

“Demons of A False Divide”

February 4th, 2018

Readings: “The Demon in Darren Wilson’s Head” by Thandeka; The Gospel of Mark, 1:29-39

I never thought I’d be talking about demons so much as a progressive theologian. But here we are! Growing up UU, I don’t think I heard that word ONCE in my childhood church, and in my mind, the word “demon” conjured up images of ancient myth and superstitious fears of forces that had more to do with human ignorance about the natural world, or mental illness just misunderstood. But then I suffered my own dark night of the soul, and I was taking some time off in college to heal, and one of my classmates said to me, “You better face those demons, girl, so you can get back into it. You can’t let them get to you. You’re too good for that.” And I knew what he meant in a literal sense; because there were no other words for me to describe what I was feeling. Because it was the first time that I felt what it meant to be overcome by forces that don’t feel like they’re coming from you. Forces that feel powerful and possessive of your heart and soul, forces that are dark and foreign, yet are turned inward and invade your sense of what is good by simply taking over your inner life. It was the first time I really thought, yes, that’s exactly it: demons don’t look like frightening creatures that steal your body or wreak havoc in your home. They more often look like the lingering effects of personal trauma, and they can be quite powerful in the collective pain we inflict upon each other through embedded systems that deny the majority of people the right to live out their full humanity. They are as overt as the genocide of the Rohingya people in Myanmar, but they are as subtle as the very real resentment that many American working class folks feel toward illegal immigrants because of a belief that those immigrants are stealing their jobs. But though we’re in a place in history where we are naming racism for what it is, calling out systems that we can finally identify as racially constructed, there are dark forces that I would argue preceded the issue of the color line and created a perfect breeding ground for its expression. And until we wrestle with the ancient demon that has possessed the hearts and minds of our social systems for millennia, we cannot move forward in our deconstruction of the myth of racial hierarchy.

This demon that we must fight with all our hearts and all our souls is the myth that *if you are poor, it is your own fault*.

It exists in some expression in every culture but has especially poisoned the soul of our collective American conscience, and it is abundantly clear - based on how we create law - that we are held captive by it still. From the first English settlers to take this land as if it was uninhabited to our current administration passing legislation that continues to concentrate the vast majority of wealth at the tiny apex of the very few, we have long been possessed – so to speak – by this unfortunate cultural narrative that came first before any concept of race hatred was prevalent.

To illustrate this point, let’s return to some influential voices of early American power: Benjamin Franklin’s writings on class revealed a man who embodied another mythical American trope, the self-made man, and yet he held a steely and visceral contempt for those who did not, like himself, rise in wealth and status. As one of the most successful editors of a major news publication, the Pennsylvania Gazette, Franklin’s views reflected a pervasive attitude of class warfare that was simply a reproduction of the same class structure that existed in England. Thomas Jefferson wrote extensively on a model of breeding that would keep what he deemed “the natural order” of human beings in their

places, from those born with elitism in their veins to those he called “the most abject, degraded and unprincipled race.” This degraded race he speaks of? Guess what color it was. White. He was describing the white working class before he took on the subject of enslavement by race. But even before the well-to-do so-called founding fathers imagined this country as an independent nation, the colonies of the American east coast were regarded by much of England as a dumping ground for what they described as the “human waste” of London slums. One writer, a clergyman named John Donne, wrote of the Virginia colony that it was akin to the nation’s spleen and liver, draining “the ill humors of the body...to breed good blood.” This from clergy, and repeated by the likes of ministers from Cotton Mather to John Winthrop. Where on earth was the spirit of the gospel in this supposed new world? It was silenced by those who claimed to be spreading it, submerged by a powerful and evil class hatred that long overshadowed its alternative message. Long before the image of the welfare queen or the toothless redneck, those who were able-bodied inspired a deep contempt for the seemingly self-inflicted inability to rise out of poverty, which was spoken about as if it was a disease: a plague upon the nation. Some sort of external epidemic that pulled down society as if society itself had nothing to do with this illness, nor any responsibility to confront it with compassion for those it affected. The first indentured servants and other enslaved white laborers worked alongside the first enslaved black laborers brought on ships from West Africa. Dehumanization was an equal opportunity employer, so long as one was landless, title-less, or motherless. And religion was a wonderful way to justify slavery in the old colonies, not by taking the Pauline letters of the New Testament literally – “slaves obey your masters,” and other grotesque phrases - but by a convenient system of reward and punishment: you don’t come to church, you could be fined, jailed, disenfranchised, banished...or enslaved. The Utopia that the Puritans imagined had nothing to do with egalitarian ethics. But it did continue a long-held tradition of separating people by class, and then using this human-created system to justify why some people deserved to thrive in comfort while others deserved to perish in poverty. By all counts, if this does not smack of demonic powers, I’m not sure what does.

