

Preaching to the Preacher
Reflections on What I Learned in 2017

By
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Over the years many have told me how difficult they imagine it must be to come up with a new sermon every week. For many ministers this is so; preaching can be the most anxiety inducing part of the job. Some struggle to continuously find something uniquely meaningful to say, and may feel defeated receiving a poor response to something they've worked hours on.

But preaching is my favorite part of ministry. I think this is so because it lets me philosophize. I've had the good fortune over the years of acquiring an impressive pile of academic credentials, including a doctorate, but I consider it all just icing on the cake compared to my original degree in philosophy. When I graduated from college, I graduated a philosopher, and have considered myself one ever since. Today, occupying a Unitarian Universalist pulpit allows me the unusual opportunity to actually make a living philosophizing.

Each Sunday, I not only get to share my thoughts about the matters most on my mind, but, as is always my intention, to engage the minds of others on the same matters. Even though I'm the one doing most the talking—okay, doing all the talking—I consider my sermons a kind of dialectic monologue. For, through my habit of questioning our paradigms and creating mind-altering experiences, I don't consider you inert listeners, but engaged as much with the questions and issues as I am. And that's what my sermons are, reflections upon my own attempt to struggle with the matters I most wonder or am concerned about. They reflect the journey of wonderment I'm upon, more so than the answers I've found, and, as such, are always an invitation for you to philosophize with me. I know my sermons aren't for everybody, but, for the most part, I'm satisfied with the response my approach to preaching receives.

All of this implies that my sermons are as much for me as they are for you. Again, I'm not sharing what I know, but what I'm wondering about, even as I reach for possible solutions to both the perennial and immediate problems facing all of us. Thus, much of my preaching this past year has coincided with my own growth and evolution. I really have spent the year preaching to the preacher. So, I want to spend a little time today talking about the sermons that have most impacted me during the past 12 months.

In considering the sermons I gave in 2017, I've found about 35 percent focused on four recurring themes. Given what happened last January, it should come as no surprise I spent much time trying to figure out how so many people could have voted for someone like Donald Trump. For me this isn't a political question as much as it is a philosophical and psychological

question. What is it about the human condition that allows us to ignore what we don't want to acknowledge in favor of what we prefer is true?

The political coup in our country by a white supremacist has also caused me to think a lot about racism in our nation, and about the best way to respond to it, which is another issue I spoke frequently about in 2017, and will likely continue talking about in 2018. It's not something any of us should stop talking about until the 500-year horror of white supremacy is finally brought to an end.

Pondering this terrible reality in our nation has also prompted me to consider the merits of PC—political correctness. Until 2017 I've wavered a bit on the topic, wondering if it isn't just a manifestation of our society's need to evolve past old stereotypes that have been conveniently used to discriminate against entire classes of people. But witnessing how it has been used by the, so-called, progressive left to publicly shame and silence those who say things they find offensive, I've come to see this phenomenon as part of the problem in our country, not the solution.

Finally, just as these three issues, Trump's illegitimate election, white supremacy, and political correctness are interrelated, the topic I spoke most about during 2018, which has become my North Star, my guiding light, is about the way forward as we respond to all these concerns and more. I'm talking about the revelation I discovered in Erich Fromm's book, *Man for Himself*, which boils the ethics of everything we do down to one principle, the fulfillment of each person's potential, or, in short, to genuine love. Think about it; if everything we do, our economics, our laws, our foreign affairs, our immigration policies, our criminal justice system, our education systems, our tax codes, our medical practices, journalism and public expression, our environmental policies, and so much else, were all focused on making sure everyone has the opportunity to achieve their greatest potential, none of the problems that have plagued us this past year would be an issue, and I'd be out of a job because I wouldn't know what to talk about.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, I had plenty to say about these things last year. Regarding the question of Trump's election, politics aside, what has bothered and perplexed me most concerns how so many people in our country could have voted for a man so openly racist, sexist, and xenophobic. I know there are lots of other things wrong with this guy, but, as a minister, the principle of compassion, of loving our neighbors as ourselves, which expresses the best in all religions, is the antithesis of what Trump spoke about during his campaign. I will admit, at first it was hard not to conclude we must have an awful lot of hateful people in our country, people who don't care about the welfare of others, not even their own neighbors.

This is what led to my sermon, "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself: Is it Too Much to Ask?" which I gave the Sunday before Trump's inauguration. Here's an excerpt:

...when Jesus instructed his followers, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” I’m pretty sure he didn’t mean just your white neighbors, or your American neighbors, or your straight neighbors, or your Christian neighbors, or your conservative neighbors. Jesus, who was often criticized by Fox News... I mean the Pharisees... for associating with those his society ostracized, those who had been demonized, or declared unclean and untouchable, people who did degrading work, or were considered second class citizens, like women, the disabled, the poor, and people of other faiths and ethnicities, didn’t build fences to keep them out. He invited them into his ever-widening circle of acceptance and inclusion.

