

IN THE NAME OF LOVE

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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READINGS

The Change by Tony Hoagland

The season turned like the page of a glossy fashion magazine.

In the park the daffodils came up
and in the parking lot, the new car models were on parade.

Sometimes I think that nothing really changes -

The young girls show the latest crop of tummies,
and the new president proves that he's a dummy.

but remember the tennis match we watched that year?
Right before our eyes

some tough little European blonde
pitted against that big black girl from Alabama,
cornrowed hair and Zulu bangles on her arms,
some outrageous name like Vondella Aphrodite -

We were just walking past the lounge
and got sucked in by the screen above the bar,
and pretty soon
we started to care about who won,

putting ourselves into each whacked return
as the volleys went back and forth and back
like some contest between
the old world and the new,

and you loved her complicated hair
and her to-hell-with-everybody stare,
and I,

I couldn't help wanting
the white girl to come out on top,
because she was one of my kind, my tribe,
with her pale eyes and thin lips

and because the black girl was so big
and so black,
so unintimidated,

hitting the ball like she was driving the Emancipation
Proclamation
down Abraham Lincoln's throat,
like she wasn't asking anyone's permission.

There are moments when history
passes you so close
you can smell its breath,
you can reach your hand out
and touch it on its flank,

and I don't watch all that much Masterpiece Theatre,
but I could feel the end of an era there

in front of those bleachers full of people
in their Sunday tennis-watching clothes

as that black girl wore down her opponent
then kicked her ass good
then thumped her once more for good measure

and stood up on the red clay court
holding her racket over her head like a guitar.

And the little pink judge
had to climb up on a box
to put the ribbon on her neck,
still managing to smile into the camera flash,
even though everything was changing

and in fact, everything had already changed -

Poof, remember? It was the twentieth century almost
gone,
we were there,

and when we went to put it back where it belonged,
it was past us
and we were changed.

From the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

We must combine the toughness of the serpent and the softness of the dove, a tough mind and a tender heart. [We] must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.

Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that.

Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.

We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.

In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.

I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.

SERMON

I love the poet Tony Hoagland. He has a directness and honesty that simultaneously delights me and makes me squirm. Yet what makes his poetry work is that Hoagland's eye is trained unflinchingly on himself first and whatever discomfort we feel is refracted in the prism of his own experience. No self-righteous recrimination in his poetic voice. Did the poem I read earlier make you at all uncomfortable? It made me uncomfortable to read it to you, and not just because it has words I don't usually use in this pulpit.

Issues of race are fraught in our culture, and Hoagland expresses an honest view that some of us may well identify with even as we're not especially proud of it. I shared that poem with you because it does speak some hard truths we need to hear even as they make us uncomfortable, yet also because the nugget that sparked this entire service is about tennis player Serena Williams, who with her sister Venus, were Hoagland's inspiration for Vondella Aphrodite. I still can't believe how perfect it is.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Something we can fret about is becoming a more racially diverse congregation. We are a mostly white liberal congregation of good heart and good intention, and we know that racism is a great evil in the world. We want to do something about it, and we don't always know what that might be.

My time living in Canada, where the racial dynamics are very different, taught me what a great gash slavery has cut across our nation. A wound that has not healed. I saw the movie *Precious* this week. It's about an African American teen living in the most abject physical and emotional poverty our society can concoct, yet whose spirit is somehow not yet destroyed. It is grim, powerful and beautiful. And as long as people in our land live in such poverty and despair, we are all somehow culpable. And we want that to change.

But racial dynamics are so very complicated. Part of the problem is that we mean so well, and yet we are afraid to do anything. The dynamics are so fraught that we live in fear of unintentionally stepping into one of those awful damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't situations. Often it just feels easier to step away from the fray.

Sometimes we want to look to people of color to help us find our way through the minefield. But people of color have their own work, negotiating a world where racism and oppression exist but are not always overt enough to resist directly. They don't want to have to be our teachers. They don't want to have to explain racial politics or why something is offensive. They tell us to do our own work. But the folks of the majority culture – and I certainly count myself among them – are sometimes at a loss.

I can only speak to you today as a white woman of great privilege. I know that some of what I say will resonate with many of you and some will not. There are human universals, and yet we are all made up of particular experiences and influences. Yet as I speak from my experience, I encourage you to examine your own relationship to race issues. And I encourage you to break the silence that comes of fear. I encourage you to speak gently and honestly of your experience. Gently and honestly to one another. For this is not work we can or should attempt alone. It can only work if we stand together.

For those of us raised in the majority white culture, there are at least three steps in the work of unpacking race in our lives.

The first part of our work is to understand our privilege. White privilege is not something we asked for. It was conferred upon us by circumstance of birth. We can very easily bristle at the suggestion that it is something we are to blame for. That it is something that automatically makes us racist. Being white does not necessarily make us racist, but it does little good for me to proclaim I am not a racist if I ignore the racial currents in our society. For the truth is, when we do try to ignore race, can certainly make us appear more racist. People of European descent often look clueless, if not outright racist, because we miss what is so patently obvious to someone who is not from the majority culture. People on the margins often can see, understand and analyze a culture far more clearly.

So first, we need to recognize our own privilege and do what we can to mitigate its exclusionary effects on so many others. This is profoundly difficult work, which is why we must do this work together.

Secondly, we must acknowledge the ways racism wounds us, too. For all of us are damaged when racism tears at the fabric of humanity. I think everyone in white America has a story of a time they were shamed about race.

