



Sermon preached Sunday, February 22nd, 2015
at Evanston Unitarian Church
by Rev. Dr. David Breeden

A reading from *Sapiens: A Brief History of
Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari.

The Opposite of Poverty is not Wealth.
It is Justice

INTRODUCTION

Most people have heard the Groucho Marx line, “I wouldn’t want to belong to a club that would accept me.”

Did you know that Groucho said this as the result of a specific event.

His daughter had gone to a country club with a group of friends to swim in the pool. The Marxs were not members of the club, and his daughter, Melinda, was not allowed to swim in the pool.

When management discovered that they had barred someone famous, afraid of the publicity, they sent Groucho an application, saying his membership would be free.

This is when Groucho wrote back, “I wouldn’t want to belong to a club that would accept me.”

Groucho’s daughter *did* want to swim in the pool, however, and so, under pressure, Groucho filled out the application.

His application was rejected. Groucho was Jewish, and the country club did not accept Jews. The management was, again, embarrassed, but rules were rules. They sent Groucho a letter to that effect.

Groucho again wrote back, this time saying that he was indeed Jewish, but his wife was not. Therefore, could his daughter join the country club and wade *half way* into the pool . . .

Groucho was part of a Vaudeville tradition in which immigrant Jews pretended to be from other immigrant groups.

The oldest Marx brother, Leonard, became Chico, an Italian character. Arthur Marx, known as Harpo, acted in a red wig and was supposed to be Irish, but, since the films were in black and white and Harpo never spoke, most people don't know that.

Groucho, whose name was Julius, originally did his comedy with a German accent, but dropped that during the First World War after he was booed off stage. The films were made well after that time. So, most people only know of one Marx brother playing an ethnic stereotype.

The most infamous case of a Jew playing another ethnicity is of course Al Jolson, who performed in blackface . . .

ONE

Why Jewish comedians played stereotypical characters from other immigrant groups is the stuff of many sociological studies. A good one is *How Jews Became White Folks and What that Says About Race in America* by Karen Brodtkin.

The formative book on the subject of ethnic groups and inclusion in the category of “white” is *How the Irish Became White* by Harvard professor Noel Ignatiev.

Fact is, when that boatload of Brits showed up in Massachusetts, they quite literally considered themselves god's gift to the continent.

Subsequently, they and their descendants decided which religions were acceptable; which ethnicities and countries of origin were acceptable; who could vote; who was enslaved; who lived and who died.

This norm has functioned continuously ever since, letting some into the club of whiteness and refusing entrance to others. This normative power is what Professor Ignatiev means by “white.” It doesn't have to do with skin pigmentation so much as the practice of—and access to—power.

The British Protestants declared themselves the baseline for “American-ness” and had the power to enforce their norms. One of the rules of White Club is . . . you don’t talk about money. That goes from stewardship campaigns in UU congregations—done *gingerly*—to economics and social class.

After all—if you’re in White Club, capitalism is the hand that feeds you . . . don’t bite it. White Club writes the economic rules.

Yet people of conscience look around—and see the truth of inequality, of prejudices from white privilege, to racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism. *Et Cetera*.

Chuck Collins yesterday called this “the myth of deservedness.” That’s the *foundational* myth of White Club—according to this myth, the Puritans deserved the land that belonged to natives. The Texas Anglos deserved Northern Mexico. Capitalists deserve the right to define marriage and family. Well—no, they don’t!

White Club. Heterosexual Club. Middle Class Club—all myths of deservedness. But not myth in a good way—it’s a lie.

I’m making a claim in the title to my talk today: the opposite of poverty is not wealth. It’s justice.

Why do I say that?

As someone born into the working class, I know that social class is about a lot more than money. It’s about social assumptions; social relationships; social safety nets; access to knowledge and power It’s a club. With rules.

Money *does* buy these. But only tangentially. The fact is, American children born into poverty have less than a one-in-ten chance of escaping poverty. I didn’t read that in some crazed Marxist pamphlet.

This is the conclusion of The Equality of Opportunity Project, headed up by Harvard Professor of Economics Raj Chetty and published in 2014.

Nationally, only eight percent of children born in the *bottom* twenty percent of income achieve entry into the *top* twenty percent. That’s one of the lowest in the

industrialized world. Children in Denmark have roughly twice the chance of changing social class.

I'm a witness. I was born into that bottom twenty percent downstate of here. Today, I'm in the top twenty percent. I did not pull myself up by my bootstraps. Being born white, male, and heterosexual loaded the dice.

