

Who's Afraid of CRT?

A Sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

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Earlier this week, as I stood on the site of what was the Jamestown settlement, I wondered “when and how did the myth-making begin?” I came to visit Jamestown and Williamsburg, VA with one purpose in mind: to see how these two historical, well-funded tourist sites confront the reality of slavery and its impact on the United States today. I came because of Nikole Hannah-Jones groundbreaking word called “The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story. I came because of banned books and silenced educators. I came because of the utterly ridiculous and yet harmful arguments regarding Critical Race Theory.

I have been stewing about the controversies surrounding the teaching of Critical Race Theory for a long time, and so am grateful for the opportunity to explore this topic with you. But before we begin I want to name at least one assumption. I am assuming that even if you are not a Fox News watcher, you have heard about the controversies about Critical Race Theory, or CRT for short, which have been swirling around the United States for the last year and half. But today's sermon is not just about CRT and their detractors. It's about something both ancient and new; subtle and obvious; damaging and diabolical in its expression. It's this last “something” that is actually more important than CRT and it's what this sermon is really about.

So who's afraid of Critical Race Theory? Before I can answer that question first give a quick summary about what Critical Race Theory is – and isn't. Critical Race Theory was a term first coined by Harvard Law professor, Derrick Bell for a course he created on Race and the Law and a 1973 book arising from that course. After years of study, Bell came to an unsettling conclusion: racism is so deeply rooted in the makeup of American society that it has been able to reassert itself after each successive wave of reform aimed at eliminating it. Racism, he argued is permanent. It's baked into our systems. These ideas became the foundation of a body of thought, taught academically in the 1980's, which came to be known as critical race theory. Later, scholars such as Kimberly Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Patricia Williams, Mari Matsuda and Alan Freeman contributed to Bell's initial analysis. It was Crenshaw who, in 1989 published an article that introduced the idea of Intersectionality – the way in which people who belong to more than one marginalized community can be overlooked by antidiscrimination law.

How then, did a theory about racism and the law become the source of angry soccer moms, screaming at School Board officials about how they don't want their children taught Critical Race Theory in a public school? Why did CRT become the conservative buzzword, mentioned by Fox news almost 1400 times in less than four months? For many of us in this church, all the sound and fury about CRT is, frankly, a little ridiculous. When asked on the air, what exactly is CRT, one politician said “Well, I don't want to go into specifics, but it's bad for our children and bad for our country.” When pressed harder, well, can you explain CRT to me, the same politician said “I don't know much about it, but I don't like it.” The vast majority of scholars and responsible commentators on politics agree that all the protests from a small group of angry white parents about getting CRT out of their school are misguided because – it isn't even taught

at that level. Accurately described, critical race theory is an appropriate part of graduate school education.

So, what's the fuss about then, if it isn't about school age children being presented with a graduate level understanding of racism and the law? If you peel back this particular onion skin, you find all the layers that these angry "not-in-my-school" parents and politicians can't or won't articulate. One of the first layers has to do with how Americans understand their own origin story. It's why, when Nikole Hannah-Jones and the New York Times published the groundbreaking work *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, right-wing conservatives freaked out.

The 1619 Project challenges the popular white mythology of America's origin story, that is, the story that America begins in 1620 with the Mayflower and the noble Pilgrims seeking religious freedom. The historically accurate story that starts with the original inhabitants of America represented by the tribes of Powhatan near Jamestown, Virginia in 1610 and that then goes on to include everyone else who arrived here from across the water actually revolves around the year 1619, a year earlier than the Pilgrims, when the ship "*the White Lion*" dropped anchor off of Jamestown carrying enslaved Africans. As I wandered about the museum displays at Jamestown and then at Williamsburg, describing the events leading up to and throughout the American Revolutionary War, I was impressed with the quality of the interpretations at these places, and how they have changed in the past decade to incorporate the whole story. But still, nowhere did I see represented one of the major assertions from the 1619 Project, which was this: (Jones writes) "Conveniently left out of our founding mythology, is the fact that one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery."

