

When the News Perpetuates Injustice
March 26, 2008 Letter
From Conference Minister Geoffrey Black

Easter Greetings Colleagues and Coworkers in ministry:

I want to share some of my reflections with you, because together, as ordained ministers in the United Church of Christ and as lay leaders in the United Church of Christ we share a sacred relationship with each other-and therefore with Jeremiah Wright, another ordained UCC minister and Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, the congregation that he served as Pastor and Teacher for many years and up to his recent retirement.

In reflecting on these matters, I'm stuck. After a week of listening to and reading analysis and opinion about the presidential candidacy of Senator Barack Obama and whether it can survive his relationship with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Jr., I am where I was in my thinking when this episode began. The questions persist even in light of the masterful and deeply insightful speech on race in America that Obama delivered in response to the demands that he denounce Rev. Wright. Yet, I cannot get past the fact that the controversy and the questions that have followed, as well as much of the analysis and opinion are based on a false premise-- a lie.

In so many words, the lie was that Jeremiah Wright is an angry racist demagogue, who hates America. The lie was disseminated by Fox News and its closely linked right wing allies. The Fox News "revelations" were quickly followed by similar stories in most mainstream media outlets including the New York Times. Carefully edited video snippets of several of Rev. Wright's sermons were used to serve as evidence to document these claims and Fox and others ran them for days with continuous commentary from its talking heads to drive home the point that this was a man who was closely related to Barack Obama.

The implication was that Mr. Obama needed to disassociate himself from this Rev. Wright or tacitly acknowledge that he shared these extreme views. Either conclusion would be harmful to his political aspirations, if only because he would have to spend time and money explaining himself. However, the desired outcome seems to have been greater than that. I believe that the outcome that the initiators of this lie were seeking was to diminish Senator Obama's profile in the minds of white voters. With that said, my concern is not Mr. Obama's presidential aspirations. My concern is the lie told about The Rev. Wright. I'll say it again, I'm stuck here. I can't let it slide.

As an African American, I am always suspicious and cautious when I hear news stories that condemn African American public figures for some alleged wrong. Yes, I am well aware that African Americans are just as prone to corruption and public scandal as any other racial, ethnic or religious group. Those, who know me well, know that I am a champion of equality who believes that African Americans are equally capable of wrong

doing. However, I am also aware that African American public figures who speak out against racial injustice have been unjustly singled out for special treatment and vilification. In reaction to their telling the truth about America they have been called hate-mongers, racists and extremists for encouraging Black people to challenge these very behaviors carried out by individual white Americans and American institutions in which power is almost exclusively in the hands of white people.

The list of such people is long and it is historic. Just in the 20th Century the list includes such luminaries as A. Philip Randolph, Ida B. Wells, Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Louis Farrakhan, (yes Louis Farrakahn,) Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. These are just a few of the many names that come to mind. Each of these people has experienced some kind of media storm in which they have been misrepresented, usually by taking what they have said out of context and turning it into what sounds to some as hate speech. The false accusations become fact and then possibility of the truth ever emerging is slim or when it does, no one cares to listen.

I can recall my first discovery of a person who was victimized in this manner, Paul Robeson. I was well into my college years of black awareness and I was astonished that I had not heard of him before. Then it was pointed out to me as a matter of fact that he was some kind of Communist, as if that explained everything. It explained nothing. My curiosity was piqued and I began to seek out information about this great American. What I learned was that Robeson a star college and professional athlete, internationally acclaimed actor, singer and orator had run afoul of the white establishment in the United States with his persistent advocacy against segregation, racism and economic injustice and for organized labor. Like many in the 1930's, he got involved with the Communist Party. He even had the audacity to go to Russia to perform as a guest of the Communist leadership. Eventually, he was labeled a Communist and "black" listed. By the time I reached adolescence in the 1960's, Paul Robeson was a non person, so much so that black people didn't even mention him. His name never came up in my home until I asked about him.

The thing about Paul Robeson that is most relevant here is that he said and did things that brought to light the plight of African Americans and many working class whites. He told the truth about America. He was vilified for doing so and as a result he went from being one of the most popular people in America to being an invisible man because he refused to do otherwise. Paul Robeson's story is important to tell. It fits a pattern. We see that pattern being played out once again using the media technology of today to assassinate the character of Jeremiah Wright, making him that bad, angry, black man who preaches hate and who hates America.

So, when the story maligning Jeremiah Wright hit the airwaves, like many other African Americans, who know him, I was immediately suspicious. When I got a look at the so-called evidence, I knew immediately that he had been taken out of context. When I saw the clips in their proper context, it was clear to me that false witness had been borne against a ministerial colleague. By this time, the congregation that he served as pastor and teacher for so many years, Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago was being labeled

a cult. The historic racist pattern of vilification and marginalization of an African American leader was at work and many people were falling in line with it, without reservation, no questions asked.

Over a week has gone by and still no questions are being asked. The assumption in most of the media outlets is that what was said about Jeremiah Wright is true. Here are three examples from one news source, the Sunday New York Times of March 23rd:

- The front page news piece titled, *Obama Talk Fuels Easter Sermons*. While this story tells how a broad range of preachers would or would not respond to the speech on race given earlier in the week by Barack Obama it never delves into what provoked that speech. It only alludes to some who “*asked how Mr. Wright, the minister could utter such inflammatory things from the pulpit*” and cites some Black ministers who said that “*their sermons might address how the reputation of a man many of them revere was reduced to sound bites.*”
- This issue of the Times in its Week in Review section includes a news analysis piece titled, “*Talk About Race,*” which places Obama’s speech in an historical context, but when it identifies how the speech came about it names “*the escalating controversy over videotaped snippets of inflammatory anti-white, anti American rhetoric, by the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., his longtime spiritual advisor and former pastor.*”
- Finally, the Sunday Times Week in Review section has a column by Maureen Dowd titled, *Haunting Obama’s Dreams*. Here Dowd asserts, “*Hillary got a boost from the wackadoodle Jeremiah Wright.*” Dowd is syndicated. So, I saw this column again on Tuesday in the Syracuse Post Standard.

By Easter Sunday enough was known about the questionable nature of the aspersions against the Rev. Wright that some in the media should have been ready to challenge the assumptions that fueled the controversy, but that didn’t happen. The conversation moved on to race and presidential politics. I have no problem with that, because it is an important issue to be explored in depth along with the broader and more important topic of race and racism in America. My hope is that maybe this time some substantial change will result. However for me, a real conversation about race and racism in America must include how we respond to corrupt media outlets that play on negative racial stereotypes and the fears they inspire.

For now, it is important to mobilize against the lie. For those of us, who know better, to allow the unwarranted attack on Jeremiah Wright to go on unchallenged would be to become complicit in the crime. My hope is that you, my ministerial colleagues and New York Conference leaders will take the time to reflect on this and act. Can we find ways as pastors and teachers and lay leaders to help others understand the misdeed that has been perpetrated by some in the mass media? Of course, this won’t be easy. We should note that the national setting of our church has worked long and hard to counter the onslaught of media attacks with limited success. Needless to say, this matter cannot be effectively

addressed with the stroke of a pen, a sermon or a public demonstration. It will take many teachable moments over time. It will require sustained organized initiative on our part to reach local media outlets with accurate information regarding Rev. Wright and the UCC. Nonetheless, I am convinced that we are called to challenge the lie with the truth. Once that task is underway, I can get unstuck.

Peace, blessings and Easter Joy,

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