A land of opportunity?

Unfortunately, it's a myth. I beat the odds. It's that simple. I beat the odds. I was lucky. I was born fitting some of the rules of White Club.

But don't tell me that I've worked harder than my relatives who have worked two and three jobs at a time.

I'm not more deserving or special When I was born into a poor, working class family, my future went on a number, a number on a roulette wheel. I won. My chances were, based on the region where I was born, downstate Illinois . . . one in ninety two. Luck.

Reacting to this isn't about anti-Americanism. It's about looking clearly at where we are and considering where we want to go. I suggest that the way to go is justice.

TWO

Some groups were able to get into White Club relatively easily. Descendants of German immigrants, for example, now outnumber descendants of British immigrants. (And George Washington was half-German.) Though it took until 1890 for a 100% German to be elected to national office . . .

Germans "became white" in 1890. The Club perks include social and political power and . . . money.

Professor Ignatiev argues that the Irish became white by becoming *more racist* than the British and Germans and organizing their political power in the poorest parts of America's cities. (It isn't a coincidence that the great haters on Fox News are generally of Irish extraction.)

The story of the Irish in Chicago politics reflects that story.

As Chico Marx demonstrated, the Italians had an *even tougher time* becoming white. Chico is named “Chico” because the Italian stereotype had such an amorous eye for the “chicks.”

Italy was thought of by the white power structure of the time much as Mexico is today, and “Italian” was an official race on the US census in the early Twentieth Century.

Whiteness. It’s a club. It’s a club with rules.

One of the jobs of a club is to enforce its rules, to police its borders. Racial profiling is merely the most blatant example of this.

In the recent election in Minneapolis, where I live, one of the members of my congregation was sternly read the consequences of voter fraud before she could get her ballot. Her last name is . . . Martinez.

Clearly, she was being reminded that someone with the last name of Martinez is probably not a member of White Club. The . . . shall we say amusing? . . . thing about the story is that her husband’s family was run out of Spain during the Inquisition period because they were Jewish, came to Mexico—the part that was “acquired” by the US in the Texas Revolution—and so the Jewish Martinez family became Americans, whether they liked it or not.

It’s difficult to get into White Club.

Consider the protests concerning the name of the Washington football team.

Some Native Americans say that the word “redskins” is racist. Some Native Americans don’t agree. It could be looked at as a classic case of he-said/she-said.

Equal time for everybody, right? That’s the way the US media plays the game, after a fashion . . .

But it’s *not* a case of he-said/she-said. It’s a matter of *listening* to the people who are hurt by the name. It’s our *obligation* to listen. Non-native Americans don’t get a vote. It’s our obligation to *serve* rather than *help*.

And anecdotes are not data. *Sixty-seven percent* of Native Americans find the term racist. End of story. People in White Club are presumptuous in making pronouncements.

I grew up in the southern-most part of this state, where debates about the Confederate battle flag are constant. Guess what—the children of Confederate soldiers don't get to say their flag isn't racist. The *oppressed* get the last word on that . . . if we are talking about *justice* rather than the rules of White Club.

THREE

Rather than reciting the rules of White Club, it is the work of those who seek justice to *join with* the oppressed and listen. This has been part of the good that has come from UU participation in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Dr. Rachel Remen, a physician and pioneer in relationship-centered health care, distinguishes between “helping,” “fixing,” and “serving.” Helping and fixing *dehumanize* the people being helped and fixed.

In the case of police killings of unarmed black men, we know that members of White Club are *helping everyone understand* why there are no indictments.

That's *not* helpful.

Members of White Club have no business helping or fixing . . . the right thing to do is to *serve*.

Some of you have read the newest book by UU scholar Mark Morrison-Reed called *The Selma Awakening*. It's about how Unitarian Universalists came to be at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement at Selma, whose fiftieth anniversary is coming up soon.

Some of you have seen the film *Selma*, in which two of the three civil rights workers killed are Unitarian Universalist.

In the 1950s, many UU congregations had large numbers of African Americans as members or frequent visitors. Only a few UU congregations now have substantial numbers of African American members. African Americans voted with their feet.

Why was that? What happened? That's the question Mark Morrison-Reed's book asks. What happened to Unitarian Universalism? Why haven't we created the integrated congregations we hoped to be then and still aspire to be?

Reed looks at the case of John Dietrich and First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, the congregation I serve. Why was it that the congregation was at the forefront of thinking on race in the 1920s, then lost steam?

