

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“Thomas Jefferson, Slavery, and TJMC-UU”
The Rev. Morris W. Hudgins,
October 18, 2009

Introduction

Today I step boldly into topic that some of you wish would be left alone. One of the staff persons said as I was preparing this sermon, “Morris, why did you have to raise this issue? We have enough on our plate now?” They were joking, but also somewhat serious. The reality is the Thomas Jefferson District Board proposed a name change for the District, before I came to Charlottesville. The District will vote on this at the annual meeting next spring. Their suggestion is: T.J. will stand for Toward Justice.

I must confess to you when this issue was brought up in the 90’s I supported a change. My preference was not to take Thomas Jefferson out of the name, but to add another name to the District. One of the suggestions was the “Jefferson-Jordan District.” The Jordans were African-American Universalist ministers active in the Norfolk area early in the 20th century.

The name Jefferson-Jordan lost by a very close margin and there was a desire by many to have a name that did not include any person, but rather identified the region, like the Blue Ridge District. The focus now is on the values we espouse; therefore, the Board is proposing the name, T.J. District, which stands for “Toward Justice”. I am not going to take a position on the district change or the name of this church. This is your task. My task is to encourage you to resolve it before the next minister is settled.

I see this as a test. I hope you will be able to say to potential candidates: “We discussed this. We heard each other. We spoke from our hearts. We made a decision considering all the points of view. We are ready to move forward.”

The reality is, names are important, and Jefferson is an important name for this community. The American Unitarian Association was right to encourage and support the founding of this church in the 1940’s. It is my hope that in this process we will also be honest about the life and legacy of Thomas Jefferson. Gordon Wood has written an essay titled, “The Trials and Tribulations of Thomas Jefferson, included in the book, *Jeffersonian Legacy*, published by The University of Virginia in 1993. He begins his essay with these words:

Jefferson scarcely seems to exist as a real historical person. Almost from the beginning he has been a symbol, a touchstone, of what we as a people are, someone invented, manipulated, turned into something we Americans like or dislike, fear or yearn for, within ourselves—whether it is populism or elitism, agrarianism or racism, atheism or liberalism. We are continually asking ourselves whether Jefferson still survives, or what is still living in the thought of Jefferson; and we quote him on every side of every major question in our history. No figure in our history has embodied so much of our heritage and so many of our hopes. Most American think of Jefferson much as our first professional biographer James Parton did. “If Jefferson was wrong,” wrote Parton in 1874, “America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson is right.”

As Merrill Peterson has shown us in his superb book published over thirty years ago, the image of Jefferson in American culture has always been “a sensitive reflector . . . of America’s troubled search for the image of itself.” And the symbolizing, the image-mongering, the identifying of Jefferson with America, has not changed a bit in the generation since Peterson book was published—even though the level of professional historical scholarship has never been higher.”

(p. 395)

I believe Wood and Peterson are correct, and the same can be said about Unitarian Universalism as their conclusions about American culture. We are a product of the times in which we live, but we hope that our heroes will lead us in a new direction. We place our hopes and dreams on our heroes.

Last month the Undoing Racism Committee here at TJMC--UU asked me to join them for a discussion about today’s service. Their conclusion is my conclusion: If we focus just on the name of the church in this discussion, we will divide the congregation and get no where.

I have received emails from many of you about this subject. You have shared your concerns about eliminating Thomas Jefferson from the name altogether. By the way, I have not heard this from anyone. What I have heard from the Undoing Racism Committee and others is that they would like to take Jefferson off of the pedestal we have set him upon. He was a human being, who became a symbol of the enlightenment, who espoused Unitarian ideals, but who also espoused some views of the Negroes and the American Indians that are being challenged today. He did not always live out the values about which he spoke so eloquently.

Let's say it: Thomas Jefferson is complicated. Gordon Wood acknowledges this in his essay. Leonard Levy in his book *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* (1963) concludes:

... his passion for partisan persecution, his lack of concern for basic civil liberties, and a self-righteousness that became at times out-and-out ruthlessness. Far from being the skeptical enlightened intellectual, allowing all ideas their free play, Jefferson was portrayed by Levy and other historians as something of an ideologue, eager to fill the young with his political orthodoxy while censoring all those books he did not like. He did not have an open and questioning mind after all.

