

SAME OLD NORTH, BRAND NEW SOUTH
Sermon Preached by The Reverend Cheryl M. Walker
District Annual Meeting, April 30, 2011

Good morning. I've lived in the South, for the past eighteen months or so, in Wilmington North Carolina, properly said as "Wiminton," no L no G. As a native born and bred New Yorker, I have pretty much adjusted to life down here, surprisingly. To be honest Southern ways are not all that strange to me, as I am from a mixed marriage; my mother was a Southerner and my father was a New Yorker, which means that I know how to curse you out and then say "bless your heart." I have recently learned that there is a difference between saying "bless your heart" at the beginning or the end of a statement. And I like living down here. I like the pace of life, the oh so descriptive use of the English language and I really like the white folk down here. They're just so refreshingly in touch with their racism. And I mean refreshingly.

Southern white people are so much in touch with racism that they're either never going to give it up, or they have been in touch with it in ways that allow them to leave it behind. There's not much guessing about which side of that fence they're on. I mean if it were a hot day and I wanted a cold beer and saw a bar with a big ole Confederate flag in its window, well there's a message that's hard to miss. Yet there's something else about white folk down here that I like, they appreciate, chutzpah, gumption; because if I went in that bar and ordered that beer I'd probably get it for free. There would be the understanding, of course, that I shouldn't sip it and I ain't gonna get another one. It's clear and I don't have to guess. I like that. In Northern cities like New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, I was always guessing.

White folk that have really been in touch with their racism and have gotten past it really have. I find Northerners often speak the right words but their actions say something very different. I'm going to tell you as story of something that happened down here and the reaction I got from Northern white people and Southern white people. And the reaction says as much about racism as the story itself.

I was at the hospital, in Wilmington, waiting to hear news about someone who was having a minor procedure. In this particular hospital they give you beepers if you're waiting; it's a lot like

they do in some restaurants to let you know when your table is ready. Well, while I was waiting I saw a woman, a white woman, who looked to be in her mid to late fifties and she had a lot of things with her, one of which was a baby carrier, with no baby in it. I assumed that it was her grandbaby that was having the procedure. I could see the worry on her face so I said a silent prayer hoping that everything would be alright. A few minutes later her beeper started ringing and she gathered up all her belongings, which as I said were many, and started walking down the hall. Just then a man, a black man, came up and took some of her things and said to her 'here, let me help you with that, ma'am.' And the woman said "oh thank you, sir." and the two of them went off down the hallway together.

I sat there for a moment and thought, 'my something is different about what just happened.' It wasn't that a black man helped a white woman, I'd seen that before in my life. After a while it dawned on me what was different in their exchange - it lacked the moment of hesitation. It's that moment that white people have, that black people notice, that white people think we don't. It's the moment of hesitation that says 'is this a good person of color or not?' It wasn't there. I don't recall a time living with white Northerners when that moment wasn't there.

When I tell this story to white people I get very different responses from Northern white folk than I do from Southern white folk. The reaction of Southerners falls mainly into the categories of I-don't-get-it, because it doesn't seem like a big deal, or with a bit of pride, because they do remember how things once were. Northerners have reacted by saying "do you think it was because that white woman thought that the black man was supposed to help her. That she thought it was his place?" That answer is insulting to the black man, as if that man did it because it was his place. It is insulting to the white woman, because it assumed a racism she didn't have. But more importantly it immediately deflects the attention away from white Northerners and subtly justifies the moment of hesitation simply by not confronting it. This is what happens in the North, we simply don't confront our racism, it's someone else's problem. It's a Southern problem.

The reactions that I got told me that it's the same old North but a brand new South.

There has been a lot of talk lately about the challenge to Unitarian Universalism of becoming truly multi-cultural. It is my belief that this will not happen in our Northern congregations first; it will happen, if it happens at all, in our Southern congregations. Southern people, of all colors, have a long history of sharing cultures. You can't live side by side and not be influenced by each other's cultures. So Southerners are, in my opinion, more prepared to venture into the territory of multi-culturalism. And because of the hard emotional work they have already been forced to do, they are better equipped to do the hard emotional work of creating multi-cultural congregations. Southern Unitarian Universalism offers a fertile ground for the grand idea that 11 am on Sunday morning need NOT be the segregation hour.

Another thing I have noticed about Southerners of all colors is their love of church. They love their church and they know how to tithe. We should all be looking to get more Southerners in our congregations. Most tell a story of loving their churches growing up, loving its warmth and nurturing, but not loving their church's message. Well, we Unitarian Universalists have the message, now we have to learn how to do church. And doing church means that God and Jesus are welcome to come in and set a spell. Our message of universal love and universal salvation rings a chord with people and we need to embrace it rather than ignore it. Quite frankly very few people understand or even care about the issue of the Trinity. What they do care about is whether or not they will be saved. And our Universalist answer has always been a resounding YES! There are people starving to hear that message. Beaten up and beaten down by a church that makes them question their worth, we have the message that affirms and promotes their inherent worth and dignity. Now we have to spread the word and especially spread the word to our Southern sisters and brothers.

And we need to spread the word within Unitarian Universalism. We need to attract more people to come and do their ministry below the Mason Dixon line. One way to do that is to attract more people to try it by offering internships while they are in their ministerial formation. Of the fifty plus internships that were offered in the 2009-10 church year, only one of them was in this district. One. How will we attract people to serve our Southern congregations if there are

no opportunities for students to learn about us and the difference between Northern and Southern congregational life?

We have many congregations and few that can afford an intern, yet we have a responsibility to the faith to train ministers here in the South so they may eventually serve the South, especially ministers of color. Now I can hear so many of y'all saying we can't afford it. We could if we pooled our resources. If every congregation gave to an internship fund, we could afford to finance an internship if not every year than at least every other year. It could be a start to creating more and more opportunities for our ministry to grow here in the South.

I think, I know, that there is great potential for the growth of Unitarian Universalism in the South. Here in the Bible belt, people want a new way of reading the Bible. And we do that. They want a new way of being in relationship with God. And we do that. They want a place where they know without question that they are loved and accepted for who they are just as they are, and we do that!

It's a brand new day in the South, the question for Unitarian Universalism is - are we ready to awaken to its promise?