

Sermon: Confederate Flags on Hamburgers
Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg
The Rev. Phyllis L. Hubbell
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Phillip Kennicutt, a Washington Post writer, asked Friday what the other people in the conversation with Donald Trump did when he made those now infamous comments demanding that those from s***hole countries not be allowed to immigrate to the U.S. What did they do right then when faced with comments most would consider racist? Did they interrupt? Did they challenge him? Did they walk out? Or did they even notice? What would we have done? What a terrific question. What a difficult, challenging question.

What are we doing when we hear racism in our lives? When we see it? I ask that question of all of us, but especially of those of us who are white. I ask this question of you who are in this room, but I ask it especially of myself. Maybe we start with whether we even notice it,

see it, understand what is happening while it is happening, and if we do, how do we react. How do we want to react?

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Today, I want to talk about what is happening in our lives, right here where we live, right here where we might have an immediate impact on our friends, our neighbors, our schools, our shopkeepers, our tourists. What are we called to do? To say?

I want those of you here this morning who consider yourselves to be white to imagine for the next few minutes that you are an African American who lives and works here in Gettysburg. You've grown up here. So did your

parents. You were one of a handful of people of color in your schools. You listened to your parents and your grandparents tell stories of what it was like for them growing up here.

Here is what you might have heard. Back when the battle of Gettysburg was fought, several hundred free blacks lived here. Many of them had fled, hearing that southerners had been crossing into Pennsylvania to kidnap blacks and take them back to the south as slaves. Confederate soldiers didn't care whether these were escaped slaves or not. If your skin color marked you as what they would have then called colored or worse, you were simply prey.

You might have learned from your grandparents that many Blacks served as noncombatants for both sides of the battle at Gettysburg as ambulance and supply-wagon drivers, as hospital attendants, as teamsters. Those Blacks from Gettysburg who served the Union during the

Civil War were not allowed burial in the Whites only cemetery.

Many of you may know more about what blacks endured here in the decades that followed. The KKK started meeting here in the 1920's. They burned a cross when there was talk of integrating the schools. But on the other hand, there is a strange story of generosity that I cannot account for. I am told that the KKK took up a collection for St. Paul's the only Black church in town. They donated \$ 115 dollars to the church. That was a lot of money for that time.

Another memory your relatives might have is of a separate school for blacks. That school was finally taken down in the nineteen thirties when the few Black children in this area were admitted into the schools along with white students.

Your parents might have reminisced while you were going up about their own childhood in the 1950's and sixties. Blacks had their own territory, a town within a town, where

they socialized with one another, went to church, planted flowers, partied. I am told it was a good community for people of color in those days, if only an island in the wider more hostile world.

Blacks were not welcome in the local hotels, or restaurants or barber or beauty shops outside that island. There was one restaurant, Neds, that accepted their business but Blacks had to sit in the kitchen. If they went into a shop, the clerks would keep a close eye on them to ensure they didn't steal anything. There were a handful of students of color at Gettysburg College. But local security would keep a close watch on any person of color who came onto the campus.

Even the churches would not welcome your parents in their doors. The Catholic church at some point did allow Blacks to attend services but they had to sit in the back. Of course this was not just true in Gettysburg. As Dr. King once said, "Eleven o'clock, Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the week."

I have heard of bullying in the schools during those years. On the other hand, Gettysburg schools may have been better than those in some other places. One student who transferred in felt a sense of relief because no-one called her the n-word as they had every day in her former school. Still, I have been told that teachers assumed their Black students had limited prospects --surely they would not get into college—surely they would not fill any professional jobs here in Gettysburg. Students with ambition usually left the area.

I want you to continue imagining what you are an African American, but now I want you to think about what your experience here would be like today. The Civil Rights Movement of the fifties and sixties changed Gettysburg. The public high school hired one African American teacher though that has not changed much if at all today. I have heard that bullying remains common in the schools, though perhaps not actual physical violence.

Last fall, someone asked our UUG Board to intervene in a case where a child had been called racist names by other students because the school had not taken strong action against the perpetrators. Our Board contacted the family twice and offered to help, but never heard back.

Some higher level, better paying jobs have opened up, though I have heard that whites often had to be prodded. Some made it clear that they were watching the new employees closely. Businesses now allow people of color to spend their money inside their shops. Some outreach has even been done to try to have more diversity. I have heard, however, that such efforts have met with limited success.

Perhaps the absence of much negative news is hopeful. I have not heard many complaints that the police are racist. There was one taser incident in 2015 that resulted in two police officers resigning, charges being dropped against the African American. A substantial settlement was later made to him.

Was that an isolated incident? Was there more to the story than the newspapers reported? You may know that better than I. There are some indications that the Gettysburg police are trying to reach out to the community, including specifically to people of color. But the local police are mostly white. As are the public school teachers. And shopkeepers. And local government leaders.

Consciously or not, that almost inevitably means that those in power will be suspicious of people of color, fearful of them, judge them more harshly than their white counterparts, have less empathy, expect less achievement. Psychologists have shown this in many experiments.

