

## Confessing America's Original Sin

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at  
First Congregational Church  
Lebanon, New Hampshire  
21 June 2015*

*Amos 5.21-24*

*I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

What is there to say? What are we to do? Wednesday night, when I heard of the shootings at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, I felt anger and horror and confusion and sorrow. I know that these feelings were shared by you and by millions of Americans as we heard of how a young white man went into a Bible study and sat with 9 black people for an hour talking about Scripture and how he then pulled out a gun and killed those 9 people. Images of the past came to mind. Grainy footage of dogs being set on black marchers in the South, stories of churches like the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham being bombed. All those lessons from our history books about lynchings and Jim Crow. This is not supposed to happen in America in 2015. We've moved beyond all of that. After all, don't we live in a post-racial society? We have a black president. Some of our most popular entertainers and sports figures are African-American. I can say with confidence that the attitudes of individuals have changed remarkably in recent decades.

Yet the truth is, we don't live in a post-racial society. The truth is that race is still an issue that we need to confront here in the United States of America.

This is something we need to talk about in the church because racism is a sin. I take my Scripture seriously and I believe that we are all created in the image of God. Each person on this earth is my brother and my sister. If we cannot talk about this in the church, then perhaps the time has come for us to turn off the lights and close the doors because we are then not capable of doing the work that Jesus has called us to do, which is to share the good news that God's love is for all people and yes, to share the call for each of us and for all of us to repent for our sins.

About 1600 years ago, the great theologian Augustine gave us the concept of original sin. His idea was that through their actions, Adam and Eve had tainted all of us. Now this doctrine of original sin has its problems. This notion that we inherit the faults of our ancestors is troubling and rightfully questioned, but there is something to this concept that can help us think about our situation here in America today, for our country has its own original sin. Sadly, this one has been passed down from generation to generation. Yes, it is the sin of racism. Right from the beginning of the American story, people were held as slaves, black people. Whites could be indentured and they could gain their freedom after a number of years of work, but black people, no. The understanding was they could be property. When our Constitution, a remarkable document, durable, powerful, liberating, was crafted, slavery was enshrined. Article 1, Section 2 contained the 3/5 rule. You remember that from your high school American History class? Other persons, that is black slaves, would be counted as 3/5 of an individual for the purposes of allocating seats in Congress. Of course, they wouldn't have the right to vote.

When the South seceded, it wasn't because they sought to free themselves from Northern domination or the depredations of industrialism. They weren't seeking to honor the spirit of liberty. Read the South Carolina Declaration of Secession issued in December of 1860. The reason is there: they were seceding because of slavery. Abraham Lincoln had been elected president. He was perceived as a threat and they could not abide that. Northern states were not honoring the Fugitive Slave Law and that was an outrage. Slavery took precedence over the Union. Yes, a great war was fought and millions of Northerners took to the field because they sought to defeat slavery – but the end of the war and the passage of the 13th and 14th and 15 Amendments did not make racism go away.

We know the story of Reconstruction and how it failed. We know the story of the rise of Jim Crow and the emergence of the Klan. Anybody here remember the name of the first great American movie? It was *Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith's glorification of the Klan. Throughout this film, the trope of the Klan defending virtuous white women from marauding black men was put on the screen and shown across the country, including in the White House, where it was lauded by Woodrow Wilson.

Our nation fought two great World Wars. Black citizens took to the field only to come home to face discrimination and exclusion. When Harry Truman sought to integrate the Army, there were people who said, "It's social experimentation. We can't afford to do that." Then in the 1960s, things came to a head with the emergence of the great Civil Rights movement and the marches and the speeches and the fight for equality and the passage of legislation. Perhaps we thought we have reached the mountaintop. The truth is, we were only in the foothills. We, as individuals, hold different views from our forebears. More enlightened, I will dare say, but we as a society are still grappling with injustice and inequality. It was only a couple of weeks ago that some black teenagers were having a pool party. Things got a little noisy. The cops showed up. You've probably seen the image of the officer with his knee in the small of the back of the young woman. Would that have happened if those teens were white?

We remember the story of Tamir Rice, the 12-year-old in Cleveland with the toy gun who was shot dead by the police. Eric Garner, strangled selling cigarettes. The horror in these and similar stories is that the police officers as individuals may well not be racist. They are just doing their jobs. They fear for their safety, but there's something in society that says black people are dangerous and we don't question that. Then we find ourselves at a Bible study in South Carolina. Nine people are shot dead. Some of our fellow citizens have trouble saying that this was a racially motivated act. They say this was an attack on Christians.

No.

This was an attack on black people who happen to be Christians. The Black church was the first institution in this country that allowed African-Americans

to hold positions of authority and dignity. It has been the habit of racists to attack and undermine this institution whenever possible.

Part of confessing our sins as a people is to name things for what they are. Sometimes, that involves letting go of things, changing the way we tell stories and imagine ourselves. It's amazing how much broadcast time on TV has been used, how many stories have been posted on the Internet, how much ink in newspapers has been spilled on discussions around, and defenses offered of, the Confederate battle flag. Some people claim it is a symbol of heritage, a means by which they merely want to express their pride. Perhaps I'm being hyperbolic here, but there are still some people in Germany who will say the swastika is a symbol of heritage and pride. There are people who say that the streets and parks named after figures from Confederate history are merely symbols of pride; Lee and Jackson are heroes. So too, to the Nazis were Hans Guderian and Erwin Rommel. The name of the street on which Emmanuel AME Church is located is Calhoun. John C. Calhoun, the author of the nullification statutes, the arch-defender of slavery. You're a member of that church, try explaining that street name to your kids.

