

Citadel High Multi Faith Service “Christian” Address to the Graduates of 2008

Embracing Darkness

June 24, 2008 by Rev. Linda Yates

My generation has given your generation a world full of problems. The good news is I suspect you might be a better generation than us. I am hopeful. Two incidents in my own life give me hope. My partner Carl is an Engineer who works in the water industry and he was to speak at a Dalhousie Faculty of Engineering gathering. Before he spoke he was required to listen to descriptions of the engineering outreach projects that the students were involved in. It was astonishing, he told me. These students had such a sense of responsibility to the planet and to people around the world struggling with the challenges of poverty and food security etc...We both agreed this was new. We remembered the biggest hope of undergraduate engineering students in the early 80's involved figuring out where the best and wildest party was to be that weekend. In my own current work, I Co-Chair the Education and Students Committee for Halifax Presbytery of the United Church– a body that accepts, screens and supports new people trying to enter ministry. There is a new trend amongst the younger ones. They want to serve the world and be of assistance to those who are suffering. I remember the first time a young woman sat in my office telling me she was not going to adhere to the usual timeline we expected of theological students because she wanted to go to Africa for a year to work, helping people. “Helping people?” I said, mystified. “Yeah, you know. Jesus said that God want us to do that, right?” It was then I realized that yours is a generation that has a real sense of global consciousness, a sense that life should be meaningful.

Religion, spirituality, at its best is about the meaning of life. It is about making meaningful life and about making life meaningful. Sometimes, that can shorten your life – sometimes it means making decisions that put your comfort, sometimes even your life on the line. We need look no further than Buddhist monks in Tibet during these last months to see such sacrifice in action.

Religion is good for you. The World Health Organization has declared that connection to a community of faith is connected to better health outcomes. Inevitably someone amongst you is now thinking “But isn’t religion what has caused all the wars in history?” Wars are always about money and territory which, ultimately is about power. Whenever there are ideas or concepts that are so important to people that they are willing to risk their lives in defence of them, there are always other men, who are willing to exploit that willingness in order to gain power for themselves. Such men use those ideas, twist those ideals in order to utilize the willingness of others to sacrifice or even die. Not just ideas like Christianity or Islam or Buddhism but also ideas like democracy or communism or freedom or liberty. You could take away religion but you will still have wars – USSR communism. Co=-opted consciously.

It is also true, however, that spirituality can be co-opted **unconsciously** by the prevailing culture to enforce or reinforce inherent prejudices, like sexism, or racism or heterosexism (hatred of homosexuals). I can only talk of my own faith which is Christianity. Nothing irritates me more than Christmas cards with the images of the cute little blond, blue eyed baby Jesus. Also, irritating is the blond long haired blue eyed “hippie” Jesus common in church stained windows. He was a Jew from the Middle East. One of the great gift of our scriptures is that they contain no physical description of Jesus. Any person who takes a few minutes to think about it, knows that Jesus would have bore far more resemblance to Tiger Woods than he would the blond blue eyed handsome hippie in a robe. (Roman Empire senators garb at that!). Why do we picture him

as a blond, blue eyed Caucasian man? The short answer is because of racism. Western Christianity has always connected what is "good" with "as white as possible." The images, metaphors and the stories we tell about ourselves are hugely important and terribly, terribly powerful.

Here is a question. When there is a coup or a government crackdown on freedom, who are the people they throw in jail first? Artists. Artists are able to convey ideas, subversive ideas, in powerful ways using pictures, dance, drama or story. Those who seek control over propaganda know that it is metaphor and image that have the real power in our lives.

The image we are using today is that of "light." I understand that in using the image of light we are talking about revelation, truth and goodness. All wonderful concepts and things I believe in. Tonight, let's push that metaphor a little further. Members of non-white groups have been telling those of us descended from Western European culture that our use of this particular metaphor has been and is complicated and even problematic for them.

If religion, if faith, if spirituality is about anything at all, it is about confronting the death dealing powers of our world and about holding up that which is life giving. That is your task as graduates. If we believe that, then we have to talk about and confront racism. This year, of all years, as a religious leader we would have to do all manner of contortions and gymnastics in our heads to NOT talk about racism. It's all over the news. There is an African American, Barrack Obama running for the highest office in the land for heaven's sake. There's a hallelujah moment that was made possible by the work of many, many faith based movements. Having said that, a shocking number of faith based groups did not challenge systemic segregation many years ago and a shocking number remain silent today about racism. I want to speak to you today about racism because we are at a particular point in history that is very poignant and important and you will be working and living immersed in it.

