



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Making the Age of Mercy

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I want to start with a quotation from a film, *The Thin Red Line*:

This great evil. Where's it come from? How'd it steal into the world? What seed, what root, did it grow from? Who's doing this? Who's killing us? Robbing us of life and light? Mocking us with the sight of what we might have known? Does our ruin benefit the earth, aid the grass to grow, the sun to shine? Is this darkness in you too? Have you passed through this night?

The Thin Red Line is a film that explores the destruction of war, and as you can tell by those questions, it asks the viewer to dig deeper and consider the origins of violence in the human condition. It reminds me of the questions Ta-Nehisi Coates raises in his book, *Between the World and Me*: if America is not God-made, and if how we treat the black body is evidence that America is indeed man-made, what does it say about us as human beings, that we are capable of such impunity and violence?

Evil is born of fear, just as violence is born of fear. I included a little of it in the reading, but Coates goes on for several pages about the violence he witnessed in his family and the black community growing up. It's violence that originated in America's slavery, and continues in the War on Drugs. It's violence that has been extended to people of color beyond African descent, in the War on Terror and the War on Immigrants.

It's this question of evil – are we naturally born bad? – that religion has tried to answer through the ages, most likely, too, in the face of great fear and violence. Some religions say, *yes*. We are born bad, until we're baptized or accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Unitarian Universalists believe we are born with a mixed bag of traits; that it's up to ourselves, family, and society to develop for good or evil. In other words, the question of innate good or evil for religious liberals is answered *relationally*, in this life, in the here and now.

And, we believe that fear is taught. We are not born afraid of the other, afraid of the criminal, the immigrant, the Muslim. Neither are African Americans born afraid of the police officer until it is beaten into them, by the police themselves or family members who teach extreme vigilance out of a desperate sense of survival.

This fear calls for mercy, but before we talk about mercy, it's so important that we understand the distinctions of the fear I just talked about. The fear bigots, or even just the average American, might have of the criminal, immigrant, or Muslim is, at heart, self-centered and ignorant in nature. No, no one wants to get hurt, but as we can see by looking at current events, the threats of terror by "radical Americans" targeting Muslims are just as real. What's far more pervasive and harder to talk about is the economic security people of privilege are afraid of losing. It's a selfish fear, and apples and oranges different compared to the fear people of color face. Their fear is a *bodily* fear, a visceral fear.

Here's another paragraph from the Ross Gay essay, *Some Thoughts on Mercy*:

Among the more concrete ramifications of this corruption of the imagination is that when the police suspect a black man or boy of having a gun, he becomes murderable: Murderable despite having earned advanced degrees or bought a cute house or written a couple books of poetry. Murderable whether he's an unarmed adult or a child riding a bike in the opposite direction. Murderable in the doorways of our houses. Murderable as we come home from the store. Murderable as we lie face down on the ground in a subway station. Murderable the day before our weddings.

White people simply have no clue of the soul-death this entails, the sadness, pain, and stress. It's why reading Coates' latest book is important in helping us understand. Perhaps it's the kind of book our new White Anti-Racist Allies group might choose to read together. Our first meeting is at the end of this month. This book is hard to read, for it's painful to awaken to, and truly *see* what has for so long, way too long, been invisible. As Gay points out, it's the familiarity of it all "which makes the significant daily terror of being a black or brown person in this country almost invisible."

And toward the end of his essay he so eloquently points out that it is mercy that will help us see. It's worth repeating:

It seems to me that part of my reason for writing this — for revealing my own fear and sorrow, my own paranoia and self-incrimination and shame — is to say, *Look how I've been made by this*. To have, perhaps, mercy on myself. When we have mercy, deep and abiding change might happen. The corrupt imagination might become visible. Inequalities might become visible. Violence might become visible. Terror might become visible. And the things we've been doing to each other, despite the fact that we don't want to do such things to each other, might become visible.

When we have mercy we can *all* say, "*Look how I've been made by this*." No, the quality and degrees of fear are not comparable, but fear is destructive, for that is the man-made seed that flowers into evil and violence. *We've all been made by this*. We all need mercy.

So what is mercy anyway? It's different from compassion. It's defined as "compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm." Mercy truly is the operative healing force we need to embrace, if we want to leave behind the age of racism, fear, and punishment. We've been here several centuries, maybe forever. Along with Coates' book, I'm also making my way through his cover story in this month's *Atlantic*, "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration."

I think we're aware of the extent of the mass incarceration crisis, but there's a couple sentences in this article that hit me hard that I want to share. In them he cites Daniel Patrick Moynihan, advisor to President Nixon, who wrote a well-meaning but ultimately ignorant and disastrous report called, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." Coates writes, "As the civil rights movement wound down, Moynihan looked out and saw a black population reeling under the effects of 350 years of bondage and plunder. He believed that these effects could be addressed through state action. They were — through the mass incarceration of millions of black people."

