

## HOMILY FOR TENEBRAE

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First Unitarian Church

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Our celebration of Tenebrae does not have a happy ending. Or perhaps I should say that eventually it does have a happy ending, but the happy ending has been suspended for a couple of days, until Sunday morning. In the meantime, we have the opportunity to sit with whatever feelings of discomfort and remorse and despair that our celebration of Tenebrae may generate in us. While not necessarily pleasant, this opportunity to sit with our challenging feelings for an extended time may be quite instructive.

Nearly all of the modern readings you will hear in our Tenebrae service this evening have to do with race relations and racial justice. I have chosen to do this for two reasons. First, here at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh we have begun the process of searching for a minister of color who will become part of our church staff. I hope that the readings we hear this evening will prompt us to deepen our commitment to this vitally important work. Second, some events connected with the presidential campaign of Barack Obama might be usefully addressed in this worship space.

In a speech entitled “A More Perfect Union” which he delivered on Wednesday, March 19, Barack Obama mentioned his pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ on the South Side of Chicago. Last June, at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, I had the opportunity to hear Jeremiah Wright speak. The Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association had invited him to share his thoughts and reflections, morning and afternoon, during our annual collegial gathering. At least five hundred Unitarian Universalist ministers were present for his presentation, and we were all deeply impressed. Jeremiah Wright explained how he had drawn from African cultural traditions, liberation theology, linguistics, musicology, African-American history, and a dozen other fields of study in putting together his particular approach to his ministry with Trinity United Church of Christ. I found his presentation absolutely brilliant.

Thus, I was surprised to find that Jeremiah Wright had become a figure of controversy. Having learned about the scholarly context which has informed Jeremiah Wright’s remarkable ministry, I appreciated Barack Obama’s willingness to place Jeremiah Wright in another context, the context of American racial prejudice and injustice which has also informed his remarkable ministry. I would like to quote a few lines from Barack Obama’s speech where he mentions this context:

The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through – a part of our union that we have yet to perfect. . . .

Understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point. . . . We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. . . .

This is the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up. They came of age in the late fifties and early sixties, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted. What's remarkable is not how many failed in the face of discrimination, but rather how many men and women overcame the odds . . .

But for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn't make it – those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations – those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future. Even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race, and racism, continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways. For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor have the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or around the kitchen table. . . .

And occasionally it finds voice in the church on Sunday morning, in the pulpit and in the pews. The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright's sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning. . . . But the anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.

I would like to think that our Tenebrae service here this evening will serve as one place where we can hear this anger without simply wishing it away, and where we can appreciate some understanding of its roots. The truth is that Rev. Jeremiah Wright has for many years been lifting up a corner of the American carpet and insisting that we all look more closely at what has been swept under it. This evening, perhaps we, too, can take hold of that corner of the American carpet and lift it up just a little higher, and look just a little more closely at what is too often unseen and unmentioned and unaddressed. And perhaps we can imagine a little more boldly what this congregation, the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, might do to move beyond what Barack Obama calls the "racial stalemate" in this country, clearing a little space for the work of reconciliation and justice and understanding and hope.

I should add that the readings you will hear in our Tenebrae service this evening are not intended to assign blame to specific individuals. Rather, they serve to remind us of cultural tendencies and institutional realities in which many people participate and which many people, therefore, have the opportunity to change.

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