

## “Social Justice For Such A Time As This”

Rev. Annie Holmes

We have been a part of a remarkable event of United States history. A person of African American descent is now the President of the United States. For conservative and liberal and all those in between, this has been an event that only 100 years, 50 years ago would have seemed like a dream. We don't even, can't even imagine all the implications of this event, because they are not yet a part of reality. I am bowled over by the implications of such an event. I, as many of you, watched “Roots.” I know the statistics and understand that more minorities are in prison than whites, more inmates on death row are of a minority heritage, and so much more. Racism, oppression, cruelty, tyranny, repression and coercion simply because you are from a certain country or the color of your skin, or the creed you follow, is now and has always has been vile, and unacceptable. And the ironic piece of this human puzzle is that oppression then and now has made us all pay a great price in lives lost, hopelessness bred, hostility nursed, alienation carved into the very fabric of a nation that claims equality for all.

The enforcement of oppression operates around the idea of survival or the enhancement of a certain way of life that one majority group seeks to maintain for their own comfort and success. Oppression, unfortunately, is a most common human enterprise. All oppression sets up a hierarchy of high and low and in and out, therefore as a society that claims equality for all, we cannot justify oppression. Nor as a church that makes known its faith in the inherent dignity and worth of all people, can we knowingly support oppression. But the fact of our lives is that – oppression is a mega trend in American culture today.

Cornel West in his book, Race Matters, tells his readers that too often the discussion of race and justice in America is confined to the problems black people and other minorities pose for whites, rather than considering what this way of viewing black people, and all minorities reveals about us as a nation.

- ✓ Liberals want to deny black people, and minorities the freedom to make mistakes.
- ✓ Conservatives either blame the problems on the minorities therefore rendering their misery invisible or unworthy of public attention.
- ✓ Liberals say minorities need to be included into our “White, heterosexual” society.
- ✓ Conservatives say minorities should be well behaved and worthy of acceptance by the white, heterosexual standard of living.

Both fail to see that the presence and predicament of all minorities are neither additions nor deflections from American life. But rather, essential

elements of that life and already a vital part.

To engage in a serious discussion of race or equality, in the construction of a social justice system in the United States, it is imperative not to begin with the supposed problems of black people or minorities, but with the flaws of our society.

The dangerous implication floating around in liberal and conservative circles today is - that only certain citizens can define what it means to be American and the rest must simply "fit in." Know that I am using the word American to define someone living in the United States. I do realize that there is a South America and a Central America and that they too are Americans. But for today I wish to define my use of the word American as people living in the United States. I hope that is clear and not exclusionary.

Those in power in America have historically continued to resist fully accepting the humanity of gays, blacks and other minorities. White, heterosexual, rich and powerful society in its hostility, is continually putting minority actions and suffering, not their own anxiety and fear at the center of discussion. To establish a new framework, we need to begin with a frank acknowledgment of the basic humanness and Americanness of each of us. What have we learned since 9-11? If we go down, we go down together. If we succeed, we will only do so together.

There is no escape from our interracial, interfaith, all inclusive view of love, from our interdependence. Because unfortunately, we in this country have been in denial about oppression, and racism and sexism and classism, and one result of that denial is, we have created rootless, dangling people with little link to the supportive networks that once worked. Black children, gay, lesbian teens, minority young adults too often find themselves devoid of family, friends, a safe school, elements of life that give structure and sustain some sense of purpose in life.

As government would rather focus on economy and politics, discussions today conceal the most basic issue now facing all minorities, the nihilistic threat to all who don't fit into the white, heterosexual mode. This nihilism speaks to the psychological depression, personal worthlessness and social despair so widespread in black communities, in gay and lesbian circles, in minority homes.

As far as many politicians go, is to rely on the Protestant work ethic as if that was the only measure by which all minorities are to be measured. If there are one or two instances of minorities reaching the top of the glass ceiling in any social ladder, this success should then be attainable by all people, regardless of circumstances. What a narrow view of life that is. Once again the majority is allowed to judge all people and all life by one standard. Who will say no? Who will say enough? Who will say, there has to be another standard, more inclusive, more real, more true to the way life is lived by such a mixture of cultures, religions and mores?

This nihilism, as played out in millions of black and minorities lives is the life experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness and most importantly lovelessness, or a sense of truly belonging to our society. And now in these recent months we can add to this long list of have-nots, the new poor, the new homeless. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self destructive disposition toward the world. How many gay, lesbian, transgendered teens have we lost because there is seemingly nowhere for these young people to go for support, love and models on how to live who they really are?