Bernard Bailyn describes Jefferson's reaction to European society and culture as,

... an eighteenth-century stereotype—a boldly liberal, high-minded, enlightened stereotype, but a stereotype nonetheless—a configuration of liberal attitudes and ideas which he accepted uncritically, embellishing them with his beautifully wrought prose but questioning little and adding little. (p 396)

Jefferson and Slavery

Our task today is to focus on Jefferson and slavery. Wood concludes:

Who could not find the contrast between Jefferson's great declarations of liberty and equality and his lifelong ownership of slaves glaringly embarrassing? Jefferson hated slavery, it is true, but, unlike Washington, he was never able to free all his slaves. More than that, as recent historians have emphasized, he bought, bred, and flogged his slaves, and hunted down fugitives in much the same way his fellow Virginia planters did—all the while declaring that American slavery was not as bad as that of the ancient Romans. (p. 397)

William Freehling calls Jefferson's attitudes toward blacks as repugnant. He concludes "that identifying the Sage of Monticello with antislavery actually discredits the reform movement." Why is this so? I quote from Woods:

Jefferson could never really imagine freed blacks living in a white man's America, throughout his life he insisted that the emancipation of the slaves had to be accompanied by their expulsion from the country. He wanted all blacks sent to the West Indies, or Africa, or anywhere out of the United States. In the end, it has been said, Jefferson loaded such conditions on the abolition of slavery that the antislavery movement could scarcely get off the ground. In response to the pleas of younger men that he speak out against slavery, he offered only excuses for delay. (p. 397)

At this point, I must interject that this was also the position of most Unitarians and many Universalists during this same period. Unitarians were the leaders in the Colonization movement to send blacks back to Africa. One of the leading Unitarians in North Carolina at the time was working to free slaves while also supporting the Colonization movement. This was common.

Another contradiction in Jefferson's life was his view of miscegenation. He was very critical of such relationships. It is clear, however, that he practiced something quite different. It was clearly happening at Monticello and most likely by him.

We also have to look beyond Monticello. When we judge Jefferson we are also judging ourselves. Our denominational history regarding African-Americans has not been pure. Mark Morrison-Reed has been telling us this for decades, as he has told the stories of how we have treated African-Americans who have proudly claimed the name Unitarian.

Most Unitarians and Universalists were gradualists when it came to the abolition of slaves. Yes, there were leading lights whom pushed for immediate abolition. But they were a minority. And even many abolitionists had an unenlightened view of race. They were pointing to a new future, but also held on to some of the old notions. People change and grow. Some change quicker than others. I am sure it was difficult for people like Jefferson to give up their property even when that property was in the form of slaves. I do not know what I would have done, if I were in his shoes.

One of the most impressive statements by the Undoing Racism Committee was the statement made by one but I know if felt by many: "If we just took the name Memorial out of our name, I would be happy." Others wanted to put more emphasis on Unitarian Universalist while also honoring Jefferson.

The fact is Jefferson will always be a part of this church, and an important part of the Unitarian Universalist history. In the second sermon in this series, I will talk about the historical connection Unitarian Universalists have with Thomas Jefferson, mainly through Joseph Priestley.

Roger Wilkins, in his book, *Jefferson's Pillow*, concludes that we must judge Jefferson and his compatriots by the standards of their day, not the 21st century. He writes:

Along with their gifts, however, these men inherited a culture and a complete set of assumptions about the world, people, and the natural order of things. However great their gifts and however hard they worked, it was not possible for them to lift themselves out of their time and culture, and it is in that context that they must be judged. (p. 10)

Wilkins describes this culture:

... when the English began to collide with people unlike themselves early in the seventeenth century, they already had a handy cultural matrix in which to place those different from themselves. There were hierarchies of human beings, and propertied white English Christians were at the top of the pyramid. Then, during the early period of intercontinental exploration, when the population of the entire world was only about five hundred million, the English came across the Indians, a new people whose skin was not white, black, or yellow and who were not Christians. The categorization of human beings and the assignment of a rank order to them were natural cultural activities for the Englishmen who disembarked at Jamestown in 1607. By the time the first blacks were sold to the colony twelve years later, racial division and mistrust had already become integral features of Virginia life. (p. 17)

Roger Taney, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, summarized the English attitude toward blacks in the majority opinion of the Dred Scott decision of 1857. He wrote:

... at the time of the Revolution, blacks were deemed to be beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect. (p. 34)

As we look at Jefferson and his views on slavery we must admit that he saw the contradictions and inconsistencies of writing about liberty while holding slaves. Part of the problem, had to do with the political realities of the time. Wilkins writes:

... the young Thomas Jefferson had attempted, in the House of Burgesses, to soften the harshness of slavery and even to clear the way for the manumission of some slaves. His

initiative had been firmly rejected. Then, in the preamble to his own draft Virginia constitution, he had included a prohibition on “holding in slavery an person henceforth coming into the country.” (p. 47)

Jefferson describes slavery as a “cruel war against human nature itself.” From 1769 through the mid-1780’s, Jefferson made repeated legislative efforts to alleviate slavery. But when he finished his work on the Declaration, he was thirty-three and owned more than a hundred men, women, and children (p. 48). One could argue that Jefferson’s objection to the international slave trade had an economic benefit for him and his Virginia gentry. Their slaves would become more valuable.

