

GA 2018 – Tales from the Underbelly

Sermon text by Randy Blasch – July 15, 2018

I was honored to be your delegate at this year's General Assembly and as such I was asked to come here this morning and report back to you the business of general assembly. As this was my first GA, I was excited to see so many people of like beliefs in one place. There were people of every race, shape, size, orientation and gender.

We sang, we laughed, we cried, we ate, oh boy did we eat. I mentioned it in one of my Facebook posts, but the Kansas City smoked BBQ Brisket Hash on the breakfast menu at the downtown Marriott, is pretty much worth the plane ticket.

Thanks to Paula's introduction I was adopted by and spent significant time inside and outside GA with some amazing folks from Athens. Inside the convention center, we passed several resolutions including use of inclusive language in our sources, replacing prophetic Women and Men with Prophetic People.

We granted religious educators delegate status, and we have approved a youth member to the board of directors of our UUA with full voting rights where applicable. Apparently there are certain things minors can't vote for under Massachusetts law.

And as far as business goes, that was about it, really, and I wasn't alone thinking it. While waiting for my shuttle back to the airport on Sunday afternoon, I was chatting with the Rev. Sherman Logan from Richmond, VA. He and I have a connection outside of just being UU Delegates, and if you want to know more about that, I'll be happy to tell you the detail, but in short, he used to be a Baptist Minister and is friends with my sister, who is also from Richmond, but she's catholic... and like I said it's a long story.

But in our discussions we concluded that actually it was a pretty calm GA, unlike previous years. People were pretty well behaved, there wasn't a crisis looming or an election for a new president, so all in all, it was pretty run of mill and that's about it for my report. Even the visit from our friends at Westboro Baptist Church was pretty darn tame. I've got details in the report that I'll be submitting to the board and sending to UUMAN Announcements.

So, I guess that's it... um.. yeah, so I guess we can do the offering and go drink coffee. Does anyone know if there are cookies? I hope there are cookies, lots of cookies...

Well, maybe, there was some other stuff I can fill a couple more minutes with. I mean I was there for 4 days. And well, you see, I have a confession to make, I didn't set out to GA as your humble servant and quiet delegate, I know, I know., no I went to GA with an agenda.

I left for Kansas City convinced I knew more than they did, and the fact is, I was going to straighten them out. I was, ask Diantha, she knows. She and I actually talked about before I left. You see I was convinced the UUA was completely off base on how they were and are dealing with the issue of White Supremacy culture, in our society and more importantly within our own denomination.

Now, let me be clear, I completely own the fact that white supremacy culture existed in the past and still does today. And we as a religious organization should be above the fray in how we conduct ourselves outside but especially inside these walls. But well, it was the words, white supremacy.

I was convinced those words, were divisive and undermining the work that our denomination could and would do if we could just soften them a bit. I mean we could be alienating many of our members because while they understand discrimination and racial bias, they certainly couldn't be thought of in the same sentence as a "white supremacist". So I thought if we just softened the language, to maybe, let's say "white privilege" we could get our members excited and back on the front lines to do the hard work of dismantling this horrible racial bias.

I now stand before you to say, I was wrong. More wrong that I've ever been in my life. While the business of GA was fairly run of the mill, the other work we did, the sermons by our president and other ministers were not. And following the Ware Lecture well, as happened to the Grinch, my heart grew at least three sizes over those days. To my friends and fellow congregants of UUMAN I sincerely and humbly apologize.

The first realization I came to was the thought that I, the gray haired, anglo, upper middle class, cradle born Episcopalian had the right to say that we needed to "soften" language regarding race. That, quite frankly is offensive and again, I apologize. What I came to learn so clearly was that language, describing and calling out white supremacy didn't belong to me and I had no right to even suggest it be changed. That wanting to change the language is as much an illustration of the problem as anything and it is why, right now, we are in as deep a racial divide in our congregations, our cities and our nation as we have ever been.

