

Pastor's Reflections ...

by Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz

A few weeks back, in response to the recent controversy raised around the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, former pastor at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois (the church where Presidential candidate Barack Obama is a member), Rev. John Thomas, the President of the *United Church of Christ* sent out a memo to our UCC churches urging us to use Sunday, May 18th as a time to initiate a *sacred* conversation on race. I want to use this space in our monthly newsletter to launch such a conversation.

A conversation on race ...

Historical context. At some point, a conversation on race in America must include people of all races: African Americans, to be sure—particularly with the dark period of slavery that has grated forever in the American conscience; but also to include Americans of Hispanic, Asian and Native American ancestry.

Such a conversation has to start with some serious sorting out of historical context.

To begin with, the Bible has its own problems with race. On the one hand, we have Galatians 3 (written in the early 50's, CE) where the Apostle Paul says:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:28)

However, we also have these words from Ephesians 6 (written perhaps a generation later):

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. (Ephesians 6:5-6)

In order to allow the Bible to breathe, and to build up the Church, it's important to understand that, to a great extent, the Bible reflects the accepted cultural mores of the historical period (980 BCE to 120 CE) during which it was penned, a period of more than eleven hundred years.

Enlightened Christian writers said things in 1st century Palestine they would most likely not say today. Like any of us, they were products of their times. For example, can we imagine the *generally* progressive Apostle Paul saying the same things in 2008 about the role of women that he said almost 2,000 years ago, when women were largely third class citizens? Hardly!

In this sense, the Bible needs to be freed from the chains of its historical period.

At the same time, we need to take a fresh look at one of the most hallowed of uniquely American documents, *the Declaration of Independence*.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (women were implied) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Since 1776, we've known these words, as they have inspired our vision and sense of justice for all persons. However, until 1863 with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and 1965 with Lyndon Johnson's Civil Rights' legislation, the words have existed more in word than in practice. And even now, in 2008, we're still a long way from them being realized.

Forever, it seems, slavery has been the eternal stain on the spirit of our great nation. At the time, the Founding Fathers knew it was wrong and morally reprehensible. Still, however regrettably, the binding realities of the times swayed the ultimate decision. As the Civil War reminds us, the challenge of slavery was not to be easily resolved.

Towards a new day. It is only now, with the candidacy of Barack Obama, whose black father was from Kenya and white mother from Kansas, that America's shameful sin has been brought center stage once again.

As Christians and as Americans, there's an *atonement* theme here that presents an opportunity for us all to move to higher spiritual ground. At our best, none of us wants to live in a country where racism has any currency in our common national life.

However, as the demographics of election 2008 suggest and exit polls confirm, race remains an unresolved element in American life and culture. Still, on the positive side, it appears to be less of a hot-button issue than might have been anticipated.

At some point, any conversation on race has to deal with stereotypes. Try as we might, it's hard not to stereotype on all sides. Fair or unfair, it's the way we sort out our lives. From our personal experience—both direct and indirect—we assume certain behaviors from certain persons and groups.

So what do we do? How do we move increasingly towards a society transcendent of race?

What we do is what we are doing in election 2008. We continue to talk about it, discuss it, and reflect on it. At the same time, we make a conscious decision to aim high, looking for the best in our brothers and sisters of all races and—again and again—we practice *neighbor love*.

Much of our problem with race in America is locked in the cultural and community divide. For too long, we've lived separate lives and kept to ourselves. Which is to suggest: we've lacked familiarity with one another. And we're not talking solely about

blacks and whites. This is no less true of Hispanics and Asians, to say nothing of Native Americans.

A conversation on race needs to bring all races and ethnic groups into the fold. Increasingly, we need to emphasize *putting a face* on the other person—the other American from whatever ancestry; until the day when we awake to a world where historical distinctions have evaporated and we're all simply Americans. We see this more and more, everyday, with our emerging youth culture.

O what a day! One people, one God, and one common future.