Conclusions

The truth is Jefferson does not embody the welcoming attitude that Unitarian Universalists would like to show today. Wilkins summarizes our dilemma. He writes:

Perhaps no other early American embodied in his life and work a more complete refutation of the simplistic and exclusionary story of America’s origins and growth than Thomas Jefferson. He was a great but deeply flawed human being who depended more heavily on blacks around him than any of the other founders. He came down to us deep into the twentieth century with the greatness etched out in bold, bright strokes and the frailties airbrushed into the black holes of history. (p. 134)

What I recommend we do today is remove the airbrushes, admit the flaws, take him down from the pedestal, and continue to admire his good qualities. Wilkins does just this when he says:

(Jefferson) was a dizzying mixture of searing brilliance and infuriating self-indulgence, of idealism and base racism, of soaring patriotism and myopic self-involvement. . . . “

Yes, let’s continue to admire Jefferson’s brilliant qualities. As Wilkins concludes:

. . . Jefferson, in polishing Mason’s words about the natural rights of humankind, coauthored the most significant sentence in American history. None of the founders bore a greater share of responsibility for freedom of religion than Jefferson. And he believed that the new nation that he had done so much to help create provided greater nurturing and protection for the human spirit than any previous regime on earth. (p.135)

I repeat what I said before: I have heard no one say that we should cease honoring these important qualities in Thomas Jefferson here at TJMC. What I do hear is that if we admit there is a different side to Jefferson it will make us a more welcoming congregation to others. Wilkins does this in his book, *Jefferson’s Pillow*, when he writes: “. . .Jefferson also spent a lot of time nurturing and protecting *himself*, sometimes to the detriment of those around him.”

I began this sermon by quoting from Gordon Wood and Merrill Peterson: “the image of Jefferson in American culture has always been ‘a sensitive reflector. . .of America’s troubled search for the image of itself.’ (p. 395)” Wilkins says Jefferson is “America writ small” (p. 134).

My hope is that we will admit this truth for our nation and our church. I also hope we will use this debate to help forge a new beginning, a more welcoming embrace to all in our culture. I close this morning with several challenges as you move forward:

1. **First**, don’t be afraid to look in the mirror, at your own attitudes, at your own privilege. Ask how your privilege has affected others?
2. **Second**, listen to one another. Notice the differences among you. How are you going to welcome differences if you continue to think that you are all the same? I encourage each one of you to think

about your attitude toward Thomas Jefferson. Then reach out to others in the congregation and ask where they stand. I have encouraged the Undoing Racism Committee to sponsor small group discussions around this topic. I hope you will find someone with a different viewpoint from yours. Listen to them and try to understand why they feel the way they do. Remember, this debate is about our self image, more than it is about Thomas Jefferson. Don't be afraid to look in the mirror.

3. **Third**, after this has been done, don't be afraid to look at the name of the church. You have changed your name before. It will not be the end of the world if you change it again. Some would like to remove the name Memorial from the name. Others would like to see Unitarian Universalism as more prominent in the name. What I hope to see is some resolution. Don't just talk. Do something. I am sure your next minister will be inspired by your actions.
4. **Fourth**, I encourage each of you to go out into the larger community where you live. Those in the Greater Charlottesville Area can take part in the Dialogue on Race that is being planned. Some of you are leaders in the planning. I understand there will be small group discussions planned between January and March of 2010. This past year we asked everyone to make a financial pledge to the operation of this church. I would love to see a pledge from all of you that you will support and participate in a Dialogue on Race in your community.
5. **Fifth**, and finally, I ask you to continue to find ways to make this church a place where justice-seeking is at the center. I hope you will continue to support the many justice projects you have sponsored in the past, as you have today, and continue to look for new ways to make a difference in this community. May this be the focus while we also work to be honest about our heroes, admitting their flaws and contradictions, and improving on what they did to build a free, democratic and enlightened world. May this be so.

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Elizabeth Breeden, Worship Associate
October 18, 2009

READING

The living tradition we share draws from many sources. One of them is: Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

Why are we concerned about racism? I have good friends who are people of color. I am always nice to everyone (well except maybe to my friends) Racism, however, remains deeply ingrained in our community. The institutional and structural aspects of racism are painfully evident. People of color generally are obliged to pay higher interest rates for their mortgages and car loans. The historical wage for black workers is even under that of women for the same job. Traffic stops and arrests are still being made for... “driving while black.” In Charlottesville, the suspension rate for black students is 10X that of white students, the black infant mortality rate is 3X that of white babies, the arrest rate is 4x that of white people. Have we decided that this is ok?