This was the sermon in which I also lamented, “the thing about this tragic turn of events that disturbs me most is that so many people, so many of my neighbors, people I likely encounter every day, weren’t troubled enough by all of this to vote against him.”

A few months later, in July, I gave another sermon entitled “Dumbing it Down: A Little Black and White Thinking to Make Understanding Ethics Easy,” during which I personified *Southpark’s* fictional guidance counselor, Mr. Mackey, to help simplify things;

Racism is bad. You shouldn’t practice racism. Mokay... Taking healthcare away from millions is bad, mokay... Citizens United, mokay, is bad... Get money out of politics, mokay... Don’t gerrymander, mokay... Voter suppression—that’s bad, mokay... If you steal Supreme Court seats, you’re bad, mokay... Bathroom laws are bad, mokay... Global warming, is bad... Stop global warming, mokay... Gun violence is really bad, mokay... Grabbing women or calling them pigs or paying them less than men is all bad, mokay... Not letting people in your country based on their religion, is bad, mokay... Not letting refugees fleeing from violence into your country, is bad, mokay... Building walls to keep out your neighbors, is bad, mokay... Tweeting mean things, is bad, mokay... FOX News is bad, mokay... Demonizing and silencing people you disagree with is always bad, mokay... Killing unarmed black men, is bad, mokay... Mass incarceration, is bad, mokay... Cutting funding to public education, is bad, mokay... So, don’t bad...Being bad is bad, mokay.

Obviously, I’ve been pretty upset with my Trump supporting neighbors, and I don’t mind dumbing things down to help them understand why. But, as I’ve evolved over the year, I’ve had to reconcile these feelings with the reality of having family members I care about and thoughtful neighbors who voted for him. So I’ve had to go deeper to discover and ask the philosophical question that’s really been bothering me, “Why do good people make bad decisions?”

A potential or partial explanation, for me, involves cognitive dissonance and our response to it. *Cognitive dissonance* refers to the discomfort we feel when facing conflicting beliefs. To avoid this discomfort, our species tends to ignore the possibilities that conflict with our ideological preferences. There’s a video on YouTube, some of you may be familiar with, that demonstrates this principle. It asks the viewer to count the number of times a basketball is passed between two teams. Afterward, it asks if they saw the moonwalking bear dance

across the screen. It turns out, if one isn't busy counting basketballs, a person moonwalking in a bear costume can't be missed. What's even more interesting, however, is that even if you know about the moonwalking bear, you still miss it if you're busy counting basketballs.

I think this helps explain how we make a lot of decisions. As a liberal progressive, I was looking for the basketballs representing my concerns and values, and, in doing so, it was easy for me to ignore the fact that Bernie Sanders had no international experience or concrete plan for dealing with many of our global conflicts, or that he didn't adequately address the concerns of Black Lives Matter, or other important issues. It was easy for me to ignore a lot of Hillary Clinton's deficits too, because the weaknesses of these two candidates weren't what I was looking for, because I was mostly looking for the ways they reflect my values and hopes. I think the same thing happened with a lot of Trump supporters. Sure, they saw the moonwalking bear of misogyny, and racism, and xenophobia once it was pointed out, but once they went back to counting the basketballs they were looking for, the basketballs representing their values and concerns, they forgot about the moonwalking bear.

This solution to the problem may represent my own difficulty with cognitive dissonance, with reconciling the conflict I feel knowing what Trump represents and having goodhearted neighbors and family members who voted for him. But it helps me understand why good people make bad decisions, and, more importantly, reminds me that I too am missing the moonwalking bears, even after some of them have been pointed out to me, because I'm too busy counting the basketballs I'm looking for.

Regardless of how or why he got in office, the reality is we have a white supremacist in office who began his administration by appointing known white supremacists and white nationalists to his cabinet. Many have responded to this disturbing reality by shutting down racist speakers on college campuses, counter marching against white nationalist groups, and tearing down age old racist monuments in the South. But, as I said in my October 24th sermon, entitled, "It's Not the Thought that Counts," "Fighting fascism with fascism is not the answer." For, as I said in another sermon that same month, "controlling the meme pool by preventing the expression of certain ideas is supposed to be the morality of Fox News, of the Holy Inquisition, of Joseph McCarthy, not the tactics of liberals who have traditionally upheld freedom of speech for everyone, friend or foe."

While it is important for us to peaceably counter messages of hate, including through counter-demonstrations, I believe we must maintain our respect for the worth and dignity of every person, including those we disagree with. As I said in one of these same sermons, "It's okay to hear things we disagree with. It's okay to listen to people with different opinions than our own. It's okay for people to say things we dislike. We're not so fragile we can't handle it, nor so righteous we don't have to stand for it."