One factor is that First Unitarian of Minneapolis is an overtly humanist congregation and humanists tend to be a . . . bit left of center.

Humanists tend to be left of center because of our assumption that *all* people deserve the same chance to flourish, to realize human potential. And we believe it's our job to do something about that. The humanist principle "the inherent worth and dignity of each person" has become a UU principle. It's a radical principle.

The Marxist analysis of race had a lot to do with why humanists were ahead of the curve on the race question, and Marxism had a lot to do with the development of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. This led to heavy union participation—unions formed the logistical and financial backbone of MLK's movement.

The Marxist analysis of race is very simple: the ruling class—White Club—creates and uses racial prejudice to divide and conquer the working class. In other words, Marxists say that "whiteness"—and getting into the club of whiteness—is a manipulative tool for controlling the poor.

Now, this is clearly a conspiracy theory. But, even given that the club of whiteness can't *really* coherently manipulate on such a grand scale, the idea has merit. And I believe it was the driving force behind the success of the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s. And it's why the movement faltered in predominantly white congregations.

For example: Here's a hero you haven't heard of unless you've gotten deep into civil rights or union rights: A. Philip Randolph.

Randolph was an African American. Born in 1889. He organized a union called the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, one of the first African American unions. He was also president of the Negro American Labor Council and vice-president of the AFL-CIO.

A. Philip Randolph was a Socialist. An atheist. And a humanist. He signed the second Humanist Manifesto in 1973. The same Humanist Manifesto that Betty Friedan signed.

The first Humanist Manifesto, written in the 1930s was explicitly socialist, when the New Deal was a heady dream. The second Manifesto smoothed that over a bit, but Humanism has socialism in its DNA. After all, if you believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each person, it's hard to argue that "white" America and its defining organizer, capitalism, create a level playing field.

Furthermore, after you've asked the question, "How can we make the United States a level playing field?" you have most likely gone down the road of *redistributive justice*.

There are two ways to redistribute wealth: revolution and taxes. Sane, thoughtful, people tend to suggest that taxes are the way to go . . .

As the socialist reading of history lost its force in the United States, and as labor unions lost their power, it became less and less obvious what the question of race meant in the larger context of UU thinking. Unitarian Universalists no longer held a cohesive or even adequate analysis of racism—what it is or how to end it or why we should even be involved. About all we can see nowadays is that we're nice and we want to be diverse, so won't all the nice diverse people come on down?

Now we know that race is indeed a fiction just as those old socialists suspected—a social construct. And even if "the man" isn't a manipulative, conspiratorial force, we do see systemic racism dividing the poor along racial lines and affecting elections.

But back to A. Philip Randolph. He joined Bayard Ruston, a nonviolence expert and gay rights activist, to plan the 1963 march on Washington that included the "I have a Dream" speech.

The background was labor unions.

CONCLUSION

Unitarian Universalism lost it's way in the late 1960s on race. We lost our way, I believe, because we thought the answer to racism was to get everybody into White Club. Our movement made the mistake of thinking that the opposite of poverty is wealth. It isn't. The opposite of poverty is justice.

Why did we lose our way?

The reading this morning points a way. Notice how often we fall into "culturism"—"Oh, those African Americans, they like their music lively, not classical." "Oh, black people, you know, they all believe in god." Culturism. Racism.

UUs too often believed that their vision of upper-middle class professional jobs and fast cars in the suburbs was what everyone wanted—so let's find a way to give that to everybody.

But that's not true. And that's just the tip of the iceberg of cultural assumptions among we UUs.

It's not the business of White Club to let people in *after* they meet certain criteria. It's the business of White Club to *vote itself out of existence*.

A Phillip Randolph put it this way:

Justice is never given; it is exacted, and the struggle must be continuous, for freedom is never a final fact, but a *continuing, evolving process* to higher and higher levels of human, social, economic, political and religious *relationship*.

Relationship. That's what it's about. Not *us* helping *them*. But *all* of us being . . . *all of us*. In this together.

The opposite of poverty is *not wealth*. It's justice.

The first rule of breaking down the walls of White Club is SAYING there's a White Club. Then *facing* what that means. Then taking our marching orders from what that means.

The opposite of poverty is not wealth. Lots of poor people find ways to get lots of money. But . . . the opposite of poverty is not lots of money. It's justice.

It's having a chance. It's health care. It's clean water. It's healthy food. It's a safe neighborhood. It's a chance at education.

That's a club I would like to belong to.

Yes, achieving that seems impossible. But it's the right thing to do.

SOURCE

<http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org>