

## **Resources for Communities of Ongoing Religious Exploration**

### V.1 Unit 5

#### Black Power and the White Liberal

Suggested chalice lighting

When you are hungry

learn to eat

whatever sustains you

until morning

but do not misled by details

simply because you live them.

~ Audre Lorde

#### I. Introduction

The sermons and readings during Black History Month were filled with challenge, and sometimes confrontation. These teachers call us to reach beyond and look past the notions we cherish around racial harmony. They tell us that, if we are to hope for true harmony and lasting peace, it will be necessary to allow ourselves to be uncomfortable. One core idea that exists through all of the teachers was that it is not helpful or constructive to overlook racial difference -- that race is a container for difference of life experience, of cultural understanding, of perspectives on fairness and justice and reasonable expectations.

Though all were provocative in different ways, perhaps the most challenging to white Unitarian Universalists, and to white progressives and liberals more generally, was Rev. Dr. James Cone. It might be easy to suppose this was because he is the most recent, indeed the only one of the writers still living. However, it is important to note that the work cited in the service was written 50 years ago.

Cone is the most challenging of these writers not because he is our contemporary, but because he is the one who was addressing what he saw as the problem inherent in white allyship. This month, rather than shorter statements from several writers, we consider a full page from James Cone. The reading here invites us to look more deeply at his views particularly in this area.

## II. CONNECT: Reading

From James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (all punctuation and italics are his)

When white do-gooders are confronted with the style of Black Power, realizing that black people really place them in the same category with the George Wallaces, they react defensively, saying, "It's not my fault" or "I am not responsible." Sometimes they continue by suggesting that their town (because of their unselfish involvement in civil rights) is better or less racist than others...

All white men are responsible for white oppression. It is much too easy to say, "Racism is not my fault," or "I am not responsible for the country's inhumanity to the black man." *The American white man has always had an easy conscience.* But insofar as white do-gooders tolerate and sponsor racism in their educational institutions, their political, economic, and social structures, their churches, and in every other aspect of American life, they are directly responsible for racism. If whites are honest in their analysis of the moral state of this society, they know that all are responsible. Racism is possible because whites are indifferent to suffering and patient with cruelty...

The liberal, then, is one who sees "both sides" of the issue and shies away from "extremism" in any form. He wants to change the heart of the racist without ceasing to be his friend; he wants progress without conflict. Therefore, when he sees blacks engaging in civil disobedience and demanding "Freedom Now," he is disturbed. Black people know who the enemy is, and they are forcing the liberal to take sides. But the liberal wants to be a friend, that is, enjoy the rights and privileges pertaining to whiteness and also work for the "Negro." He wants change without risk, victory without blood.

The liberal white man is a strange creature; he verbalizes the right things. He intellectualizes on the racial problem beautifully. He roundly denounces racists, conservatives, and the moderately liberal. Sometimes, and in rare moments, behind closed doors, he will even defend Rap Brown or Stokely Carmichael... But he is still white to the very core of his being. What he fails to realize is that there is no place for him in this war of survival. Blacks do not want his patronizing, condescending words of sympathy. They do not need his concern, his "love," his money. It is that which dehumanizes; it is that which enslaves. Freedom is what happens to a man on the inside; it is what happens to a man's being. It has nothing to do with voting, marching, picketing, or rioting – though all may be manifestations of it ... A man is free when he accepts responsibility for his own acts and knows that they involve not merely himself but all men. No one can "give" or "help get" freedom in that sense.

In this picture, the liberal can find no place. His favorite question when back against the wall is, "What can I do?" One is tempted to reply, as Malcolm X did to the white girl who asked the same question, "Nothing." What the liberal really means is, "What can I do

and still receive the same privileges as other whites and – this is the key – be liked by Negroes?” Indeed, the only answer is “Nothing.” However, there are places in the Black Power picture for “radicals,” that is, for men, white or black, who are prepared to risk life for freedom. There are places for the John Browns, men who hate evil and refuse to tolerate it anywhere.

### III. GROW

Questions for consideration and discussion

1. “All white [people] are responsible for white oppression.” If you are white, are you able to hear this without feeling personally attacked? If you are black, is it possible to believe this without feeling personal animosity?
2. Cone uses the word ‘racism’ both in discussing personal attitudes and in describing a social system that gives advantages to some and not to others, on the basis of race. Is it helpful to make a distinction between the two?
3. In prelude to this passage, Cone says that “racist” is like “pregnant”: either one is, or is not. Others have claimed that the struggle against one’s own racism is necessarily lifelong and gradual. Do you agree with one or the other of these positions, or is the truth somewhere in between?
4. How concerned are we -- whether white or black -- with maintaining friendships, connections, and privileges as we decide whether (and how strongly) to confront racial disparities and racist attitudes?
5. Do you agree that there is truly no way to be an effective white ally, short of the radical position -- the John Brown stand -- as Cone suggests? Is anything else simply a moral compromise, or self-serving betrayal?

### IV. SERVE

Check your motivations. We all want to do the right thing, as best we can. We also know that others may not perceive actions as we intend. This may help or hinder our authenticity.

As you consider whether to speak or to remain silent on a topic, reflect on the reasons for your decision.

- Am I concerned the perceptions of my friend, my acquaintance that I would like to be my friend, my coworker who is watching for me to stumble, my boss or subordinate, my spouse or partner, my fellow church member who is of a different race?
- Am I taking or not taking a stand because I am unsure, or because I am protecting myself?

- When I am sure that my words and actions are made in the best of intention, do I grant the same assumption to the words and actions of those with whom I disagree?
- When I encounter a perspective from an experience other than my own (race, age, religious background, etc.), am I able to acknowledge that without defensiveness? Am I able to say, "tell me more," rather than "yes, but I think..."?

## V. Conclusion

We have varying degrees of understanding, and varying levels of personal engagement with ideas and feelings about race. Did this discussion help to uncover anything new or unexpected (in yourself or in others)? Did the sensitive, emotionally charged nature of this topic make conversation difficult for you? Did you say or avoid saying anything in order to shield yourself or keep from hurting others?

Were you surprised by differences in the group? By similarities? What other feelings did you encounter? What got in the way, and what was missing? If people in the group would like, invite them to share these things, without interrogation or challenge.

Suggested words for extinguishing chalice:

I have come to believe that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. ... My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. ~Audre Lorde