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I, RACIST



*What follows is the text of a “sermon” that I gave as a “congregational reflection” to an all White audience at the Bethel Congregational United Church of Christ on Sunday, June 28th. The sermon was begun with a reading of The Good Samaritan story, and this wonderful quote from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*.*

Credit for this speech goes to Chaédria LaBouvier, whose “Why We Left” inspired me to speak out about racism; to Robin DiAngelo, whose “White Fragility” gave me an understanding of the topic; and to Reni Eddo-Lodge who said “Why I’m no longer talking to white people about race” long before I had the courage to start doing it again.

A

couple weeks ago, I was debating what I was going to talk about in this sermon. I told Pastor Kelly Ryan I had great reservations talking about the one topic that I think about every single day.

Then, a terrorist massacred nine innocent people in a church that I went to, in a city that I still think of as home. At that point, I

knew that despite any misgivings, I needed to talk about race.

You see, I don't talk about race with White people.

To illustrate why, I'll tell a story:

It was probably about 15 years ago when a conversation took place between my aunt, who is White and lives in New York State, and my sister, who is Black and lives in North Carolina. This conversation can be distilled to a single sentence, said by my Black sister:

“The only difference between people in the North and people in the South is that down here, at least people are honest about being racist.”

There was a lot more to that conversation, obviously, but I suggest that it can be distilled into that one sentence because it has been, by my White aunt. Over a decade later, this sentence is still what she talks about. It has become the single most important aspect of my aunt's relationship with my Black family. She is still hurt by the suggestion that people in New York, that she, a northerner, a liberal, a good person who has Black family members, is a racist.

This perfectly illustrates why I don't talk about race with White people. Even — or rather, especially — my own family.



love my aunt. She's actually my favorite aunt, and believe me, I have *a lot* of awesome aunts to choose from. But the facts are actually quite in my sister's favor on this one.

New York State is one of the most segregated states in the country. Buffalo, New York, where my aunt lives, is one of the 10 most segregated school systems in the country. The racial inequality of the area she inhabits is so bad that it has been the subject of reports by the Civil Rights Action Network and the NAACP.

Those, however, are facts that my aunt does not need to know. She does not need to live with the racial segregation and oppression of her home. As a white person with upward mobility, she has continued to improve her situation. She moved out of the area I grew up in— she moved to an area with better schools. She doesn't have to experience racism, and so it is not real to her.

Nor does it dawn on her that the very fact that she moved away from an increasingly Black neighborhood to live in a White suburb might itself be an aspect of racism. She doesn't need to realize that “better schools” exclusively means “whiter schools.”

I don't talk about race with White people because I have so often seen it go nowhere. When I was younger, I thought it was because all white people are racist. Recently, I've begun to understand that it's more nuanced than that.

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of Black *people*.

We don't see a shooting of an innocent Black child in another state as something separate from us because we know viscerally that it could be our child, our parent, or us, that is shot.

The shooting of Walter Scott in North Charleston resonated with me because Walter Scott was portrayed in the media as a deadbeat and a criminal — but when you look at the facts about the actual man, he was nearly indistinguishable from my own father.

Racism affects us directly because the fact that it happened at a geographically remote location or to another Black person is only a coincidence, an accident. It could just as easily happen to us — right here, right now.

Black people think in terms of *we* because we live in a society where the social and political structures interact with us as Black people.

White people do not think in terms of *we*. White people have the privilege to interact with the social and political structures of our society *as individuals*. You are “you,” I am “one of them.” Whites are often not directly affected by racial oppression even in their own community, so what does not affect them locally has little chance of affecting them regionally or nationally. They have no need, nor often any real desire, to think in terms of a group. They are supported by the system, and so are mostly unaffected by it.

What they are affected by are attacks on their own character. To my aunt, the suggestion that “people in The North are racist” is an attack on her *as a racist*. She is unable to differentiate her participation *within* a racist system (upwardly mobile, not racially profiled, able to move to White suburbs, etc.) from an accusation that she, individually, *is a racist*. Without being able to make that differentiation, White people in general

decide to vigorously defend their own personal non-racism, or point out that it doesn't exist because they don't see it.

The result of this is an incessantly repeating argument where a Black person says “Racism still exists. It is real,” and a white person argues “You're wrong, I'm not racist at all. I don't even see any racism.” My aunt's immediate response is not “that is wrong, we should do better.” No, her response is self-protection: “That's not my fault, I didn't do anything. You are wrong.”

Racism is not slavery. As President Obama said, it's not avoiding the use of the word Nigger. Racism is not white water fountains and the back of the bus. Martin Luther King did not end racism. Racism is a cop severing the spine of an innocent man. It is a 12 year old child being shot for playing with a toy gun in a state where it is legal to openly carry firearms.

But racism is even more subtle than that. It's more nuanced. Racism is the fact that “White” means “normal” and that anything else is different. Racism is our acceptance of an all white Lord of the Rings cast because of “historical accuracy,” ignoring the fact that this is a world with an *entirely fictionalized history*.

Even when we make shit up, we want it to be white.

And racism is the fact that we all *accept* that it *is* white. Benedict Cumberbatch playing Khan in Star Trek. Khan, who is from India.

Is there anyone Whiter than Benedict fucking Cumberbatch? What? They needed a “less racial” cast because they already had the Black Uhura character?

That is racism. Once you let yourself see it, it's there all the time.

Black children learn this when their parents give them “The Talk.” When they are sat down at the age of 5 or so and told that their best friend's father is not sick, and not in a bad mood — he just doesn't want his son playing with you. Black children grow up early to life in The Matrix. We're not given a choice of the red or blue pill. Most white people, like my

aunt, never have to choose. The system was made for White people, so White people don't have to think about living in it.