My first introduction to the inherent racism embedded in religious imagery, metaphor and institutions came in the person of an African classmate, Edith from Zambia, 1994. She said that she had excellent self esteem as she was being raised by her parents. Then she attended the free school run by white Christian missionaries and her self esteem took a nose dive that never really recovered. All religious imagery associated blackness with evil. Terms in our common usage reflect that, including: black Friday, black sheep, black heartedness, black list, black mark, black lies. Everything good, wise or noble was depicted in images of lightness or whiteness. Constantly there was all this embracing of light, light and more light. Of course there was the picture of the blond blue eyed Jesus looking down upon them all. Racism is inherent in our language and our religious imagery and it is very, very powerful. Edith said it constantly washed over her on a daily basis. This is the exact experience that our First Nations People have told us they experienced and continue to experience around language, religious imagery and race. Historically it has resulted in horrendous policies that we are only beginning to address as Canadians. The Apology delivered by Stephen Harper on June 11th laid out for all of us to see in devastating detail.

Second person to teach me about racism is our theological student at St. John's this year. Yvette Swan is a sixty year old woman. She is from Bermuda. She was a member of Parliament, a Senator, and past President of the World Women's Business Association. She has done work with the UN. She has worked all over the world and has a holiday named after her in California. Yvette is black. This is a woman to be reckoned with. She has travelled the world but she said she had to come to Halifax to encounter racism in such incredible depth. Only in Halifax has she been followed in drug stores. Layer upon layer, word by

word, image by image, we Nova Scotians live and work and eat both subtle and not so subtle racism. We are barely even aware of it.

What can we do about it in terms of spirituality? We can expand our metaphors and our language.

What gives me hope are the voices we have begun to listen to. Womanist theologians (female theologians of colour) have told us, in terms of image and metaphor that we of Western European descent have ignored the holiness of darkness as a metaphor. We must embrace the light **and** we must embrace the darkness if we are to be fully human and if we are to be filled with God. Embracing the light **means** embracing the darkness. So, what does it mean to consider the truth of darkness as a religious image of equal value and power? We have seen too much of the light as a society. Scientists say we are getting fat and ill because we do not spend enough time in darkness sleeping. Some of the most God-filled activities happen in darkness. Our greatest creativity happens in the silence of darkness. We rest in the darkness. We heal in the darkness. Sober second thoughts and insight happen in the darkness. It is darkness that we dream. In our holy writings, angels most often come in the darkness. Seeds germinate in the safety of the darkness of the earth. When they grow into great trees of tremendous heights, the roots, remain in the darkness building, nourishing, anchoring that tree and keeping all the soil and vegetation around it from being washed into oblivion by the winds, rain and snow. It is in the dark that trees and vegetation cleanse the air we human beings are so inconsiderately filling with CO2. Darkness is protective. It was in the dark safety of an attic in Amsterdam that the teenaged Ann Frank was inspired to write her remarkable journal of dignity, faith and hopefulness even as Aryan Nazi soldiers marched about the streets, brazen and fearless in the bright light of day. It was in the blood-and-guts darkness of his mothers womb, surrounded by the steady (boom-ba-boom ba boom of his mother's heartbeat) that Jesus was nourished, grew and made ready to enter the danger filled light of day. All of us have known a safe, warm nourishing womb of darkness or we would not be here today, any of us. We need both darkness and light and God fills both.

What gives me hope, again, is your generation. Never before has a generation been so able to think in both/ands instead of either/or. Whether it is race, gender, sexual orientation, or multiple faiths you can seem to appreciate all expressions. It is refreshing, exciting and so very, very hopeful.

It is most often in the darkness of the night that we come to repentance and wisdom. I asked our student in a final supervisory meeting, "Yvette, how on earth have you gotten through this year." " God has gotten me through it," she said. "And caring people." That is what will get all of you through the challenging moments in your lives, lives that if they are to have real meaning and faithfulness to God will include working toward eliminating racism. Caring people and the love of God - a love that is so magnificently expressed and represented in all of the diverse expressions of faith and religion in this room today. Can there be anything more hopeful than that?