Many of you remember my colleague, mentor and friend Mark Morrison-Reed, who spoke here at my ordination and again in December. He was raised as an African American Unitarian Universalist. One of his great gifts is to bring his experience and struggles to our faith tradition. An article in the UU World tells the story of a time Mark was speaking in Ohio. People were sharing experiences of race.

“The last [man] to speak, confessed, “I have a nasty, embarrassing one.” The youngest of four kids in Akron, Ohio, he came home for lunch with his siblings one day and blurted out, “Last one to finish is a nigger baby.” His mother and siblings recoiled in shock. “We had a black lady cleaning the house. That was my first awareness of differences.” He broke into tears.

“It hurts,” Morrison-Reed responded.

Misunderstanding, [the man] choked out, “I’m sorry.”

“No, it hurts, for you,” Morrison-Reed insisted. “Every child goes through that.”

Racism hurts us all. When we are able to share our own shame and hurt – even if we stand in a place of privilege – we can begin to heal the wounds all around. For to be white in America, is also to be wounded by racism.

And that leads me to a third step in addressing race and racism – and to Serena Williams, at last.

Our work is also to advocate for understanding and change among ourselves. This is called being a white ally against racism and oppression. We can’t wait for the people of color to speak out against racism, we must do it ourselves and with ourselves. How much more powerful it is, when someone who has done the work of recognizing their white privilege and experiencing their own pain, can speak to other white folks about racism. Rather than a person of color seeming to accuse, we can speak out of a shared pain.

Being a white ally might well mean standing directly against injustice. But the far more important and subtle work is confronting racism when we see it in ourselves, our family, friends, co-workers. Did any of you suddenly get uncomfortable

when I said that? Have any of you ever see someone do or say something subtly or even overtly racist and simply looked the other way? How many of you have a story of a time when, out of ignorance or fear or anger, you did or said something that you regretted?

Our work is with our own folk – whoever they are. White people of European descent can't expect people of color to always take the initiative and then follow them. We must be allies among ourselves. Stand up and help educate each other. This, too, is challenging work.

But let me tell you a story when I was a white ally. It was a small thing, but it was a thing.

Depending on how much of a tennis fan you are, you may remember last fall at the U.S. Open when a lineswoman called Serena Williams for a foot fault at a critical point in a match. Serena lost it. She tried to shake it off at first, but then she accosted the judge. She furiously approached the lineswoman with a ball in her hand saying I'm going to take this ***** ball and shove it down your ***** throat. Who knows if she felt a little like she was shoving the Emancipation Proclamation down Lincoln's throat while she was at it.

This whole thing was an extreme breach in tennis etiquette and rules. Serena lost the point and was assessed another point for her outburst, and she lost the match. The USTA has since fined her and put her on probation. All well and good, you might say, situation over. Yet such a moment in America cannot happen without serious racial overtones and undertones. The lineswoman later said she felt like her life was threatened. Although Serena said she was just blowing off steam. And no doubt Serena was good and intimidating. I would have been plenty scared to see an incredibly powerful, tall, angry black woman moving toward me in such a manner. As Tony Hoagland put it, Serena is "so big and so black, so unintimidated, hitting the ball like she wasn't asking anyone's permission."

It's a complicated situation. I'm not defending or condemning Serena. I'm not suggesting that her punishment was stronger or lighter because of her race – though I suppose there are arguments either way. I'm only saying that the whole incident and people's reactions to it are necessarily racialized and we should acknowledge it and talk about it. It's an opportunity to learn and grow.

I had just such an opportunity the next week. I play tennis in the City League and we were the visiting team at a match that week. I had played in the first round, and a group of us were sitting watching our teammates play in the second round. Some women from the home team were talking behind us. I overheard part of their conversation and realized they were talking about the incident with Serena. One woman referred to Serena as uppity – the word that was used for slaves and later free black folks who were, quote "getting above their station," quote "forgetting their place."

I turned to three of my teammates sitting to my right. "Oh my gosh," I said. "That woman from the other team just called Serena, uppity." My teammate who was the third one down is East Indian and she knew exactly what was wrong with calling an African American uppity. The other two women, both white, did not understand. What's wrong with that one asked. When I explained, she said, "So it's kinda like using the n-word." I said, "Yeah, not quite so bad, but like that."

That was it. I decided not to say anything to the woman who had spoken. I was aware that I was a guest at her club, and frankly, it was more than I thought I could do. I didn't know her, and I imagined that all I would do is offend. Perhaps she, too, had no particular understanding of what a loaded word she used. But I did say something to my friends. And I educated them perhaps only ever so slightly. I raised some consciousnesses that day, including my own.

Golly, telling you about it now, it seems such a small act. But it was a moment I couldn't and didn't just let pass. Sure, I could have done more and another person might have. It was what I could do in that moment. And in that moment, I was being a white ally among people of my own culture and background. Advocating for tolerance and understanding. My two white friends perhaps will think about things differently.

So, I stand before you, a white woman of privilege whose done her share of race awareness training, and that's the best I can offer as a white ally. I share it with you because I know it wasn't much, but it was a step. As Dr. King said, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." And I was not silent.

As a people of faith, as good people of good intention, we are called to live by our values of justice and compassion. Yet it's hard to find our way in a complicated world.

Yet here's the thing, if we are going to answer the call to stand as allies, friends and compatriots of the dispossessed and marginalized, we must also stand together. I did one small thing, but I could do it in part because I knew you were there with me. I knew I could share my story with you and you would understand the complexities, the difficulties, even my shame at not doing more.

You didn't know it but you were standing there with me.

We are so much more powerful and strong and courageous when we stand together.

Will you stand with me?

Blessed be.

Amen