It shouldn't have to be our black fellow citizens who say it is wrong for these names to be out there. We should be saying that. Lest we focus all of our attention on the South, thinking we're Northerners and we belong to the UCC, so that means we're good mainline Protestants, let's not forget our own checkered history here north of the Mason-Dixon Line. I lived in Boston for 9 years in the 1990s. Then, though it was 20 years after the busing crisis, the scars from that event still marked the city. I still remember reading in the sports pages about how athletes from other parts of the nation invariably described Boston as the most racist city in America. So much for the cradle of liberty.

And how about good old New Hampshire? "Live Free or Die." New Hampshire, the very last state to adopt the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Some of the arguments that were made for not adopting this holiday were that only 1% of the people here were black, so it wasn't a germane issue. Martin Luther King is not a figure for just black Americans to celebrate. He is a figure for all Americans to celebrate. The fight for the holiday was long and it was hard.

There are white supremacists in our state. Indeed, racism is alive and well here in the Upper Valley. It was only last summer that some of my neighbors in the School Street neighborhood, where we live in the parsonage, emerged from their homes to find gentlemen from the DPW with blowtorches working on the signs. They wanted to know what was going on. They workmen, it transpired, were removing swastikas.

We have a problem as a society. To deal with it, we have to name it. We have to confront facts that make us uncomfortable. We have to be prepared to do things that may call for sacrifice. Consider this statistic. Post-recession median household wealth for a white family in 2014 was almost \$142,000 down from 192,500. The median wealth for black households had fallen to \$11,000 from 19,200. We kid ourselves if we think that the disparity in wealth between white households and black households is simply because whites work harder and save more. We know about redlining. We know about the reluctance of wealthier districts to pay to support education in poorer ones. We know how after the Second World War, housing programs and job opportunities were often denied to blacks.

We have sinned as a people and we need to own that. We need to recognize how even if we as individuals have not directly done these things, we are complicit. Consider Lebanon, a mill town. Where did all the cotton come from? The South. Who did all the harvesting? Before the Civil War, slaves. Afterwards, sharecroppers. Who received all the profits? The owners. The work done by the blacks, the money reaped by the whites. A story repeated throughout American history. Yes, we are working to change it, but we are not done and we can't assume that the work has been completed.

I look at my eight-year-old son and I think that in just a few years, he's going to be a teenager. He'll probably start wearing clothes I don't like, like maybe hooded sweatshirts. My thought is he'll look sloppy. The worst thing I'm going to have to worry about is someone's going to see Chip walking down the street and think boy, that kid's slovenly. But if he were African-American and wearing the hoodie, we know that too many people would wonder, "Is this kid going steal something from me? Do I need to worry? Do I need to be afraid?" I do not mean to dismiss the challenges that anybody in this congregation has faced in life, but unless we are willing to admit that we have won a lottery just by being born white in America, we are living in denial.

Maybe I'm sounding a little worked up this morning, maybe a little agitated. We don't usually do that in the Congregational Church, do we? Today, though, I'm okay with sounding a little extreme today. Let me share with you some words from Martin Luther King's Letter From Birmingham Jail, from April of 1963. He was writing to the clergymen of that city, some of whom thought he was a bit loud and disruptive in what he was trying to do. He wrote:

I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist. As I continued to think about the matter, I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love? 'Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Do good to them that hate you and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.' Was not Amos an extremist for justice? 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.' Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel? 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.' Was not Martin Luther an extremist? 'Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise, so help me God.' And John Bunyan, 'I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.' And Abraham Lincoln, 'This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.' And Thomas Jefferson, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal.' So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?

Then later that year, after the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham had been bombed, when King offered his eulogy for three of the young girls who had been killed, he said, "They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned, not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream. If we are as exceptional a people as we like to think we are, we must work for the American dream for all of our citizens."

Now this is all sobering. Perhaps, as we look at the scene, as we survey the national landscape, we might lose heart. Let us not commit that sin. If any of us needs inspiration, we only need look at the front page of yesterday's *New York Times*:

I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you." Let me read a little of this story to you. "One by one they looked to the screen in a corner of the courtroom on Friday, into the expressionless face of the young man charged with making them motherless, snuffing out the life of a promising son, taking away a loving wife for good, bringing a grandmother's life to a horrific end, and they answered him with forgiveness. 'You took something very precious away from me,' said Nadine Collier, daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, her voice rising in anguish. 'I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you and have mercy on your soul.' The occasion was a bond hearing, the first court appearance of the accused killer Dylann Storm Roof, for the murders, apparently racially motivated, of 9 black men and women in a Bible study session at the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on Wednesday night.

But it was as if the Bible study had never ended as one another after another, victims' family members offered lessons in forgiveness, testaments to a faith that is not compromised by violence or grief. They urged him to repent, confess his sins, and turn to God. 'We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with open arms,' said Felicia Sanders, the mother of 26-year-old Tywanza Sanders, a poet who died after trying to save his aunt, who was also killed. 'You have killed some of the most beautiful people that I know,' she said in a quivering voice. 'Every fiber in my body hurts and I will never be the same. Tywanza Sanders is my son, but Tywanza was my hero. Tywanza was my hero, but as we say in Bible study, we enjoyed you, but may God have mercy on you.'

I can only pray that I could have even a fraction of that faith. Yes, I speak today as an American who loves his country, who wants it to fulfill the promises that have been made throughout the ages. I speak first and foremost as someone who tries, imperfectly as it may be, to follow the way of Jesus. It's not easy to be a Christian. Jesus never said it would be easy to follow Him. If

we can experience the kind of transformative love that these survivors have known, if we can show the kind of hospitality that was offered by the people at the Bible study, if we can show the kind of courage that has been displayed by women and men down through the ages fighting for what is right, then we will have begun to repent of our sins, to have turned in a new direction, to have at least begun to head towards the Promised Land.