Why the serious backlash against the 1619 project? It's another one of the layers of this rather smelly onion. Nikole Hannah Jones provides part of the answer: "*Many historians have been seduced by the desire to manage the story of our founding, protecting our identity as an exceptional, fundamentally just nation, the freest in the history of the world. Our memory of the past is so often managed and manipulated, according to historian Gary B. Nash. The revolutionary period remains "a sacred relic." Even for many white liberal historians, the Revolution is the last thing that people let go of. But for black Americans, the traditional origin story has never rung true. Black Americans understand that we have been taught the history of a country that does not exist.*"

Sit with that statement for a minute. "Black Americans understand that we have been taught the history of a country that does not exist." White Americans are forced to confront the fact that America's origin story has to include the greed of colonization, combined with racism and the enslavement of human beings. And if we are to tell the truth about why this country first began, that truth does not begin with Pilgrims seeking religious freedom with the hope of building a shining city on the hill. It begins in blood and bile and pain. Who wants a story like that, right? When the other one makes for better optics and has nicer costumes?

Part of the resistance to Critical Theory is not about the theory at all. CRT becomes a dog whistle for white rage at being made to feel uncomfortable. In fact, in Virginia, it was almost made illegal to make white people feel uncomfortable. The CRT dog whistle was used quite effectively in the most recent election for Virginia's governor. Glen Youngkin was not the most popular candidate until he hit upon an issue that could galvanize his base. He knew it and he exploited it by saying that on his first day in office, he would forbid the teaching of Critical Race

Theory. Then, as part of his ad campaign, he featured Laura Murphy, a mother whose son Blake had been required to read Tony Morrison's novel "Beloved" as part of his high school curriculum, a book that has to do with personal history, not with critical race theory. Beloved is the Pulitzer Prize winning novel voted by a poll of writers and literary critics as best work of American fiction from 1981 to 2006. Blake recalls reading the book before bed and having night terrors after he fell asleep. "It was disgusting and gross," he said "it was hard for me to handle. I gave up on it."

So who is afraid of Critical Race Theory? A lot more white people than ever before, because of ads like that. Blake has apparently survived his terrors and is now 27 years old and working as the Associate General Counsel for the national Republican Congressional Committee. But the Virginia election Youngkin won has resulted in night terrors of a different kind, that are keeping me awake. I'm awake worrying about "inherently divisive concepts" being banned in Virginia. Here's a couple of them, quoted from the Governor's first Executive Order:

"that an individual, by virtue of his or her race, skin color, ethnicity, sex or faith, is racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously"; and

"an individual, by virtue of his or her race, skin color, ethnicity, sex, or faith, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race, ethnicity, sex or faith";

Aha, now we're getting down to it. If you don't listen to these statements carefully, especially if you're white, you might think to yourself – what's wrong with that? But the reaction to statements like that usually won't be argued directly and rationally. We aren't hear white protestors saying: "I have seen studies that indicate its impossible for a white person to be subconsciously racist." Or "It is a well-known ethical standard in moral theory that people of one generation have no responsibility to respond to the mistakes of any previous generation." No, the response you hear from some of the white CRT protesters are things like: "my ancestors or I didn't have anything to do with slavery or discrimination. How dare you accuse me of racism!" Or even – and this is a direct quote from one of the moms at the Loudon County School Board Meeting – "we are not a racist country – we elected Obama – twice!"

When I listen to these anti CRT rants, I try to hear what's underneath all the posturing and pontificating and what I hear is fear. And the fear is of two things: white fear of losing power by losing control of the narrative of America's origins story; and white fear of being called or discovered to be a racist. It's that second point I want to address now, because in my life I've had my own personal epiphany about that one.

Who's Afraid of CRT? Well, thirty years ago, I would have said: Unitarian Universalists are. Let me tell what I mean. In the early 1990's, the Unitarian Universalist Association re-started its commitment to offering anti-racism training, using a model called "Crossroads." After an initial overview of oppressive cultural and economic forces that affected white communities and communities of color differently, the trainers told us they were going to make a statement we were going to find hard to accept. They said that all white people are racist. Of course, most of the white people in the training, including me, didn't accept that, because we didn't understand what "racism" really is. We didn't understand that racism is not simply personal prejudice, but that it is prejudice plus the power of a majority culture to create

systems of government, laws, institutions, and assumptions that enforce prejudice. In America, racism lives in our systems and culture of white supremacy. Because of the endemic nature of white supremacy culture, and especially if you are white, you cannot have resisted adopting racist attitudes and beliefs, even if you never acted upon them and couldn't see them. By the end of our training, most of us were ready to take the first step - admitting you're a racist - but we were not yet at the second step - that we have personal responsibility to actively undermine that racism, to be traitors to our white supremacy culture. Those two steps freaked out Unitarian Universalists. Many were appalled and offended by the very suggestion that just by virtue of having white skin, you were racist. The idea that we could carry the sins of institutionalized racism into our hearts and lives was unthinkable, for all but our most engaged anti-racists. After the shock of that initial training, it took me almost ten more years of work to deeply understand the relationship between personal prejudice and the imprint of centuries of racist beliefs and practices that imposed upon the body writ large.