Our church’s commitment to be on the journey toward wholeness has included sexual orientation, culture and race. While we have shown some progress with our LGBT sisters and brothers, there has been little progress in the area of race and culture. Newcomers and visitors from traditionally marginalized groups may find themselves lost and perhaps lonely in our liberal religious community.

In conversations about racism, experienced people say: “We keep coming back to three important issues: the power of language; our commitment to be inclusive; and our commitment to include the institutional and structural aspect of racism...Can you allow yourself to ignore the truth behind terms like “institutional racism” or “white privilege”?”

As white people do we choose not to notice when names or institutional practices are racist whereas people of color must notice. A recent article in TIME magazine on babies and racism said that children of white (especially liberal) parents were inadvertently discouraged from talking about race, because they recognized that it makes their parents uncomfortable. Parents of children of color MUST address the issues of race with their children at an early age, and many times thereafter. As I try to become aware of “invisible” racism, and talk to active anti-racist members of the Charlottesville community, they declare that we seemed to be in a much better place in the 60’s and 70’s than today. I think, breaking the barrier of segregation did not teach us to welcome, enjoy and encourage diversity in our society. That’s the much harder job we have before us. One question is: are we still contributing to massive resistance through our inactivity?

The City is launching a Dialogue On Race, attempting to include as many citizens as possible. We are hoping that many hundreds of citizens from every background will meet in small groups to talk and listen deeply to one another and to come up with suggestions for actions to improve the opportunities for all of us. Please consider joining in these Dialogues. You can see the details in the Bulletin section of the OOS or at a table in the Social Hall.

The population of my neighborhood is too slender and is too much divided into other sects to maintain only one preacher well. I must therefore be contented to be a Unitarian by myself.”

Thomas Jefferson, 1822.

1943

The “**Jefferson Unitarian Society**” was formed with 15 members.

1944

The name is changed to “**Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Society.**”

1946

The name is changed to “**Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church**”

The development of the Charlottesville Church had been a matter of unusual interest to Unitarians since the beginning of the effort because of the Thomas Jefferson relationship. This was to be the only religious memorial to Jefferson and the only formal recognition of his religious views. Both Presidents of the American Unitarian Association President Eliot and Davis made special efforts to be helpful at every point. The AUA subsidized the church budget in its early years and it provided \$100,000 of the \$130,000 for a church building.

1951

The dedication of the new church building lasts from April 1 to April 8, 1951

1958

Black soprano Emma Jefferson Morris sang in a church concert prior to her debut later in Carnegie Hall. Gov. Lindsay Almond closed both Lane and Venable schools to prevent court-ordered desegregation of the races. Church board unanimously declined a request from Ch’ville Foundation to establish (whites only) high school in church building.

1959

The name is changed to “**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Unitarian Church.**”

1945 – 1954

Malcolm Sutherland was serving as the first full-time minister. At the U. Va. Hospital he and some members of his congregation joined a team of doctors and clergy in visiting patients in the Davis Ward, which was the part of the hospital where African American patients were treated. At a time when racial segregation and injustice were sanctioned by law, these courageous Unitarians quietly pushed for justice and equality, sometimes to the discomfort of other church members.

1963

Roy Jones became the minister in 1963. He was at that time the head of the UUA commission on Race and Religion. School desegregation and open housing were burning issues. After the Birmingham Church bombing that killed 4 little girls the front of the church was draped with black crepe. Some members of the congregation were not in support of this but the Board, pressed by Roy Jones, chose to do it.

1965-1968

President Tom Michie called a special congregational meeting in September to discuss, among other things, the disposition of the Duschak (dew shack) property that had been left to the church by 2 deceased sisters. There was much discussion and turmoil within the church and in discussions with the Duschak property neighbors about offering the house to a black family in the all white neighborhood. As it turned out, a white family bought the house in a sealed bid, and the furor over the sale faded. However, the high feelings among some members of the TJMUC congregation took a long time to dissipate. Some members, who were perhaps more dissatisfied with the process than with the outcome, left the church.

The church however remained, as Roy Jones said, “uneasy in its differences.” Pledge income plummeted. President Bill Spurgin linked the Jones ministry to church action on “poverty, racial integration and open housing.”

Ann Hope, Molly Michie and Gwyneth Mooney founded the preschool in 1967 with the support of the Religious Education Committee of the church. It was designed as an outreach for UU social and educational values to the community and to meet a community need for a semi-structured, multiracial preschool. It was the first integrated preschool in Charlottesville and the first parent cooperative.

1981

The name is changed to “**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church Unitarian Universalist.**”