My guess is that white Gettysburg is neither the best place nor the worst place for people of color to live in this country. But this history of Gettysburg as a place where African Americans were second class citizens within some of our lifetimes has left its legacy of racism. Many African

Americans here as elsewhere distrust the police and the schools. If you have been following along trying to imagine that you are an African American living here in Gettysburg, you may understand why this is so. But the presence here in this historic town of so many Confederate flags doesn't help.

What more potent symbol of that legacy is the presence of the Confederate flag in houses, in cars, in shops. Though the north won the battle of Gettysburg, the many Confederate flags make it seem like it was a southern victory. How does that feel to those whose ancestors endured the Middle Passage, slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and who themselves have encountered racism?

A couple of months ago, I was discussing my preliminary thoughts about doing this service about Gettysburg and race with several of you. UUG Board member Bettye Baker told me that the Blue and Grey, a local downtown restaurant, sold hamburgers with confederate flags

planted in them. “They what? Hmmm,” said I, ‘Confederate Flags on Hamburgers.’ That would make a great sermon title.”

So I have looked at the history of the Confederate flag controversy. It’s complicated. How do you do a reenactment of civil war battles without carrying a replica of the Confederate battle flag? Many southerners protest that they carry the flag to honor and remember their ancestors. Some argue that in fact the Civil War was about states’ rights, not slavery. Some will say that they, too, abhor the KKK and will join us in protesting them. But they want to carry their flag.

Some people genuinely believe this. But historically, I find their reasoning difficult to justify. All of the states that seceded stated in their secession documents that they were leaving the union to protect slavery. Every single one of them. In 1861, Alexander Stephens, Confederate Vice President stated that “Our new government was founded on slavery.” The only states’ rights at issue was the right to

own slaves. Even if that history did not exist, the use of the flag by the KKK and the segregationists, has captured that flag as the symbol of violence and oppression of blacks.

I want you now to think about all those stories you would have heard all your life as a person of color about what your parents endured. Think about the times you as a person of color would have encountered prejudice in your lives. How do you think you would feel walking in an area of town with confederate flags hanging out many windows? Would you feel uneasy if a car or a motorcycle came down the street late at night with a couple of confederate flags flying? I would.

John and I went over to the Blue and the Grey. We ordered a “confederate” hamburgers. True enough, they had a confederate flag stuck in each of them. But not the battle flag of Robert E. Lee. No, this flag had the southern cross surrounded by a large field of white. That was the second official flag of the confederacy. People in the Confederacy said that the first one was too similar to the

Union flag. So they created a new one. One where most of the flag was white, to symbolize purity. It's creator called it "the White Man's Flag."

So back to our original question. What do we do when everywhere we go we see Confederate Flags? Do we say something? Do we walk out? Do we write a letter to the editor? Do we kneel? Or do we just ignore it? Do we ignore the racism? Do we ignore the pain and anger of many of our African American friends?

I hear my white southern neighbors saying "But this flag is just about my heritage." As far as I know, none of my ancestors fought on either side of the Civil War. But at least two of my ancestors held slaves. My middle name Lenoir was given after one of them. My aunt and I went to a Lenoir family reunion thirty years ago in Lenoir, North Carolina. My middle name is Lenoir. I did not know when I agreed to go that the family home of General Lenoir, an officer in the Revolutionary War was a plantation. I did not know that he kept slaves. As far as I remember, no-one

mentioned this at the reunion dinner. I'm pretty sure I didn't. I lacked the courage. But I left, shaken.

I considered for a while whether I should change my middle name. I didn't. I am a Universalist. I believe there is something inherently worthy in all of us, even slaveholders. I'm sure General Lenoir was in part a product of his times. I respect that he was a general in our country's fight for freedom for those of us who were white. But I would never consider carrying a Confederate flag in his honor. There are other ways to honor our ancestors.

Gettysburg is a town whose economy is based on its history. But telling that history, telling all of it, should be this city's mission. We should remember that southerners kidnapped blacks and forced them into slavery. We should remember that an overwhelming majority of southerners of all economic classes supported slavery, including those who fought and died for that cruel cause. We should remember that the South was fighting to

preserve slavery, that this was the issue at stake for the South in Gettysburg. We should remember most of all that the Union, at great cost of lives, won that battle. We should be sure that the U.S. flag or the Union battle flag is what we see most prominently on the streets of Gettysburg. We should celebrate the ideals for which that flag stands, "One nation, under God, indivisible, with freedom and justice for all.

Dr. King spoke of the people who will one day be recognized as heroes. I and many of my white friends are so lacking in courage that we are often afraid to be impolite, let alone risks our bodies and our lives. We are so lacking in imagination, that we do not notice how painful, how frightening, the Confederate Flag is to many of our neighbors of color. Would that one day some of us might instead become heroes for justice, heroes for equality.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith is a complicated. It does not call us to believe the same things. But it calls on us to

act. It calls on us to be at least everyday heroes, working for justice, working for compassion, seeking to walk in each other's shoes. May we open our eyes to injustice everywhere. May we speak out in the cause of equality for all. May we march, and write letters, and hold high the flag of freedom --"One nation, under God, indivisible, with freedom and justice for all."

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