

# The Urgency of Now

*a sermon by the Reverend Dr. Susan Veronica Rak*

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"A heavy and cruel hand has been laid upon us. As a people, we feel ourselves to be not only deeply injured, but grossly misunderstood. Our white countrymen do not know us. They are strangers to our character, ignorant of our capacity, oblivious to our history and progress, and are misinformed as to the principles and ideas that control and guide us, as a people. The great mass of American citizens estimates us as being a characterless and purposeless people; and hence we hold up our heads, if at all, against the withering influence of a nation's scorn and contempt."

Frederick Douglass wrote these words in a statement on behalf of the delegates to the National Colored Convention, held in Rochester NY, July 1853. These same sentiments that have held our country and our spirits hostage for so long. I know we would like to think we've come so far in that century and a half, but the truth is we haven't. Not that the "white people" here harbor such animus toward other "races" - that we think them "a characterless and purposeless people". We'd like to think we have evolved... and personally I am sure each of us has.

But something – something – has kept racism alive in society in the years since the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil Rights act. As it has been pointed out over and over again, racism is not a personal liking or disliking of a particular group of people. It's not personal – it's systemic and systematic. Prejudice plus power embedded in a system of laws generated by those purporting to act to protect the common good.

In her book *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson – told the story of how black people, African Americans, left the south in droves to find opportunity and equality in the north. Often the story that's told about this Great Migration is that southern blacks left because of cotton... because mechanized harvesting took away the need for cotton pickers or it was the boll weevil. "Cotton was getting harder to grow; the soil was exhausted; the boll weevil had arrived; everyone was broke."

When Wilkerson interviewed about twelve hundred people for her book, none of them, when asked why they left the South, mentioned the boll weevil. Instead, they talked about Jim Crow, and about lynching, and about violence and humiliation and misery. "We cannot fight back," Richard Wright, himself a part of that Great Migration, wrote, "we have no arms; we cannot vote; and the law is white."

The Great Migration was an escape from pernicious racism and violent persecution - Jim Crow and the thousands and thousands of other unwritten laws that governed the bodies, minds and spirits of African Americans in the south. Just to remind us a little of what Jim Crow was like: Georgia was the first state to demand separate seating for whites

and blacks in streetcars, in 1891; five years later came Plessy v. Ferguson. By 1905, every Southern state had a streetcar law, and more: in courthouses, separate Bibles; in bars, separate sections; in post offices, separate windows; in libraries, separate branches.

What seems unimaginable to us was everyday life for thousands and thousands of people. Absurd, demeaning and hateful laws and practices embedded in daily life for black people all across the south and perhaps in more subtle ways, throughout the rest of this country. Ending Jim Crow took the efforts of thousands of people over many years.

The Civil Rights movement - that long and deep struggle that took the lives of many and inspired a generation - was more than the glory of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Dream" speech. It was the hours at lunch counters and the days in jail. The exhaustion of walking instead of riding on buses and the ache of marching in the face of angry dogs and even more rabid shouting spitting people and the force of fire hoses and nightsticks and bats.

Americans might be excused to breathe a sigh of relief all these years since - to say the work was done and look, we have a black president and all is well. Yet it is not so. And as painful as it is, we must look again at how race perpetuates a system of injustice - a system almost hiding in plain sight here in the 21st century. So we turn to Michelle Alexander's book ... *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.

I've read the book and looked at the study guide and the UUA "common read" materials. I've heard her speak and seen her on television, most notably on PBS' Bill Moyers program. Even with all this behind me, I am not sure I can do justice to this serious, searing issue. But I have to try...

Alexander has managed to pull back a very heavy curtain that has been in place for a generation - a curtain designed to conceal horrible truths. This country celebrates achievements of "racial equality" on Martin Luther King Day. We recall fondly the days of singing "We Shall Overcome", and then we move on. We want so much to believe in the fable of colorblindness... of peaceful coexistence and equality and justice for all.

Alexander points us to a new caste system - not perhaps as blatant as the codes that allowed slavery to flourish up until the Civil War, and not as brazen and unashamed as Jim Crow. But a very real system that is working just as efficiently in undermining the welfare and health of a whole class of citizens.

There are lots of facts and statistics to back this up... Did you know that there are more African Americans in prison right now than there were enslaved before the Civil War? About one-third of all African American males in this country are either behind bars or on parole or caught up somewhere in the "Criminal justice system". The reverberations from these facts are enormous and the effects last for generations.

These astonishing and disheartening numbers are a result of this country waging a "war on drugs". These attitudes and prejudices and laws slipped into our society easily after the passage of Civil Rights laws that eliminated Jim Crow.

When President Johnson signed those civil rights laws into being, he knew that the southern states were then ceded to the Republican party... the so-called southern strategy the Republican party adopted carefully hid outright racial discrimination behind the

curtain of “law and order”. Ronald Reagan’s reputation was made on that platform as we as a country got tough on drugs. Even though statistics show that consumption of illegal substances is just as high in the white population, it was targeting urban areas and not the suburbs that began this rise in incarceration of young men of color. As these arrests rose, drug rehabilitation funding and resources disappeared.

These are all facts. You can look them up.

And so as not to be partisan, the Democrats ramped up those policies. Not to be perceived as soft on crime, the 1990’s saw a huge increase in African Americans in the prison system as mandatory sentencing went into effect. And how this “war on drugs” disproportionately affects African Americans is clear... even the penalties skewed toward locking them up.

