

Sermon Delivered on January 10, 2021

Rev. Julia Hamilton @ The Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara

Link to video: <https://youtu.be/A3fdrW9yF0o>

In 2004, I was living in New York City when the Republican National Convention came to town. There were massive protests. Thousands of people were arrested in sweeps that caught up anyone in the area, whether they were protesters or just a 15 year old kid trying to go see a movie. People were held for days in makeshift pens inside smelly, toxic warehouse space on the river. People were corralled into "free speech zones" under overpasses, far from the location of the convention. We were not allowed to carry anything resembling a stick or a potential weapon - we had to tape cardboard tubes to our signs to hold them up. I was reflecting on those cardboard tubes as I looked at images of the insurrection in the Capitol on Wednesday. I noticed all those flagpoles, not as simple tools to hold banners, but intended as weapons. I noticed how some of the flagpoles in the pictures were sharpened at the end. I saw an image of a man with an actual spear - with a sharpened metal tip - a man with a spear inside the Capitol building, yelling at a Capitol police officer.

I wondered when the restriction on sticks and spears at demonstrations had been lifted. I wondered why the officer was not trying to arrest him for carrying a weapon. I wondered who actually had the power in that photograph. I don't think it was the officer in uniform.

There is another image from Wednesday that perhaps illustrates even better the historical tension that exploded this week.

*(show image)*¹

The first thing you notice about this image is, of course, the Confederate flag. The flag that has been working its way toward this hallway for 156 years, and was flown inside the halls of Congress for the first time this Wednesday. And the attitude of the man carrying the flag, casually walking through the halls, seemingly unhindered by anyone with the power to stop him.

But if you look above the man in the photo, you see a painting hanging on the wall. This painting is of Charles Sumner.

As coincidence would have it, I've been reading about Sumner and his friends for the past couple of weeks, in a book titled "Conflagration: How the Transcendentalists Sparked the American Struggle for Racial, Gender, and Social Justice" by my colleague the Rev. John Buehrens.

¹ https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/confederates-in-the-capitol/617594/?fbclid=IwAR3z-HWgwNEyCB7lcrdUVKa5ikWKvU5IGUTj_rQjKj2bj-gJR1pQb_UJfQg

Sumner was a Unitarian from Massachusetts, close friends with Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and a firebrand of an abolitionist. In 1856, he was attacked and nearly killed on the floor of the Senate by Preston Brooks, a Representative from South Carolina. It took him over three years to recover his health enough to return to Congress, where he continued to advocate for radical reconstruction and civil rights for the rest of his career.

As far as I am aware, the assault on Charles Sumner in 1856 was the last time a person was physically attacked in the halls of congress...until this week.

And the painting you can see all the way to the left, partially obscured by the flag, is of John C. Calhoun, defender of slavery, Vice President under John Quincy Adams, and one of the founders of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. Two portraits of our Unitarian forebears, on opposite sides of the most critical issue in our national history: the legacy of slavery and the ideology of white supremacy. The history of our faith, just like this history of this nation, is tangled up in both the democratic ideal and the legacy of racism.

It is a remarkable photograph.

Looking at all the images from Wednesday, I think it was the entitlement that struck me most often. The mob felt that they were the rightful owners of this Capitol and all the power and promise it represents, and they were not going to let anyone, even the people they usually saw as allies like the police, they were not going to allow anyone to take what they perceived as theirs: the leadership of this nation. They would burn it to the ground rather than share power. It prompted me to reflect on the question of who feels authorized and allowed to use violence to enforce the agenda of the nation.

Preston Brooks, the man who attacked Charles Sumner, felt it was his duty to defend the honor of the South with deadly force. He felt it was his right to use violence to defend the institution of slavery, which at that point was embedded in the identity of the United States, whether you were from the North or the South. In Brooks' mind, he was defending the integrity of his country by attacking the Senator who wanted to dismantle the very system that had made America great.

I believe that if you had asked the man carrying the Confederate flag in that photograph if he was defending his country, he would have said yes. If you asked him if he was defending democracy, he would have said yes.

And yet, he was carrying the flag of a failed rebellion against that very same country, in a failed attempt to circumvent the democratic process.

So you see here, where the conflict lies.

Two agendas came into conflict on Wednesday: the agenda of expanding the ideal of democracy, and the agenda of preserving white supremacy. Democracy and white supremacy are both founding ideologies of this nation. When people say that violent white supremacy is not who we are as a nation, they are ignoring our history books. They are not remembering the stories behind the pictures that hang on the walls of the Capitol. As a nation, we are committed to a democratic ideal *and* we carry with us the legacy of white violence.

For most of the history of this country, these two agendas have coexisted. Not always peacefully, not always without debate, but as long as a white majority was winning elections, democracy could continue to function as the explicit agenda of the country while white supremacy festered and bubbled along under the surface.

