

**Channing Memorial Church
Unitarian Universalist
Ellicott City, Maryland**

**The Reverend Susan LaMar, Minister
September 23, 2007**

The Heart of Atonement

How many of you remember Isaac Hayes? It was 1971. I was at a concert at the War Memorial stadium in Syracuse, and he was the headliner, offering a performance of soul music that had the many thousands swooning. What a performer he was (still is, I guess, despite a number of difficult years of drug abuse, although he is aging, like the rest of us.) He plays just about every instrument. Just after the intermission, he was presented with an oil painting by an artist who was incarcerated at the state prison at Attica, one of the highest security prisons in New York State. It was a beautiful work, and he gave a moving speech of appreciation.

As he was finishing, two or three young black men, who I happened to know as rather unsavory characters from my days working at a swimming pool in their inner city neighborhood, jumped up on the stage, yelling "Get that brother out. Get that brother out." Now keep in mind, this was 1971, so racial tensions were high, with the Black Panthers being active, and fear very close to the surface of both blacks and whites. There was potential for a riot to occur. As one of probably a dozen white people in an audience of several thousand, I felt a moment of uneasiness.

But Isaac Hayes pulled off an amazing feat. He fell still for a few moments, glanced at the young men attempting to disrupt the concert, and then turned back to the audience. And he began to speak. He spoke about racism. He spoke about race relations. He spoke about the unfairness of a court system that handled "justice" for blacks and whites differently. He spoke about subsistence crimes – those crimes committed in order simply to support a family because jobs were not available. He spoke about the need for accountability by those who committed serious crimes – that prison is justified. He spoke extemporaneously, all the while holding the painting, for a good ten minutes.

At first, the young men kept up the chant, "get that brother out" clearly expecting the audience to join in. But after a few minutes, they stopped, kept listening, and then slowly walked away. No need for guards. No need for security. No need for police.

Simply the powerful presence of a powerful personality, speaking the whole truth.

When they had gone, Isaac Hayes turned, put the painting back on its tripod, walked over to his piano, and began to play.

The image of that evening has been with me this week, as I, along with so many of us, have been watching events unfold in Jena, Louisiana. It comes back to me often as I watch, the oh-so-slow, oh-so-painful process of racial reconciliation taking place in this country. 1971 was thirty six years ago, and in some ways great strides have been made, yet in other ways we still have so very, very, far to go.

A rough outline: A year ago, a few black students at Jena high school sat under a tree where only white students had previously sat. The next day, there were three nooses hanging from the tree. The School superintendent handled the incident as a prank, and gave the three white students who hung the nooses a three-day suspension. Several weeks of racial tension and unrest followed, including a fire set to the school. In December, several black students beat up

one of the white students, and were charged with assault and attempted murder, even though the student's injuries were not life threatening. There is still much dissent and confusion over who should be charged with what, and whether the incident is "racial" or not. At one point, white community leaders cut down the tree, hoping that would help put an end to the tensions. This week, multitudes gathered in Jena, supporting six black teenagers who are being zealously prosecuted for the assault.

Here is what has been echoing through my mind this week as I have watched the events unfold. The power of symbols. I believe that a lack of understanding on the part of the white youth, the school administrators, and white townspeople in general . . . a lack of understanding of the *nuclear* power of the symbol of the noose for African Americans is what unleashed these events. One symbol, interpreted by one group as a cute prank and by another as an imminent threat to life and limb, unleashed all of that power.

A noose, when used in the context of race relations, is not a prank. *Never*. It is a recollection of a time of severe threat and danger – terrorism – by whites against blacks. Lynchings were not pranks. A noose is a reminder that this nation is still . . . still . . . in the process of atoning for the legacy of slavery and of Jim Crow and of assumptions of racial superiority.

Here is level one of the problem. In the year 2006, there was still a place on public school grounds, which was considered by tradition to be the sole property of whites.

Here is level two: I think that it is possible, just possible, that the kids who hung the nooses may . . . may . . . have *thought* it was a prank. It may have been what I call "cruel teasing" . . . a kind of (in their minds) way of saying goodbye to their exclusive use of the shade of that tree. A begrudging "OK, but we're not going to go quietly" kind of acquiescence. I was an adolescent once. I can remember my mind working that way. I can almost hear them saying, "We didn't mean anything by it," as an excuse, or at least an explanation. "We were just kidding." That in itself is a huge problem. They are young, studying the civil rights movement as "history." They probably don't realize that we are not even one lifetime away from the meaning of a noose being a clear and present threat of murder. Less than one lifetime from actual lynchings.