Crack is the cheaper form of cocaine and the preference in urban areas. The penalty for possession of just 5 *grams* of crack [less than one ounce] mandated a 5 years prison sentence. The counterpart for cocaine - used more by suburban population, mostly white: 500 *grams* of powdered cocaine will get you five years.

You don’t have to be a math whiz to see how out of proportion that was. Those sentences have been reduced some now, under President Obama’s Administration... but not enough. And it does not undo what’s been done under those laws.

Alexander notes:

“The genius of the current caste system, and what most distinguishes it from its predecessors, is that it appears voluntary. People *choose* to commit crimes, and that's why they are locked up or locked out, we are told. This feature makes the politics of responsibility particularly tempting, as it appears the system can be avoided with good behavior.

But herein lies the trap. All people make mistakes. All of us are sinners. All of us are criminals. All of us violate the law at some point in our lives. In fact, if the worst thing you have ever done is speed ten miles over the speed limit on the freeway, you have put yourself and others at more risk of harm than someone smoking marijuana in the privacy of his or her living room. Yet there are people in the United States serving life sentences for first-time drug offenses, something virtually unheard of anywhere else in the world.”

Religion, Christianity included, which this country purports to value so highly, places a high value on love and forgiveness. Where is the possibility of redemption in this system? And the effects are not just felt behind the walls of our now infamous prison-industrial complex in this country.

Make no mistake, this system is designed to keep people of color in their place. The role of plea bargaining comes into play as well. Fear of the harsh mandatory sentences might make an accused person - including those totally innocent of the crime - cop to a plea of a lesser charge rather than face the possibility of a guilty verdict and a harsher prison term. These reduced sentences still leave a person tagged with the word felon. A felon who has done the time and is released faces a life much harsher than before.

And here women, men and especially children are affected. It's likely that that a person in jail, even pre-trial, leaves a family behind - possibly as the primary breadwinner, breaking up a critical support network and causing damage to spouses, siblings, parents and children. They'll likely lose their job during incarceration, thus falling further behind in bills and rent. When they are released after their stay, there's little treatment or prospects for a new job; their completed sentence may stain their record such that it's even harder to find employment. They may be back on the street with the same personal struggles of addiction, domestic abuse, health issues.

People coming out of this "justice" system after serving their time are now banned from voting. They cannot receive food stamps or SNAP benefits. They are barred from federally subsidized housing and welfare. It's usually difficult to find a legal employment. Another harsh sentence meted out and marking people for life - sending them into desperate lives lived on the streets.

But somehow, the society in which we live is comfortable looking at this as a choice - the result of poor choices made. "Just say 'no' " should do the trick, right? The system that keeps this in force is nearly invisible, shielded by big corporations and public sentiment goaded by indifferent political parties. And the irony is that increasing levels of imprisonment may exacerbate the very problems it is intended to solve.

This powerful system of mass incarceration parallels the old Jim Crow is that "both have served to define the meaning and significance of race in America." (Alexander) Slavery defined what it meant to be black (a slave), and Jim Crow defined what it meant to be black (a second-class citizen). Today mass incarceration defines the meaning of blackness in America: black people, especially black men, are criminals. That is what it means to be black."

So now where is the hope in this? How do we still hold onto the possibility inspired by Dr. King's "dream"?

There are proposals to mitigate these harsh sentences for non-violent felony crimes, where the records will be sealed after four years, allowing a person to possibly get his or her life back. A small step, but it's something.

There are campaigns across the country to have employers "ban the box"... on many job applications there is a check-box with the question if the applicant has ever been convicted... even though this echoes the words of the satirical Alice's Restaurant song, it is serious business when companies use this to discriminate against a whole class of people.

The *Ban the Box* campaign has been working against this for years, by asking employers to choose their best candidates based on job skills and qualifications, *not* past convictions. And now over 45 cities and counties, including New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Seattle, and San Francisco have removed the question regarding conviction history from their employment applications.

This is one small step. It may seem an hopeless task, it may seem like a dream, but it is possible to reverse these trends. The choice is ours.

We must choose to see and learn these hard, disheartening facts. We have to let in the pain and suffering and injustice, and work together to not let it overwhelm or paralyze us with the enormity of the problem.

Let this break open your heart. These facts may be disheartening, but let us allow them to stir our spirits. The choice is ours.

Alexander notes that

“We could choose to be a nation that extends care, compassion, and concern to those who are locked up and locked out or headed for prison before they are old enough to vote. We could seek for them the same opportunities we seek for our own children; we could treat them like one of “us.” We could do that.”

And Dr. King’s address to the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom put it this way:

“[My friends] we have come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.

Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy... Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.”

Nothing short of a major social movement will end the system of mass incarceration. *We can be that social movement, motivated by the belief in love and justice that inspired Dr. King.* It will be hard work, and our baby-steps in this march may not seem like much, but we can carry forward the legacy of freedom fighters.

I am still looking for that path, that starting place. What I do know is that the starting place is here... (the heart). As we say on Yom Kippur, this place inside me - and inside you - is the only starting place there is.

Let us open our hearts and minds, build the world we dream about. Work toward a new system where there is justice and freedom and equality for all... food, shelter and education to those in need. Let us awaken from our colorblind slumber, embrace the humanness of all - and let our light shine.