But we can't point this out.

Living every single day with institutionalized racism and then having to argue its very existence, is tiring, and saddening, and angering. Yet if we express any emotion while talking about it, we're tone policed, told we're being angry. In fact, a key element in any racial argument in America is the Angry Black person, and racial discussions shut down when that person speaks. The Angry Black person invalidates any arguments about racism because they are "just being overly sensitive," or "too emotional," or— playing the race card. Or even worse, we're told that *we* are being racist (Does any intelligent person actually believe a systematically oppressed demographic has the ability to oppress those in power?)

But here is the irony, here's the thing that all the angry Black people know, and no calmly debating White people want to admit: **The entire discussion of race in America centers around the protection of White feelings.**

Ask any Black person and they'll tell you the same thing. The reality of thousands of innocent people raped, shot, imprisoned, and systematically disenfranchised are less important than the suggestion that a single White person might be complicit in a racist system.

This is the country we live in. Millions of Black lives are valued less than a single White person's hurt feelings.

White people and Black people are not having a discussion about race. Black people, thinking as a group, are talking about *living in a racist system*. White people, thinking as individuals, refuse to talk about "I, racist" and instead protect their own individual and personal goodness. In doing so, they reject the existence of racism.

But arguing about personal non-racism is missing the point.

Despite what the Charleston Massacre makes things look like, people are dying not because individuals are racist, but because individuals are helping support a racist system by wanting to protect their own non-racist self beliefs.

People are dying because we are supporting a racist system that justifies White people killing Black people.

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see this in how one Muslim killer is Islamic terror; how one Mexican thief points to the need for border security; in one innocent, unarmed Black man shot in the back by a cop, then sullied in the media as a thug and criminal.

And in the way a white racist in a state that still flies the confederate flag is seen as “troubling” and “unnerving.” In the way people “can't understand why he would do such a thing.”

A white person smoking pot is a “hippie” and a Black person doing it is a “criminal.” It's evident in the school to prison pipeline and the fact that there are close to 20 people of color in prison for every white person.

There's a headline from The Independent that sums this up quite nicely: “Charleston shooting: Black and Muslim killers are ‘terrorists’ and ‘thugs’. Why are white shooters called ‘mentally ill’?”

I'm gonna read that again: “Black and Muslim killers are ‘terrorists’ and ‘thugs’. Why are white shooters called ‘mentally ill’?”

Did you catch that? It's beautifully subtle. This is an article talking specifically about the different way we treat people of color in this nation and even in this article's headline, the white people are “shooters” and the Black and Muslim people are “killers.”

Even when we're talking about racism, we're using racist language to make people of color look dangerous and make White people come out as not so bad.

Just let that sink in for a minute, then ask yourself why Black people are angry when they talk about race.

The reality of America is that White people are fundamentally good, and so when a white person commits a crime, it is a sign that they, *as an individual*, are bad. Their actions as a person are not indicative of any broader social construct. Even the fact that America has a growing number of violent hate groups, populated mostly by white men, and that nearly **all** serial killers are white men can not shadow the fundamental truth of white male goodness. In fact, we like White serial killers so much, we make mini-series about them.

White people are good as a whole, and only act badly as individuals.

People of color, especially Black people (but boy we can talk about “The Mexicans” in this community) are seen as fundamentally bad. There might be a good one — and we are always quick to point them out to our friends, show them off as our Academy Award for “Best Non-Racist in a White Role” — but when we see a bad one, it’s just proof that the rest are, as a rule, bad.

This, all of this, expectation, treatment, thought, the underlying social system that puts White in the position of Normal and good, and Black in the position of “other” and “bad,” all of this, is racism.

And White people, every single one of you, are complicit in this racism because *you benefit directly from it*.

This is why I don't like the story of the good samaritan. Everyone likes to think of themselves as the person who sees someone beaten and bloodied and helps him out.

That's too easy.

If I could re-write that story, I'd rewrite it from the perspective of Black America. What if the person wasn't beaten and bloody? What if it wasn't so obvious? What if they were just systematically challenged in a thousand small ways *that actually made it easier for you to succeed in life?*

Would you be so quick to help then?

Or would you, like most White people, stay silent and let it happen?

Here's what I want to say to you: Racism is so deeply embedded in this country not because of the racist right-wing radicals who practice it openly, it exists because of the silence and hurt feelings of liberal America.

That's what I want to say, but really, I can't. I can't say that because I've spent my life not talking about race to White people. In a big way, it's my fault. Racism exists because I, as a Black person, don't challenge you to look at it.

Racism exists because I, not you, am silent.

But I'm caught in the perfect Catch 22, because when I start pointing out racism, I become the Angry Black Person, and the discussion shuts down again. So I'm stuck.

All the Black voices in the world speaking about racism all the time do not move White people to think about it— but one White John Stewart talking about Charleston has a whole lot of White people talking about it. That's the world we live in. Black people can't change it while White people are silent and deaf to our words.

White people are in a position of power in this country *because of racism*. The question is: Are they brave enough to use that power to speak against the system that gave it to them?

So I'm asking you to help me. Notice this. Speak up. Don't let it slide. Don't stand watching in silence. Help build a world where it never gets to the point where the Samaritan has to see someone bloodied and broken.

As for me,

I will no longer be silent.

I'm going to *try* to speak kindly, and softly, but that's gonna be hard. Because it's getting harder and harder for me to think about the protection of White people's feelings when White people don't seem to care at all about the loss of so many Black lives.