We have become a nation where it is somehow ok to verbally attack a woman on a bus for wearing a head scarf and suggest to her our government needs to take away her children because of what she believes. It happened this week. Or a woman who is proudly wearing a shirt that says she's from Puerto Rico is threatened by a man in a public park and the police stand idly by and watch. Just in case you didn't know and I know you all do, Puerto Ricans ARE American Citizens, period, that's it, no controversy there and yet, our current culture has given those who have hate in their heart permission to attack her because of the color of skin and the place of her birth.

This country that boasts of freedom and liberty and justice for all has an frightening history when it comes to promoting the "Christian" values it was supposedly founded on. And we are the country whose many citizens stand up screaming for the rights of unborn children while in the same breath they support a policy taking children who come here looking for a safe haven from oppression and forcibly ripping them from their parents' arms and separating them just because of the where they come from.

There are stories where they told the parents they were taking the children for a bath... FOR A BATH, I believe I've heard that story before, except they were taking those children for a shower.

And they do it in name of freedom. When Columbus "discovered" America, there were an estimated 5 to 15 million people living on the North American continent. Then the White Man landed at Jamestown and Plymouth Rock and began to expand into this beautiful land we now call the United States. We celebrate on the fourth Thursday of November some made up meal where the white man and the native sat together.

They saved the white man's lives in this new land and in appreciation and in the name of race and religion we began a systematic slaughter of the native people and slowly began to move them to resettlement areas. "Reservations," we called them, and by the end of the 19th century there were fewer than 280,000 indigenous people left in this nation. One of the most insidious events started right here in Georgia, memorialized by a plaque near Dahlonaga at the beginning of the trail of tears where the Cherokee were forced to walk from Georgia to reservations in Oklahoma. It is estimated 4000 native Americans died in that event alone.

And we of course followed that up with the enslavement and owning of people, although we didn't consider them as such at the time. Africans who were captured, shackled and brought here in the bowels of ships were NEVER considered humans. They were property, like our cars and our houses and treated as such. And this country that tries to stand up to the world as the beacon of human rights, allowed the ownership of people as property until 1865.

But if you think it ended in 1865 you need to crack a different book. It was almost impossible for African Americans to vote in this country until at least 1964 and it was illegal to have an interracial marriage in this country until 1967. OVER ONE HUNDRED YEARS LATER.

And I know what you're thinking, "why the history lesson? We know all this." Trust me, I'm getting there. This past week has been a week of utter joy for me. My son, Connor, who many of you know, is a proud daddy of a beautiful boy, Wyatt. Technology is wonderful, we video chatted on Thursday night. I got to talk to my son and his wife all while watching this beautiful boy sleep. Oh my god, my heart melted. They are moving back here in August and will be here in Atlanta for several weeks before settling in Monterey California for the next couple years. Isn't that awesome.

But it made me think. Another confession I have to admit is that I'm a follower of George Takei on Facebook and Twitter. I find his views into the LGBTQ community very insightful. And if you haven't seen the stories he's posted on his childhood please find them, they are very moving. You see, for those of you who don't know, George Takei, Mr. Sulu of the original Star Trek, his family was arrested and moved to an internment camp during World War II, only because they were Japanese Americans. We did it again rounded up people and put them in camps all because they weren't like "us", they weren't White.

And it got me to thinking and this is when my heart exploded in my chest. My son is in the Navy and they will be living in California. If it was 1943, he would most likely have been drafted into active duty and sent back to sea and my daughter in law and grandson would be left like many wives and children behind worrying if their daddy and husband would ever come home.

But it is also likely that my wonderful Daughter in Law and grandson would have been rounded up, just like the others and sent to an internment camp. It has now hit home. I realize that I had every opportunity in my life to have my heart turned but this, this one little "what if" is what changed my heart, what made me NOW understand, really understand.