A couple of weeks ago, I reflected on the theological entrenchment of classism in Hinduism with its caste system, a class hierarchy built into the fundamental structure of the faith. February marks the beginning of Black History Month, which leads us into the time to look backward in our quest to empower our spiritual journey forward. To really get underneath the deeply entrenched cultural sins that continue to hold sway over our ability to live fully into God’s dream, the beloved community, I want us to dig deep this month. We tend to talk a ton during Black History month about what W.E.B. DuBois deemed the problem of the 20th century, which he called “the problem of the color line,” and he was absolutely correct. But as people of the God who challenges us to worship in the form of radical neighborly love, I believe we must interrogate the entrenchment of classism as a demon that works alongside and upholds the equally demonic power of racism in this country. As I read our gospel selection for this morning, I kept pausing to wonder what Mark was telling us about Jesus’ ministry in his obsession with healing sicknesses and driving out demons, and declaring that “this is what he came to do.” If this was a large part of Jesus’ mission, then the healings point to something bigger than the text; something beyond the narrative to a deeper systemic darkness: we know there was something rotten in the state of Galilee. Something underlying, something that no one else felt they could touch, something so ingrained in the culture that it was taken for granted. We also know that one of Jesus’ biggest critiques of the world as he knew it was the abject poverty all around him and the dedication of empire in maintaining this economic status quo. This is found in all four

gospels. So what if these demons he drove out included the demons of a belief system that accepted this world order as inevitable, a belief system that was pervasive, that the human suffering caused by a vast inequity in wealth was somehow untouchable, unchangeable, and perhaps even divinely ordained?

The Rev. Dr. Thandeka, a Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian, has long critiqued our conversations about race and racism around black and white color lines because of their lack of attention to class. What's ironic about Thandeka's writing is that she was one of the most prolific early writers in the contemporary public sphere to talk about the identity of whiteness. And she does it as a black woman. But as a black, highly educated, woman minister in a primarily white, highly educated, traditionally male-dominated denomination, it makes some sense that her approach to racism in America is atypical, and unusually complex. Her focus on Darren Wilson's language about Michael Brown, his use of the word "demon," reveals an analysis that is more than a critique of white racism. It is an examination of what it means to be white – and poor – in the American context. And her curiosity leads her to conclude, quite astutely, that the identity of becoming white in a country controlled by whiteness yet teeming with powerlessness on both sides of the racial coin builds an existential shame into one's psyche similar to the shame that is learned and integrated very quickly into the psyche of the child who is black or brown in America. Let me be very clear: this is NOT an argument that the pain of white shame is equivalent to the trauma of black shame. Because it is not, and it has entirely different outcomes. What it is, is an acknowledgement that there is a loss felt early on in a country with so little upward mobility for so many folks, that drives both the subtle racism of liberal well-off white folks and the overt racism of poor white folks who have lost something and in searching for that something, attach themselves with religious zeal to the very people who are keeping them down.

Thandeka, from her perspective, thus resists the idea that whiteness is a privilege in and of itself, because of the vast class disparity that has always existed and still exists today. While I disagree on this point, based on a long history of government relief favoring poor white people over poor black people from Reconstruction to the current opioid epidemic, she wants to refocus the conversation here by making clear that race is still a device used by those who hold the economic power to keep a social system that ultimately continues to work in favor of a few while many suffer. If it weren't for racism, wouldn't the many more who cannot pay their bills have revolted against the very few who control the purse strings? Once the controlling class saw that all it needed to maintain control was to create competition between white workers and black/brown workers, we were sunk; the false race divide keeps white workers believing that their enemy is the black and brown workers who are also just trying to survive, rather than the CEO making billions that decides to cut an hourly wage from \$12 to \$8. As Thandeka points out, this is the result of a historically ingrained sense of fear coupled with powerlessness that looks for a scapegoat in the wrong place, that grasps at a sense of belonging by believing that the one who looks like me must have my back, but in true tragic form, destroys both the fearful accuser and the victimized scapegoat. And the result? The Nero of the white ruling class fiddles while Rome burns. And this is nowhere as obvious as in our current crisis, a crisis where these same folks accept a foundering president whose only credentials needed to be rich, white, and male while they rejected a successful president whose credentials still had to surpass the most highly educated, morally pure, politically savvy white elite because he was black. It is nowhere as obvious as in the madness of an entire political party that abandons not only its moral integrity, its fundamental beliefs, but its agreement to engage in factual discourse in order to

bend to the will of this rich, white man. When Rome burns as our government turns a blind eye to injustice, while factories continue to close and deportations of immigrants increase by 46%, when the rich white man insists that the poor white man's enemy is the immigrant, the poor black single mother, the Syrian Muslim, the Haitian refugee, the trans and gay and lesbian folks – *is this not a demon that must be driven from our social consciousness?*

We will not be free until we understand this demon for what it is. We cannot deal fully with erasing racism until we engage its link to classism. And we cannot fulfill the gospel call without engaging both. The wonderful thing is, we are NOT powerless. We can resist our sense of powerlessness, we can drive out the demons that tell us we cannot change this system, by slow and steady engagement. Remember, beloved, that we are not alone, and it is evident in the groundswell of local and national organizations committed to redeeming the soul of this nation. It is proof that there are more of us that thirst for a just society than there are who would give in to the lies of fear-based division. There are multitudes of us that desire greater opportunity for all, that recognize that our strength lies not in a Darwinian model of every person for themselves but in nurturing and caring for those whose struggle is our struggle. And there are equally as many who understand that the God who sent the Rabbi Jesus to heal the sick and drive out demons is calling us into this vision of a world where fear is replaced by relief. Where we can breathe easy because everyone has enough. Such relief will come when we collectively decide that fear is the demon, not the antidote, to healing ourselves and healing each other. It will not come all at once. But it will come with steadfastness and a devotion to doing what we can individually, and as a congregation. So let's go forth starting this month. Let's make our connections to Children of Promise, to Brooklyn Pride, and let's decide where our ASBC funds are going to have an impact this year. As the apostle Paul charges us, let us not grow weary in doing good; for in due season, we will reap if we do not give up.