

Everything Old is New Again
The Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt
President, Starr King School for the Ministry
Unitarian Universalist General Assembly
June 25, 2015

Good afternoon. Thank you for coming. Most of you have come today to hear me speak about UU multi religious reality. I won't be talking about that at all, and I am sorry. Some of you may have come to hear me talk about the flurry of social media and tabloid journalism swirling around Starr King this year. I won't be talking about that at all, and I am NOT sorry. Finally, I would not be doing my duty as a trauma and disaster chaplain if I didn't advise you that some of what I say may be too graphic for some members of the audience, and so please know that you may need to excuse yourself for certain parts of this talk.

My reading this morning is from the book of Mark, in the Christian Scriptures, chapter 4, verses 16 through 20.

And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. 17 But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are those sown among the thorns:

these are the ones who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. 20 And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”

Imagine your Tuesday night covenant group at your home congregation, the circle with its single empty chair to remind us to remain open to new people. Imagine lighting your chalice just as a stranger arrives to participate in this session's reflection, perhaps on grace, or mercy. Imagine sharing your thoughts, perhaps hearing from the stranger a few words on the reflection topic. Imagine extinguishing the chalice and finding yourself at the other end of a gun. Imagine yourself being killed in what was meant to be the safest place you knew. Imagine being targeted because you were white. Imagine that it isn't the first time, or the 10th time, or the 100th time. Imagine never feeling safe anywhere, at any time ever. Welcome to African-American life in the 21st century.

One week ago yesterday, a 21 year old racist terrorist walked through the doors of Emmanuel AME Church and joined a bible study group led by the church's pastor. They welcomed this white stranger, this newcomer, into their midst; the pastor asked him to sit next to him.

Together, they read and reflected on this text from Mark. And when they were done, this terrorist took out a gun and methodically shot most of the people in that room. He allowed one person to live, so that she might witness to his atrocity.

Depayne Middleton Doctor; Cynthia Hurd; Susie Jackson; Ethel Lance; The Rev. Clementa Pinckney; Tywanza Sanders; Rev. Dr. Daniel Simmons, Sr.; Sharonda Coleman Singleton; Rev. Myra Thompson. Those are their names. Today marks the first of their nine funerals. and each day, as their funeral processions move through Charleston, their mourning families and friends will ride down streets named after honored Confederate generals. The pastor's funeral corsage will move to his church from the state capital where he has been lying in state, and where the Confederate Flag flies at full staff, padlocked to the flagpole by law.

The perpetrator of this massacre left on his personal page a 2,500 word manifesto about his motive and inspiration. Part of this screed was reported in the New York Times, as follows.

I have no choice,” he wrote “I am not in the position to, alone, go into the ghetto and fight. I chose Charleston because it is most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to Whites in the country. We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything

but talking on the internet. Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me.”

It's a safe bet --at least I hope it is-- that no one in this room believes the words of this racist killer. But how many among us seriously engage with the words in the book of Mark? The bible study that night at Mother Emmanuel was a continuation of the parable of the sower. The seeds being sewn were the words of God, and Jesus is continuing to explain to his disciples about the word of God, the faith they engender and the actions that result. We of liberal faith in this hall today are no different than the soil on which the seeds have fallen. We might understand them as seeds of love and liberation and challenge, and only you will know how you have responded, or continue to respond. When the seeds of liberatory work fall on the ground of your heart, are you excited to hear and understand until you glimpse what lies ahead? Are you the person who lives blithely with your privilege, ready to walk away as soon as the work becomes tough, or is not sufficiently rewarding for you? Or are you a part of the easily distracted, interested in the work of justice but choked by the seductions of a world in denial, a world designed to help you stay unconscious. Or are you ready and willing and able to engage, shored up by comrades in the work and partners in spiritual practice to sustain you when things are tough, or even impossible?

I have wanted to write or talk about the events of Charleston since the day it happened, and I have been mute until now. The depth and breadth of sorrow and rage and horror that I have felt in response to these murders is hard to overestimate. And it is joined with my sorrow and horror and rage about so many other murders: the murders of Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner, the murders of Tamir Rice and Renisha McBride; the murders of Rekia Boyd and Tanisha Anderson and Yvette Smith and Tony Robinson and Mariam Carey and Michael Brown and Dontre Hamilton and we could be here all day reading names. In an irrational sense it is also fear that has kept me silent, the foolish idea that if only i don't think about it happening to my husband or my sons I will keep the evil spirits of white supremacy culture at bay one more day.

Unless I am at work at Starr King, I often feel alone in this religious community that I love and to whom I have given my life, because often people of color and whites do not even have a common language of oppression to guide our work and our lives together, because every effort at social justice necessarily begins with an act of translation and is just as often met with an act of denial and the dance toward understanding takes so long it hardly feels worth it. It is at these moments I remember that I volunteered for this life assignment. I married into Unitarian Universalism and this faith captured my spirit much as my beloved husband captured my heart and it was only years later, in

a seminary class on the public practice of ministry, that I realized what a crazy, terrible thing I had done.

