



UU Women's Federation Sermon Award 2020

Winner

"Georgia Blew My Mind in 2019: Moving Past Dreams to Action"

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SERMON: Georgia Blew My Mind in 2019: Moving Past Dreams to Action

I am a black woman, 70 years of age, the matriarch of my family; grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles all deceased. Neither the maternal nor paternal sides of the family were prolific with few children born into each generation. Of my generation there remains only my year younger brother, two younger cousins and myself. Nor were we very communicative. Silence was a strong component of getting along in both sides of my family.

I have experienced both gender and racial discrimination; in housing, employment and education. I've fought back using the laws and tools available to me. When none were available or were unsuccessfully wielded, I found ways to get over it and move on.

I never asked about our family histories. There were no bibles or other artifacts listing marriages, births, christenings or deaths. The development of and interest in companies such as "Ancestry.com" and "23 and Me" were long in the future and I was never very curious about my heritage anyway feeling that there was little way to learn.

I did know that my paternal great-grandmother's (she lived to be 105) parents were slaves and that she was born free. I knew that my father was raised in Kentucky and that my maternal side of the family migrated to the Chicago Illinois and northern Indiana area from Nashville. That's it.

I worked the Census verifying addresses for the 2020 count. My division in Tampa Florida completed our assignments quickly. Georgia had few workers and vast territories that needed completion so I was among 20 from Florida who went to Vidalia Georgia to work for two weeks in primarily extremely rural areas.

Driving to my assigned location one morning I passed a field that was recognizable, though not instantly, as a cotton field. I've of course seen cotton in its final state but never before seen it growing in a field except in movies, on television or in pictures. I wear cotton clothing as most people do. Never have I had a negative thought or reaction until that day.

As I recognized the field for what it was my stomach clinched, my heart rate sped up and I had a feeling of despair. I did nothing but continue to drive.

Each time I passed another cotton field that day and the next my reaction was the same. The feelings became so disturbing that I finally could no longer ignore them. When I reached a point where I could safely pull to the side of the road, I dug deep into myself and asked the hard questions.

"Why am I feeling this way? I have no stories that relate to this. I have no associations with this. I have no memories, no personal struggles that have been shared with me. Why?"

I finally surmised the answer and even now as I type this I am overcome with the feelings of despair and anguish that - "That could have been my life. Born in a different time, those are fields where I might have been forced to work and bleed. That had the civil war ended with a different victor my life could have been one of that kind of degradation and torture" today.

“Get over it” is a popular clapback when African-Americans talk about the past and its ramifications on the present. I didn’t know I even had anything to “get over” until the deep fear that resides in my bones sprang to the fore because of a concrete visual of where I could have spent my life under other circumstances. I didn’t consciously know, yet a part of me did.

I had the “talks” with my children that Caucasian parents don’t have to have. I have ignored taunts delivered by people who had the need to feel superior. I have cried privately over opportunities that based on my abilities should have been mine but were given to others. I have suppressed my anger when made to jump through hoops that others did not. These were all things in my present that I knew must and could and were dealt with.

My drive through rural Georgia solidified for me what I already knew. Slavery didn’t go away – it morphed.

It became poverty, red-lining and other forms of discrimination in housing and in employment, voting impediments, schools separate and never equal - a prison pipeline and murder by – “I feared for my life”, “stop resisting while I shoot you full of electricity” cop.

Where two thirds of the citizens of Florida votes yes on Amendment 4 to restore voting rights to returning citizens and the white aristocratic legislature found its loophole to override the will of the people.

This unknown grief and fear of a past I never lived has shaken me. It has made me look at the world differently. Not since my childhood have I walked into a restaurant and thought “am I really welcome here”? But I did while I was in Georgia.

When I went into the Jacuzzi at the hotel my thoughts turned to the knowledge that I would have once been banned because people worried that our colored skin would contaminate the water. I remembered my thoughts as a teenager wondering why Caucasians worked so hard to tan and attain skin the color of mine when it was so despised on my body.

Are my reactions in part caused by the current climate of hate that is rampant and an environment that becomes more hostile every day? Is it because I have lived through the civil rights movement expecting improvements to continue on an upward path and am seeing a downward trend as bad or worse than when I was a child?

I don’t have the answers to my own questions. I know only that I am working to heal my heart, to excise the pain and refrain from despair. AND to share. To put the word out that others who feel like me have a responsibility to share. Those who need to learn can only learn if the information is out there. They can only partake of what is available.

I read something recently that has become my focus. Picture 3 people of different heights: tall, medium and short; standing behind a wooden fence to watch an event. Provide each with a box 1 foot tall. The tall person doesn’t need it. The medium person can now see over the fence and the short person still can’t see. That’s equality – equal treatment; one size fits all.

Equity gives every person what s(he) needs. The tall person needs nothing. The medium height person needs 1 box and the short person needs 2 boxes. They can all now see.

That's what I thought I had been striving for all my life as an investigator with a civil rights agency, as a teacher, as a parent; all persons getting what they need to move ahead. I knew that people resent this. They see it as a handout more often than a hand-up. They see it as something being taken away from them and given to someone/thing less deserving.