One more step later on in the process for me was listening to one of the most important sermons I've ever heard given by a mentor of mine, a cis-gendered white male who had worked his entire life on anti-racism, anti-sexism and LGBTQ rights. One Sunday, he stood before the congregation and said "I have a confession to make. I am a racist." You could hear the congregation gasp. "And I am sexist. And Patriarchal. And Homophobic." He then went on to explain that the Crossroads training he took helped him to understand the ways in which he unknowingly, unwillingly, adopted the isms of the dominant culture - and that it was his task- and OURS - to be accountable for that adoption, to face the truth and to root it out, together. Instead of being shameful, his confession was liberating.

So you see, I understand why it's hard to grapple with the systemic nature of racism. I understand why these shouters about CRT are resistant to exploring the racism that lives in human heart. The general population of white people who are railing against CRT and the layers of endemic racism that it represents are not going to understand these truths without a lot of personal work- AND without national leadership around anti-racist work. That's why pushing back on all the anti-CRT rhetoric is important.

Who's afraid of CRT? I am! Not the theory of course, not acknowledging the work I have to do to undermine the isms I have within myself, but I am afraid of the ways that CRT reminds us of the utter dominance of white supremacy culture, of hetero and patriarchal culture and the ways that these are intertwined with greed and capitalism and war-mongering and earth-destroying culture. I fear that as I age I may get weary of the diligence required to fight the racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism within myself and with in the wider world. I fear succumbing to hopelessness when realizing that this narrative that goes all the way back to 1619 and beyond that. Maybe some part of that is true for you too?

Ah, but let us not forget the words of the prophet Amanda Gorman who says " We cannot possess hope without practicing it. It is the most fundamental craft we demand of ourselves. We have not been without reasons to practice hope. During the summer of 2020 it seemed like the nation - nay the world - world was moving from a moment to an anti-racist movement - moving from resistance to resilience to reckoning - oh so much seemed possible to hope for before the bitterness and the backlash began.

And I have to say that when hope is indeed hard to find, there is one source that I turn to again and again, despite its institutional imperfections; despite its painful stories of avoidance and denial and neglect, and that is to my faith, to our faith as Unitarian Universalists – and this church as one manifestation of that faith. If it weren't for this faith, I – and I suspect we – would not have the resources, or courage or community to counter those who want to create a white-washed America.

If you need a reminder think for a moment about the courageous stances this congregation has taken together over the years. Think about All Souls as the epicenter of Marriage Equality fight. Think about the fact that the 8th Principle, now adopted in dozens of congregations all over the country, was inspired in large part by the work of All Souls member Paula Cole Jones. Think about the fact that the 8th Principle, adopted by All Souls is now the lens through which we examine every aspect of congregational life. Think about the hard work of All Souls 8th Principle Task Force and the Transformation Team. Think about the fact that you have a place to go to be strengthened and nourished and supported and sustained for this work we are gifted to do. And as a person of color, you have a strong community of others who know exactly what it is like to live under white supremacy, and you have people who share your values and know your experiences. This is what gives me hope. This is what tempers my ire about anti-CRT rant-ers. This is what gives me strength to embrace the truth of the words of W.E.B. Dubois when he wrote: *Nations reel and stagger on their way; they make hideous mistakes; they commit frightful wrongs; they do great and beautiful things. And shall we not best guide humanity by telling the truth about all this, so far as the truth is ascertainable?* This collective power is what Amanda Gorman means when she says: *A silent Shock out of the blue: A hand hung to another or a head pillowed by a shoulder is by far worth more than anything we've won or wanted. When told we can't make a difference, we'll still make a sound.*

May we – all Souls, continue to make more than sounds – let's make some noise and invite Saint Honesty to rain down on us her hard won truths. Amen and May it Be So.