Here is level three: Even if the teenagers didn't know, the school superintendent *should have known*. It seems to me it is the job of educational leadership to have a deep and abiding grasp of history – not as book-learning, dates and facts and all the stuff that you can test people on with multiple choice – no not that. Educational leadership ought to have an understanding of history as a community's and a culture's story, in all its complexity, all of its symbolism, and all of its pain.

Here is level four: This incident tells me that our culture's, our nation's, collective stories are not being told well enough. They are not being passed on from generation to generation, across all racial and ethnic subcultures, in ways that "zing" right to the heart.

Imagine, for example, if when the nooses appeared in the tree the entire school population had been gathered together under that tree to hear the story of Emmett Till. 1955 – less than a lifetime ago, the brutal murder of a fourteen year old boy in Mississippi, by hanging, beating, stabbing and drowning. A young black teenager – a teenager just like the Jena students. A real life story of the powerful meaning that "noose" has for African Americans. Might it not be that the lesson might be more important than any math, English, or *abstract* social studies class that day? *This is why those nooses are wrong. This is why they will not be tolerated here. This is why they are not a prank. This is why you who hung them there will be expelled. This is why you who hung them must figure out how to make atonement, before you are allowed back in school. This is why.*

Then, and only then, after you have taken some action within the community, after you have felt within yourselves the fear and terror that those nooses caused in others, after you have made it right will you be allowed to take your transgression to the temple and lay it on the head of the goat to be taken away into the desert. Not until you have changed. After. You have work to do first.

[Pause]

Jena is for me a reminder of just how far we have to go. It is a reminder that reconciliation – atonement – coming together as one nation, one people, one world, is not an easy thing to do. It is a reminder that actions and events and symbols are *experienced* and *interpreted* in completely different ways by different people. It is a reminder that when those differing interpretations happen – notice that I did not say misinterpretations, but differing interpretations, when those differing interpretations happen, tremendous power is unleashed. The question becomes: is there any place for that power to go, other than into violence. Is it possible to direct that power into atonement . . . drawing the parties into a single community?

I don't know that it is possible – it is impossible to know the future. But I *believe* that it is possible.

I *believe* . . . that unless all parties, in this and other situations are able to recognize symbolism and its power we will not be able to come together as one world. I believe that we have to allow ourselves to see, hear, and feel what the “other” sees, hears, and feels in order to engage with one another toward peace.

Here is another example: Two religious youth groups joined together to view a movie about the Holocaust – a Jewish youth group and a Protestant youth group. The idea was to facilitate interfaith understanding. They viewed the film which depicted in graphic detail the horrors of the Holocaust. And when the movie was over, the Protestant kids said, “Omgod, that was awful, let's go for pizza.” And the Jewish kids couldn't eat. For them it was not an intellectual exercise, an interesting bit of history. For them it was a living memory, their families, their people. It was an immediate and personal living horror.

I suspect that situations like that occur all the time, with people obliviously going on with their lives without realizing, perhaps without even an inkling, of how others are affected. It was captured right after September 11th with the so often repeated phrase, uttered with legitimate bewilderment, “Why do they hate us?”

What I believe is that it is incumbent upon all sides to be able to recognize the power of symbols in one another's emotional and spiritual lives. I believe that it is absolutely necessary if we as a world are ever going to be able to truly and deeply respect the particularity of culture and community at the same time that we form a single, peaceful world. An atoned world. As it is said in our sixth principle, we are expected to affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Atonement is some of the hardest work there is. It happens exactly at the intersection of individual and community. The liturgical act of placing sins on the head of a goat – the scapegoat – practiced by the ancient Israelites one day a year was not itself the act of atonement. No, it just symbolized all of the work that each individual member of the community had done as they examined their lives and hearts for their own acts that may have caused damage to others in the community over the course of the year. I am imagining the long list that Aaron probably recited, as he placed all the sins of all the community members on that goat's head. It would probably take a couple of hours just for mine!

And yet because it is a liturgical act – part of the work of *all the people, collectively* -- it also – like all good liturgical acts – is a reminder that we are not alone in our need. We *all* make mistakes. We all fall down.

We all bear responsibility for creating a community, nation and world that listens and hears and looks and sees. It is an act of visioning, first, an act of seeing in our mind's eyes a promised land, a beloved community, a world made whole.

And then it is an act of the will . . . the will to keep trying, even when we stumble, and fall, and when it seems just too hard to get back up again. It is an act of the will to see through another's eyes. It is an act of the will to open ourselves to the meaning of symbols – to even know that they *are symbols*, so that we are not inadvertently dismissive of an "*other's*" deep meaning.

Communities have to do it collectively. But the work can only really happen collectively if it first happens in the hearts of individuals. In my heart, and your heart.

May it be so.

© Rev. Susan LaMar, 2007