So what does any of this have to do with GA? Well, one of the main focuses of our discussions in and out of session was the current situation at the border where children are being ripped from their mothers' arms as I mentioned earlier. We talked about how we can't stand for it and many of us have marched and called our leaders to say we won't stand for it. And our own Dave Dunn is heading to Arizona in early August to join others to be a presence at the border and we need to support him in that.

And now this is where we come full circle. We need to take a stand and we need to make a change, but it's not the change we think we need to make. Since the last election we've all been walking around kicking the dirt and being angry about the election, and we should be. The policies that are currently place are heartless and dangerous and need to be changed, but we have to stop pointing our fingers and saying it's their fault, that is unless we're looking in the mirror while doing it.

When I first started thinking about this sermon and how GA's message of dismantling of white supremacy was to be at its center, all I could think about was the hook, what would my hook be, and I decided it would be "reclaiming America" and I had even written new words to the Paul Simon song we sang before I stood up here. We were going to walk out and "RECLAIM AMERICA". And I was damned proud of it.

But in a few minutes we'll take the offering and the words for us to sing together as we part will be in the basket, so take one as the baskets are passed and you leave your INCREDIBLY GENEROUS OFFERING. But what you will notice is that "reclaim has literally been crossed out and REMAKE" has replaced it. I don't want to reclaim America.

I don't want to reclaim a history of subjugation, and racism that we have repeated over and over and over again. It's time for a do over.

We can't change our history, that's part of who we are but we can change our future if strip ourselves naked and remake America. Native Americans, African Americans, Japanese Americans, Female Americans, LGBTQ Americans, Muslim Americans, Hispanic Americans and all the others who I have failed to mention.

We have continuously found yet another group to discriminate against and frankly I'm tired of it. I'm tired of trying to FIX what we have created. It's time to create a new land. A land that starts from a different place, a place of equality for all, PERIOD.

We need to not constantly change what we have to say that now this group is ok and that group is now ok. That's wrong, that's not what we believe this country is about and this is me pointing that finger in the mirror, IT'S NOT CHRISTIAN.

In his Letter from a Birmingham jail that was a central part of the message from GA and that we read parts of as our call to worship, Rev King said:

"I MUST make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season."

Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

So now is where I potentially get myself into trouble. Our Constitution is really a great document. To date there's nothing like it anywhere in the history of the world. It grants us as citizens great power and one of those powers that we are granted is the power to change our country.

And now I say that if America is to survive as the nation we want it to be, we dream it to be, if it is to be that land that we sing about in our hymns, NOW is that time for that change. We need a, and here it is, a revolution.

Not a revolution fought with guns but one fought with votes. To change this country, we need to change our government and to change our government we need to vote. Yes, there are questions about the legitimacy of our votes, but that said we need to vote and every chance we get—and this is me in mirror again—vote out every gray haired white man we can.

If we want the change we claim we want, we need to vote in every woman and person of color we can. We need to vote for those that most accurately represent those who are oppressed. I need to say as a white man, a vote for a white man is to continue this culture of white supremacy and not a vote to create a government that is really by, for and of the people of this nation.

Look, there are certainly good people who look like me in our government and they, like us, can be a vehicle of change. But only when those who are oppressed can see themselves in our government can they feel safe, can they feel a part of the solution rather than having the solution thrust upon them.

For two hundred and forty two years the white anglo saxon "Christian" man has had the opportunity to make this country great with liberty and justice for all. I personally think that's statistically significant enough number to prove we CANT.

It's time for change, real, radical change. A change we need to make sure happens. One message was clear at GA, it's not up to our African American or Hispanic or LGBTQ members to make the change. It's not up to our ministers to take control and make that change. It's up to us, all of us to make that change.

To my fellow gray hairs, it's time to abdicate the throne and do it in the name of love. Love for this country and what we want it to stand for, love for our neighbors, and love for ourselves. We need a change, a big change and we need it now. Amen.