I now know that want is JUSTICE. I think I always did. Justice removes the fence or makes it one that can be seen through. I want us to remove the impediments that prevent growth, that prevent safety, that prevents peace.

Shortly after I returned from Georgia, I traveled to Maine to visit family and friends. I went to a concert one evening and the black singer, a man born and raised in Macon Georgia, sang a song he wrote about his need to leave Georgia and his ultimate return. The universe closing the loop?

Will the Justice we've never had be attainable? Difficult, yet with the will, the commitment and the hard work completed by people in love and faith - Yes.

I have hope that with Justice I will no longer fear the cotton fields.

I've spoken for 10 minutes without speaking of the man whom we come to honor today - Martin Luther King, Jr. And yet I feel that all I have shared and what I will ask of you honors him.

"Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world." **Harriet Tubman**

Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of his dreams on an August day. His dreams, only in part - have become reality. In his words:

"There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.

We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.

We cannot be satisfied as long as the negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one.

We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: "For Whites Only."

We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote."

I quote **Marian Anderson** "*None of us is responsible for the complexion of his skin. This fact...offers no clue to the character or quality of the person...*"

And yet:

The police issues continue: 1. for selling cigarettes on a public street – resulting in a strangle hold that results in death; 2. For running from a traffic stop – resulting in death from multiple shots in the back. The justice system fails: when a person is absolved in the death of a black teen walking in a neighborhood wearing a hoodie.

We are able to seek and gain lodging in motels and hotels. But red-lining and discrimination in housing - both rental and purchase persists. The inequities in education, employment and wages prevent too many from “moving on up” even if the other impediments aren’t present.

The “for whites only” signs are gone, replaced by cell phone calls to the police on blacks who: wait for friends in a Starbucks, barbeque in a park, sleep in a public room in their dorm building, check into their rented Air B&B accommodation, and babysit their white friends’ children.

Replaced by children being excluded from school because they wear their hair in traditional African American styles: braids, locks or afros. Where a young man was humiliated in a gymnasium full of people when told by a referee that he had to choose to either have his locks cut then and there or forfeit his opportunity to wrestle for his team.

Where a Black woman in the workplace knows that she may be looked at as not professional unless her hair conforms to the white image of beautiful hair.

Where the military told African American women who if called upon to put their lives in harm’s way were told that braids were unacceptable and only relented when the outcry was too loud to ignore.

So much for his dream that one day this nation would rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed where all men are created equal and not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. “

I believe that more important than his dreams he lived a life working to make those dreams reality.

The work remains for us, individually and as groups to continue to create reality out of those dreams. To select a concrete area of concern that can be turned around. The mountains that stand in the way have increased in height over the last few years.

The bombardment of hostility, negativity and set-backs and pushback create fatigue which makes it hard to continue. That one more meeting, that one more phone call to a legislative member, that one more letter or email that needs to be sent and that one more march for women, for Black Lives Matter, for immigrant justice, for citizen reentry, for children.

The poem by Langston Hughes “A Dream Deferred” exemplifies why Dr. King’s dreams could only be a beginning. Mr. Hughes wrote: “What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore--And then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over--like a syrupy sweet? Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?”

I am here to share with you a need and as a UU congregation, and as individuals who believe in UU principles I expect you to act upon it.

We will have neither justice nor peace in this world until we each realize that it begins with the actions that we each take.

The actions you have taken up to this point are not enough. They will never be enough until JUSTICE has been obtained for every: black, brown, yellow, white, poor, child, lesbian, gay, by-sexual, transgender, queer, and other-abled person.

And so, I come to the end.

If we were today in a black African Methodist Episcopal or Baptist church, now would be a come to the alter call.

Instead I am issuing a call to action by closing with these final points.

1. Re-define your socially conscious dreams as working goals listing the actions it will take to make it so. Make a plan and be sure to add a time table. Without deadlines goals fall into the open pit of good intentions unacted upon.
2. To prevent fatigue and burnout: create or recover a dream deferred. Always wanted to paint, go back to school, have lunch with your grade schooler in the cafeteria? Take steps to act. Paints and paper are inexpensive, take one class as a start, pick a day and enjoy your lunch. Taking care of your own needs first allows you to better take care of others. Begin now to make your personal dream your reality.
3. We are truly in perilous times. Are you registered to vote? Are your adult children and grandchildren registered?

If you haven't asked them now is the time. Assumptions can't be made. These conversations must be had and perhaps not just once. I can think of no greater action to take than this.

Thank you for your attention today. It is possible that everything I said could have been summed up in two sentences. The first from Anne Frank "How wonderful it is that nobody has to wait a single moment before starting to improve the world". Make today the moment that you begin to act each and every day.

And quoting **Marian Anderson** once again "*I always bear in mind that my mission is to leave behind me the kind of impression that will make it easier for those who follow.*"

I believe there can be no peace without justice. Which leads me to ask - what is your mission and what are you going to do that will make justice easier not only for those who follow but also for those who are here now.