My professor at the time, who was a white woman, was walking with us through a study of repentance and its root meaning. She told us a story of a white man in her congregation who was friends with a black man, also a member of the congregation. The two men worked together at the same company and both men were up for a coveted promotion. She spoke of a counseling session she had with the white man after his black friend got the job he wanted. As she spoke about trying to help him repent, to turn, as she spoke about that white man's pain and rage at losing the promotion, as she told us of his outrage that his friend, "that nigger," is what he really said, had taken his job, and his terrible shame and surprise to discover how racist he was at his core, I found myself sobbing in awful recognition. As a future minister in this painfully white denomination, I was being called to minister to people just like her congregant-- shame-filled, raging, privileged, entitled, overserved white people. I didn't know how I could bear it. I didn't know how to be released.

In truth, I cannot be released and I have not been. I have accepted my call and at the same time I have made promises to myself about this unexpected ministry, promises that I work hard to keep. First among them is to say what I know to be true, most importantly to myself. I know that I must hold a line that many religious

professionals of color must hold for ourselves--a line that even in its maintenance reveals how evil, how pernicious racism is. I must always watch for the moment when my pastoral care of someone becomes spiritual domestic work, cleaning up the detritus of someone's unformed understandings. It is almost always around issues of race, it is almost always around tough conversations about acknowledgement of white privilege or next steps for confronting racism. They are almost always conversations with women, and those women are always middle age or older. They sometimes happen with men, but those conversations are largely marked by anger and denial. With women, the changes are invariably marked by tears, and a sense of helplessness that even the woman in question may not know is exaggerated. Almost always, there is a pleading look, a request--spoken or unspoken--that I take this cup from her, save her from the work of self-examination or self-condemnation, clean up her part of a mess from which she benefits the vast majority of the time.

It used to trouble me, then it angered me. Now I know it for the passing phenomenon that it is, an expression of what the writer Dr. Robin DiAngelo of the University of North Carolina Greensboro has termed "white fragility," Dr. Di Angelo explains it thusly: "White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations

for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium."

If you have not read this paper, please do; I believe that whites who are serious about countering oppression and doing the work of liberation will first need to build their resilience to combat this culturally supported state of fragility, and Robin DiAngelo will do for this next generation of anti-racist work what Peggy MacIntosh's famous essay on white privilege did for the previous generation of anti-racist work.

Amid the race-related horror show that has been these last 18 months, it has been salvific for me to reconnect to Starr King after 15 years, and to be chosen to lead the school. Whenever I review the materials about our educational model, our commitment to educate to counter oppressions and to create just and sustainable communities, I am reminded of all it took to arrive at that place, how difficult it was to do, and how much it cost those of us who believed in the task. The school began

this journey more than 20 years ago; I was a brand new member of the Starr King board of trustees, and the entire board was at work on a process of board education and discernment, led by the amazing and wonderful Clark Olsen. We were more fortunate than we knew to be led by Clark in a process that would help us to determine what kind of theological school we hoped to create. He knew intimately the price we might pay to be serious about challenging an oppressive system, even one we were part of. If you are in the room, Clark, (and even if you are not) I want to thank you. The leadership you offered the board and Rebecca in the mid 1990s laid the groundwork for all the counter-oppressive work at Starr King that followed, right into the present day, and as a true warrior for justice you are never far from my thoughts.

We worked together under Clark's and Rebecca's combined leadership to reimagine the school in service of the beloved community in which we longed to live. We discerned that among the most important things we could do was to create a school that worked against the evils of racism and sexism, homophobia and classism, by endeavoring to model this in our faculty and staff, in our board and among our students. We did a faculty search that advanced that goal, at great emotional and financial cost to the school. And long after I left the board, the school continued to pursue that goal, creating the educational model we now employ, a model that challenges assumptions and equips our students to think

critically and act compassionately in the service of liberation.

There has never been a greater need for religious leaders with the capacity to do the work of justice in a country and a world suffering from nearly fatal doses of the poison that is racism. We are committed to raising up those leaders, sending them out into congregations and communities to serve the cause of justice and freedom and love. We know why we are here, and what we are here to do, and we will continue to do it with all the strength and enthusiasm and love we can give to the task.

My question for you as I end this afternoon, is what are you willing to do? Are you willing to give up your silence and your complicity? Are you willing to be less fragile in your whiteness and more resilient? Are you ready to face the ugly voice that is planted in your head and maybe your heart, and repent, turn away from the white supremacist culture you were taught not to notice, and turn toward a new way that we could build together? If you are ready, we are ready for you, and the world we can imagine together is the world we must attain. Let these few words of mine then, fall not on the stony ground of resistance, but on the fertile soil of change so that it might bear fruit--thirty, and sixty and one hundred fold. Thank you for coming.