder for people to live, to make it, the stress of the situation can bring out our worst human traits: fear, denial, hatred, and violence. We are prone to believing stories and lies that protect us. We are prone to unconsciously agreeing to systems of great oppression that appear to benefit us. For example, many believe the myth that we are experiencing great lows in crime rates, because so many people are incarcerated. But experts say that increased incarceration accounts for only 10 percent of the drop in crime rates, 25 percent tops.

Another way to frame this is that, as the middle class continues to shrink and people get poorer, no matter what color you are, an underclass serves the purpose of there being a group who will always be poorer and worse off than you are. So the existence of this beleaguered group can make people feel better about themselves, even as their own economic prospects may be crumbling.

In these difficult times, for these reasons, it is more important than ever that fear, denial, and hatred be identified and not tolerated. The tradition of liberal religion holds this dear: it is our responsibility to be a voice for moral conscience. In order to do that though, we need to know the facts, to see the truth, and this

means having the courage to remove our blinders, to call out our own spiritual ignorance, and call into question our own acquiescence to the stories that feed our fears. It's asking a lot of us, but I believe that one of the best ways to make liberal religion, such as Unitarian Universalism, stronger, is to ask more of us.

The truth is, we failed to be a voice of moral conscience back in 1850 - neither the Unitarians or Universalists can claim any great abolitionist movement then. We also weren't vocal during Jim Crow at the turn of the century, when lynching was rampant in the South.

A hundred years later, it's better late than never. And this time, it's not about a group of white liberals helping those poor black folks. It's about people like us - we the members of the diminishing middle class with spiritually sound values - standing up for our country and doing the right thing. And not just for our fellow felons, but for all fellow Americans, who want higher education to have a bigger slice of the budget pie than prison gets - who want the long term interests of the country, the many, to outweigh the short-term interests of the greedy, and the few.

What is happening with mass incarceration in this country is so out of sync with our core liberal religious beliefs of justice, freedom, and equality, that if we fail to be a voice for moral conscience, we have to ask ourselves if we even really know what the responsibilities of a religious liberal are. We are here to nurture our spiritual growth, yes, and while there are many ways to do that, let us remember that one of the most powerful ways to grow spiritually is to stand up for justice in order to end suffering.

It's true that this is the kind of injustice that takes generations to change. One of the ways we plant seeds is to expose ourselves, and others, to the real people who are suffering, to learn their stories, to put a human face on it.

In 2004, I interviewed a man named Lee Reese who lives in Austin, TX for the sermon so I could share his story. Lee was an ex-con who volunteered with probationers. He has a typical criminal record for a black man who got caught up in the system. His first felony was in 1970 for marijuana possession and in 1992, he was at the wrong place at the wrong time with a group of people who had one miniscule amount of crack among them. The cops raided this group, and since everyone else there was going to go to jail on other, unrelated charges, Lee got assigned as the one who had possession of this little bit of crack, and was sentenced to 30 years.

He spent five years in prison, and during that time lost the sight in his remaining good eye due to glaucoma that went undiagnosed. He is now legally blind. Because his sight was so bad, at one point he ran into a female guard by accident, and was accused of assault, even though it was an accident. He lost the good time he had earned as a result.

Based on his experience, Lee has these perspectives on the criminal justice system. He believes that prison is a breeding bed to keep prejudice and bigotry alive, simply by the way it's all set up. In most prisons in Texas, which are primarily in rural areas, the guards are white and most of the prisoners black. He said that blacks are treated rougher than other prisoners by the guards and the wardens. Blacks are more likely to get solitary confinement and there are more extreme measures taken on them. Of course, this exacerbates racial hatred on both ends.

And while it's tricky to cast black people as victims, Lee contends that it is hard to not become a victim of the system. He says, "There's a ghetto in every major city of America. Once you're caught up in the system it's very hard to get out because you have an X on your back. You don't learn any skills in jail about how to get by in society, so when you get out, you revert to old survival skills."

Lee says that a lot of people wonder why young black men are so angry. It's not just the prison experience, it's also the daily reminders that black people are not accepted. Whether that's being stopped by cops for driving while black, or when you hear the click of car doors being locked as you walk by a car full of white

people, it is these daily reminders that not only are you not accepted, you are feared. And that really hurts. It *hurts*. But the machismo of our culture does not allow black men to show this hurt, to express this pain, and so the deep hurt turns to anger. "It completely erodes your spirit," Lee says. And he had a term for what is happening with this prison generation - he calls it "soul genocide."

When you take this many black men out of society, they can't procreate healthy families. 70% of all black men in this country have had some kind of confrontation with the law. And there's no money to fight back, there's no money for lawyers to sue for blatant harassment by the law.

Lee is just one of millions, one of seven million. And the way things are going those millions, unbelievably, could grow.

A stock phrase in ministry is that we need to "comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable." Lately I've come to feel that we are all afflicted, comfortable or not. Michael Foucault, the French social philosopher said that when there are this many people on the inside - incarcerated - no one is on the outside.

There's a lot of fear-feeding going on these days, because fear is the easiest method of controlling people. But a democracy can't function without trust. Today many of our political and social institutions have substituted fear for trust. Whether it's fear of terrorists or immigrants or violent crimes, fear is like a prison.

When I think of where all the wars our country wage overlap, the war on terror, the war on drugs, and the war on immigrants, I am frightened about the world I am bringing my children into. They may be lily-white, but each of these wars will affect them. It will affect the safety of their environment, their educational opportunities, and their livelihood, and maybe much more than that.

What I can see now is how the most vulnerable among us today are like the canaries in the coal mine.

Jesus said that what you do to the least among us, you do unto me. It's one of his radical teachings that contains the key to dispelling the spiritual ignorance that Martin Luther King Jr. said keeps racial injustice in place.

When there are this many people are on the inside, no one is on the outside.