Life without meaning, goals and love, without community will breed a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others. The question remains, why the cultural structures that once sustained life in America are no longer able to fend off this nihilistic threat? Minorities of all kinds have always been in American's wilderness in search of a promised land. Fear of the white authority has directed anger, rage and despair toward fellow minority citizens, especially toward black women, gay men, and those who are the most vulnerable in our society. What can we do? Take a breath, these are huge issues. Probably not taken care of or healed completely in our life time.

Any time you spend on helping minorities, children, animals, the earth find the same respect, dignity, funds, jobs, housing etc. that the majority has enjoyed, is a step in the right direction. We must begin to admit, preach, live as Americans, that the most valuable sources for help, hope and power resides in ourselves and our common history. We need to focus our attention on the public square, the common good that is foundational to our national and global destinies. Be reminded that as bridges, tunnels, subways and streets are neglected in our cities, it reflects our own myopic economic policies, and the low priority we place on our common life.

We need to meet the need to generate new leadership, grounded in grass-roots organizing that highlights democratic accountability. Help to answer whether a genuine multiracial democracy can be created and sustained in an era of global economy. We need to be reminded again that structures and behavior are inseparable, that institutions and values must go hand in hand.

Culture, all culture is rooted in institutions such as families, schools, churches, communication, industries, TV and radio. We need to not be afraid to delve into the depths of despair and dread that now flood the streets, the homes of minorities, the poor, the homeless in America. Nihilism is a disease of the soul. It needs to be cured not by legislation only. There needs to be a quest to honor a black identity, a gay identity, an Arabic identity, a Mexican identity, etc. because this identity is integral in talking about racial, sexual and class equality. Racism and homophobia are related cousins. And questing for identity involves self-respect and self regard. A program of social justice, whether by you yourself or this church in general is a step toward that self-respect and self regard that gives and sustains life for those who finally get it. They are worthy, they have dignity, they have rights, just as they are.

So, we are in a unique position now with the leadership opportunities we have in Washington to make some dreams come true that maybe would never have had a chance before. But the onus or responsibility still falls upon us, you and I to do what we can do to make social justice a reality for all people no matter their race, sexual preference, income, education or creed. All problems have spiritual answers. And none more so than the question of how to be just and honest and loving in a challenging time.

But please, before you jump into any action with both feet and all the energy you can muster, take some time to meditate, to pray, to be with your own fears, your own ideas, your own longings. Because if you are not in touch with what is your motivation, what are your fears, your own prejudices, your own love base, you may burn like a bright candle for a while, but you will burn out with fatigue, cynicism, and the feeling of being over burdened if you are not plugged into a energy source that never fails, never needs new batteries, never has a power outage, and that source is - your sense of the holy, your sense of purpose, your reason for living, that clear and honest motivation for all you do. Every morning you need to be in touch with that power source in order to do what you want, wish, will to do for the world during the day. All problems are spiritual, all true answers are complicated. Take a deep breath each morning and touch that power base first for yourself, before you touch another being.

We say in the face of these large and looming issues, I am only one person and I have my own issues, fears, financial and physical limitations. And that is very true. And we say, I live in my own need for an identity and a voice and own needs taken care of. And that is most definitely true. But, in the face of these large, looming social issues, when you read to a child you are opening up a world for them that may last a life time. When you hand a can of food to someone you are the hand of creator, sustainer and redeemer. When you counsel, or hug a bereaved person, lay your hands on the sick or dying, you are the beloved community alive and well. These big issues are not going away, but we need to continue to look at them with honesty and fearlessness and remember with the macrocosm of racism, poverty, hopeless and fear, you are already, by your deeds, a light at the end of the tunnel.

I invite you now to go on a canoe ride with me. The morning is crisp and clear, although it is cold. We all climb into our respective canoes. Some of us will be sitting in the middle, too tired this morning to paddle, but that's ok, because there are many others of us who are ready and willing to paddle until later in the day. So, here we go, we push our canoes into the water, the river of our lives. Our canoes are the foundations that we have already set for ourselves; faith in ourselves and each other, a willingness to help where help is needed, a firm belief in the power of church and the beloved community, peace in our hearts because we know all the work of creating a wonderful world will not be completed in our life time, but we truly believe that one canoe paddle at a time will get us to where we need to be, at least in this life time. As we begin our

journey, as we set our paddles into the water we see our breaths come out and form short waves of frost.