More important than mass demonstrations, however, or tearing down monuments and flags, or changing the names of mascots and street signs, I've been arguing we must finally tear down that age-old systems of discrimination, especially systems of white supremacy, that persist in our nation. For, as I mentioned in my recent sermon on "Love or Racism," as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva succinctly reminds us, "blacks and most racial minorities lag behind whites in terms of income, wealth, occupational and health status, educational attainment, and other relevant social indicators."¹ This isn't so, he suggests, simply because too many individuals still hold racist ideas. If this were so, as many think it is, the problem is solely individual, and the solution educational. The problem, rather, as Bonillo-Silva sees it, is that "after a society becomes racialized, racialization develops a life of its own."² In this sense, all of us are stuck in the terrible and unending milieu of white supremacy.

The problem, thus, is not individual, nor is the solution a simple matter of education. It's not going to be that easy. Changing minds, especially through the tyranny of PC, which, like all tyrannies, commits linguicide by declaring certain speech impermissible, does nothing to dismantle 500-year-old racist systems. In my opinion, it only exacerbates the problem by whitewashing our language. If all we do is to make hate silent and get rid of all outward signs of racism—monuments and flags—then the reality of white supremacy will continue to thrive in the shadows, even as millions of Americans continue to suffer its consequences. Citing Martin Luther King, Jr., who once said, "It may be true that the law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless," this past year I've repeatedly argued most our effort needs to be upon changing the system, changing the rules, even in our imperfection, even with our imperfect words and beliefs, even amidst our brokenness, prejudices, and fears.

And this brings me to the topic I most often touched upon during 2017, making human fulfillment the focus of everything we do, making it the basketball we are looking for, the basketball we're most counting on. As I said during my July sermon entitled, "Becoming Human," ours is among a handful of unusual species born premature, and that continues maturing as long as we live, so long as society doesn't keep putting systems in place to stunt our growth. This is why, Erich Fromm said we always die before any of us is ever, "fully born,"³ because we have the potential to keep growing right up until the end; which is why he also said, the whole meaning of life is to "develop into the individual one potentially is,"⁴ and, "The duty to be alive is the same as the duty to become oneself."⁵

Thus, throughout his career, Fromm insisted, "*the most fundamental kind of love, which underlies all types of love...*" includes, "*the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of*

¹ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Lynne Rienner Publisher, Boulder, CO, 2001, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 91.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*

any other human being, the wish to further [that person's] life." So, love, like racism, isn't merely a personal matter. Becoming oneself isn't the individual's problem or duty alone. A just society, which is synonymous with a loving society, must, by definition, demonstrate this wish to further the lives of others, to help them grow, become, evolve, through its institutions and culture. Again, as I said in "Love or Racism," because that's the choice before us, "White Supremacy is the opposite of love for this very reason, because it excludes nonwhites from these very qualities—responsibility, care, respect, knowledge, and the wish to further their lives."

I concluded that sermon by also saying, "The reason racism, like all forms of oppression and domination are unjust, is because it prevents certain people, precious people, people born with so much beauty and genius to share, from fully unfolding and becoming all that they are meant to be," and for this reason, "We can no longer revolt against racist feelings and sentiments. We must, rather, have a love revolution that finally changes the ideas and institutions that continue to hold people down, we must attack the racist prison and criminal justice system, the racist housing, education, and employment systems that are keeping too many of us down, with love—with the belief that all people, ALL people, are equal and deserve care, respect, freedom, and the opportunities to fully express themselves and become all they are meant to be."

This is probably why my favorite sermon of 2017 was, "The Sovereignty of Persons: Better Borders for a Bigger World," which I gave in July, arguing the age of nations is ending as we hurl toward the inevitability of one world community. "The next giant leap means overcoming our fear of others by realizing there are no others," I said, "It means shifting our loyalties from the countries we identify with, to the principles of freedom, and democracy, and equality we identify with. It means an end to the brief Age of Nationalism, and the emergence of an Age of Global Community in which all people live according to these principles. It means identifying not with our nation, but with our species. The next giant leap for humankind means transcending race, gender, sexuality, religion, countries, ideas, economics, culture, language, or anything else that keeps us apart. The next giant leap for humankind means becoming one people, one world."

I'm not sure where my sermons will go from here, but this seems like a good starting place for 2018, a vision of a more unified, just, and loving world. It is, as I said, my North Star, my guiding light, that shall determine the course I take over the coming months. I hope, as I continue my own journey, and get to process aloud with you each Sunday, that our dialectic monologue will remain meaningful to you as well. But, mostly, I just want to thank you for this rare privilege of fulfilling my own potential by allowing me the opportunity to be a 21st century philosopher. I love you too.