The man with the Confederate flag was not used to seeing a conflict between democracy and white power, because for hundreds of years in our nation, democracy had been curated and limited, orchestrating the victory of white male leadership time and time again. He could imagine that democracy and white power were one and the same, and that this was right and good, because that is what he had been taught was true. Even those people at the riot who would never name White Power as their reason for being there, it was in the air all around them, the entitlement and the anger and the feeling that this country was *theirs* and violence was a legitimate and even necessary response to any threat to the existing order of things.

That was why they yelled “traitors” at the police who were trying to clear the Capitol steps – because the officers who were trying to keep them out were not functioning the way they were *supposed* to, the way they had in the past, when police were first the enforcement arm of slavery, and then segregation, and finally and most recently, the protection of white property and comfort over and above Black lives. The police, like each and every one of us human beings living in this nation right now, are being forced to choose: Which will you protect and defend, democracy or white supremacy? Because you can’t have both anymore. And it was clear that on Wednesday, some of the law enforcement came down on the side of democracy, and some did not. And at least one officer was killed and dozens injured for choosing to defend democracy.

As the reality of a white majority fades and a more diverse electorate comes into power, democracy is being liberated from its past entanglement with racism. And we are approaching a reckoning that has been working its way toward us ever since the Civil War.

It is not coincidence that Trump, the avatar of white male privilege, was elected right after Obama, our first Black President. It is not coincidence that this violence broke out after the election in Georgia, when democracy did not deliver results for the white electorate, even with the extensive gerrymandering and efforts to suppress the Black vote.

The Cabinet Biden has nominated is on track to be the most diverse in our history, and white supremacy feels its ability to hold on to power through democratic processes slipping away.

A so now, perhaps for the first time in our history as a nation, a choice must be made: democracy *or* white supremacy. We can no longer have both. A liberated democracy cannot coexist with a racist ideology. And we should celebrate this moment, as well as being sharply aware of the danger it presents.

The people swarming the Capitol on Wednesday made their choice. They did not hide their allegiance to white power any more than they hid their allegiance to Trump. They were there to protect their nation, their identity, their place in a white majority country– and if democracy has to be cast aside to achieve that goal, then so be it.

I read an insightful interview with Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal², Representative from Washington State and head of the House Progressive Caucus. She was in the gallery while the ballots were being counted on the floor, and when the mob broke into the building she huddled with others up there for over an hour and half before they could be escorted to safety. In the interview, she notes that 48 hours earlier, they had been given a warning that the day might turn violent. They had been instructed to arrive at the Capitol before 9am, to stay on high alert, and to bring an overnight bag with them in case it was not safe to leave. But being a woman of color, she recognized she was especially vulnerable. She says,

“I had another realization: One of my colleagues was talking about how she had instructed her staff to wear just regular casual clothes in case they needed to blend in with the crowd at any point, and she herself was wearing black pants and a black turtleneck because she wanted to fit in if she needed to. And when I saw that description, I thought to myself ... that’s not an option for me. That’s not an option...”

There was no way Pramila Jaypal could have blended in to the mob that attacked the Capitol. She had no whiteness to hide behind, no cover for who she was, and what she represented: Everything they feared, everything they want to see removed from power. If Trump is the embodiment of their movement, she and other elected officials like her are the embodiment of where democracy in our nation is headed, that is to say, no longer reliably controlled by the same white men who have dominated the scene for so long. She is the embodiment of the choice we are making – to move toward liberation, inclusion, and diversity – and although we may be moving that way in the long view, on a day to day basis there are still plenty of people who are angry about the change. And being an embodied representative of change in a moment of crisis is dangerous, and so my main prayer today is for the health and safety of all of those who have targets on their bodies simply because of who they are, whether or not they even want to be part of this. Like the Black woman in Los Angeles who was assaulted on Wednesday simply for walking past the mob that was gathered there in sympathy with the rioters in the Capitol.

² <https://www.thecut.com/2021/01/pramila-jayapal-surviving-capitol-riots.html?fbclid=IwAR1VNpaTR76N4sil36XPMC67pFZg9jjABcwEhBY2N9pq9Pey7HiflY6wVvYM>

Although Trump and his supporters did not immediately get what they wanted – Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were still confirmed as President and Vice President Elect, despite the death and destruction of the day – although the mob is removed from the building and some arrests are being made, this tension between democracy and white supremacy is not resolved. There are already credible reports of plans for disruption around the inauguration.

More violence may continue to erupt. We need to be prepared for that possibility. But I find inspiration in the words of a colleague, Ian White Maher:

“It is, I suppose, a statement of faith to say that as sinful as this nation is and has been, I still believe. I still believe that love is possible. I still believe that justice is possible. I still believe that liberation is possible. The moral arc of the universe is long and I can see only a little way, but the seeds of the children of our children live within me and for them I trudge along its curvature guided by love, justice, and liberation.”

May it be so, blessed be, and amen.