So if we've been here forever, is there hope, is there truly hope for making an age of mercy? Let's get theological, then offer the liberal religious translation. In the Hebrew Bible, what some call the Old Testament, mercy is associated with the covenant obligation between God and humans. Humans must be faithful to the covenant and God binds himself to fidelity to the covenant by mercy and by grace, which is another Hebrew word used to mean mercy. In the New Testament, God's merciful faithfulness is attributed to his sending of Jesus and saving his people. This is all taken directly from my Harper Collins Bible Dictionary. For good measure, Muhammad said, "Those who are merciful have mercy shown them by the Compassionate One, if you show mercy to those who are in the earth, He Who is in heaven will show mercy to you."

Okay, so there's a lot of divine participation going on in all of that. Let's bring this down to earth, right? You know, I often say to myself, "Lord, have mercy." I say it when I'm trying to get through my day, those moments when I'm tired and I want to stop but I know I've got to keep on going. For example, I was happy I co-authored and submitted an Op-Ed in favor of increasing the minimum wage in Pasadena that was published in last Sunday's Pasadena Star News, and that I helped collect half of the 20 clergy names in support of it – even a Catholic priest! But wouldn't you know it, I can't just sit back with some Cheshire grin now, it doesn't make me done. I have to follow up. I need to get all these clergy to follow up with their parishioners, and the slog of advocacy work has to keep going. I have to *keep movin'*. Lord have mercy!

I say it a lot, and I don't believe in "the Lord" per se, but what I'm really trying to say is, "let me have mercy on myself and mercy from my fellow human beings," because what matters most to me, is when mercy happens in the flesh! Again, for religious liberals, mercy is *relational*. Mercy matters most now, in this life, between human beings, face to face.

It's face-to-face mercy that changes laws, too. As weary as my advocacy ministry can make me, I love it because in no other way do I meet incredible people and hear stories I wouldn't hear anywhere else. Listening and feeling is how I embody mercy in the flesh and in the halls of justice. Taking a stand for the sacredness of the African American body, that the corruption of the imagination shall no longer make the black man or boy murderable. If there's any divine intervention in this work, it's via the inspiration of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., for he is the picture of Jesus I place on my wall. It's MLK who was in the flesh a lot more recently than Jesus was, so I can relate to him more, I can believe in him. It was the crux of his message and ministry, to *make mercy*.

I don't think about MLK as a martyr or a savior, I just try to be like him. To make in-the-flesh mercy that changes laws and lives. To make mercy means I gotta make more calls and send more emails, organize, help more statements get published. Mercy in the flesh is the struggle itself. Making mercy also means I need to find the courage to empathize, to feel with the fathomless fear unique to communities of color. There is not mere dignity in the struggle of mercy-making – there is something else. There is a deep and abiding spirituality, an experience of the sacred, of the holy. To make mercy with one another is to come in

communion with the basic truth of humanity: That the holy, and the goodness, *is* inherent in every one of our bodies, in the flesh.

It's like the wisdom that says, "Don't be Christian, be Christ. Don't be Buddhist, be Buddha." Don't just talk about MLK and mercy, be MLK, be mercy.

Making the age of mercy asks some things of us. This was articulated in very simple terms by Pastor Kerwin Manning, a local black Christian minister who spoke at the panel on police accountability this past Tuesday night, organized by CICOPP, the Coalition for Increased Oversight of Pasadena Police. After talking about all the funerals he's had to do for the lost sons in his community, he said, "Look. Until people really care, even when they're not affected by it, even when the violence and the killing is not in their neighborhood, nothing will change." And it's what the expert on police accountability, Sam Walker, said too. It is sustained, organized community activism that will change things, and I know that what makes it sustainable is when people care, because they want to make mercy.

We saw mercy happen on the state level this past week, when the legislature and Governor Jerry Brown, against the odds but because they heard from enough of us who care, passed and signed into law AB 953, the bill to stop racial profiling in California. As our Kris Ockershauser, leader of the coalition, said, "This is truly a huge win in the fight to end racial profiling."

So is there hope for making the age of mercy? Yes, there really is. But we've got to get more white people to *show* how much we care, not just think it. There's hope if white people recognize the unjust power unique to us, and how our majority silence implicitly condones the age of fear and suffering. Remember, mercy is different from compassion because you can have compassion, and not be able to affect change in someone's life. Mercy is "compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm." With mercy, it's forgiveness *and* the ability to affect positive change.

In other words, you can't give mercy with your eyes closed. When you recognize you can harm or punish, or not harm and punish, then it becomes a conscious decision, and it's when the invisible, finally, finally becomes seen. We white people can forgive ourselves for the historical wrongs of slavery and still not recognize our position of power in their institutional continuation. With mercy we recognize our power over, the power to help or hurt. These questions of Ross Gay's, can be like a prayer, a touchstone of intention:

"What if we honestly assessed what we have come to believe about ourselves and each other, and how those beliefs shape our lives? And what if we did it with generosity and forgiveness? What if we did it with mercy?"

So - *Have you passed through this night?* We've all been made by this man-made America. But the good news is that, when we make mercy for ourselves and for the other, it is an initiation to the holy, when we recognize that every night a child is born is a holy night, and that the bodies of all God's children, all of us, every shade of us, are sacred, perfect, whole.