Every breath, every paddle reminds us we are moving, we are on a journey. Sometimes we see we have to switch sides of the canoe in order to avoid a rock or a branch laying across our path. But we dodge these obstacles with ease and grace, many of us paddling now for a long, long time. We look behind us and see some of the newer canoers are not so adept at avoiding the rocks and branches, so we slow down and go back and show them how it is done. Sometimes they smile at us and thank us, sometimes they snarl and say, they could have done it without our help. We sigh, and smile also, knowing we were the new canoers once too.

Now there are many canoes coming down the river. Some of them going very fast indeed. We wave to them. In some canoes we are amazed that we see our Grandfathers and Grandmothers, our Mothers and Fathers, our Aunts and Uncles, our sisters and brothers, all paddling away. We wave and wonder, and are reminded, ah, yes they too are on this journey, even if some of them are no longer with us. And then there are the canoes that are 36 feet long and carry whole families and nations and generations. They slide by easily, sometimes waving, sometimes ignoring us, sometimes asking for directions or caution as to where are the rapids, sometimes maybe even trying to tip us over, and sometimes giving us much needed bread and water for our own trip. We hear their songs, we hear their stories and we wish to sometimes sing along with them.

Our canoe party has within it, as all good canoe parties have, a voice of reason. When you are in the wilderness of life, with no 7-11, no Freddies, no Safe-Way there needs to be the voice that tells you how much water you have left, how much food there is for the rest of the journey, how many more miles there are to go until the next rest stop. Paddle, paddle, paddle, paddle. You are getting tired. You have been steering for a long, long time. The one in the middle is ready to help out after their rest. Yes, rest is good. But you feel guilty about giving up your post. You are the best steerer you tell them, yes, yes they say, but there are others who can also steer. So, with some reluctance you paddle over to shore, get out, stretch and sit down in the middle of the canoe as someone else takes your place. As you hang on to the sides you see there is so much to see you did not see while you were working so hard at steering. The clouds, the trees, the cranes, the heron, the turtle, the other canoes. You wave and some wave back, some don't. All of them rushing to somewhere in their own foundations, on the river of life.

The journey is long, the obstacles are many, and each paddle from a small canoe seems so little, so ordinary, so nothing in the scheme of wide, wide river that never seems to end. But be at peace, you little paddler, in your little canoe, it is exactly by each paddle, each listening to the voice of reason, watching for obstacles, and waving at other canoers that we are true to the task of this life. So, paddle on, little paddlers, and know that even if the eddy you make with

your paddle is absorbed by the river is a matter of seconds, energy given freely and in love is never truly lost.

Ask yourselves, with whom do you eat, who sings with you, with whom do you associate and who do you help? Answer those questions and you will know the answer of how to be more diverse. What pictures are hanging on your walls? Are there people of different colored skins, different lifestyles, different creeds celebrated in your life? Do you read books from other cultures? Do you listen to music from other lands, other tongues than American and English?

To an end that could promote diversity in our lives as a church community, I have some symbolic seeds here today, seeds for change that can be planted within our hearts. The soil is the nourishment and encouragement that we can give to each other. The pot is our community that holds us together. The seeds are each and every one of us, ready to grow and blossom into action and love.

- ✓ Be it resolved: to work within this congregation to identify oppressive behaviors we exhibit as individuals and as an institution, and then find ways to eliminate those behaviors. For example do we only identify people by their race, or their sexual preference. Like saying, “The Black lady, the Mexican man, the gay hairdresser, the Muslim and so forth. How come we never say the white Protestant ethic male?” Because somewhere inside us we know people are so much more than simply their race, their sexual orientation, or their creed.
- ✓ Be it resolved: to further explore more uses of worship resources from diverse cultures be used in our church’s music and worship materials so that we become familiar with other faiths, other viewpoints, other ways of looking at life.
- ✓ Be it resolved: to conduct a program of this church’s history regarding racial diversity and social justice practices.
- ✓ Be it resolved to continue to make linkages with community organization especially in low income areas.
- ✓ Be it resolved there will be an evaluation of the content and process of the church’s religious education program, and adult programs for their support of a diverse way of looking at life.
- ✓ Be it resolved that we will each in our way, within our own emotional, monetary and physical limitations to do what we can to further our 7 principles that speak to values we affirm and promote.

As we watch these seeds that have been laying dormant for months and months grow into fruition, may our resolves also grow into a community outgrowth that is more open, more loving, more inclusive of all peoples.