"When Mothers of Black Sons No Longer Need Fear"
A Sermon by Charles Blustein Ortman
October 5, 2014

READINGS: ANCIENT AND MODERN:
Our first and ancient reading is from the Book of Matthew, Chapter 22:
…and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments are suspended all the law and the prophets.

Our Modern reading this morning is from the introduction of, "The New Jim Crow; Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness," by Michelle Alexander:
Jarvious Cotton cannot vote. Like his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather, he has been denied the right to participate in our electoral democracy. Cotton’s family tree tells the story of several generations of black men who were born in the United States but who were denied the most basic freedom that democracy promises—the freedom to vote for those who will make the rules and laws that govern one’s life. Cotton’s great-grandfather could not vote as a slave. His great-grandfather was beaten to death by the Ku Klux Klan for attempting to vote. His grandfather was prevented from voting by Klan intimidation. His father was barred from voting by poll taxes and literacy tests. Today, Jarvious Cotton cannot vote because he, like many black men in the United States, has been labeled a felon and is currently on parole.

SERMON: "When Mothers of Black Sons No Longer Need Fear"
Many of you are already aware, and I would want us all to be, that this month is national End Mass Incarceration Month. With other congregations and organizations from the area, we'll be hosting a major event down on the Plaza of Church Street and here at the UU on Wednesday evening, October 22. Two weeks from now, on Sunday, October 19, our Undoing Racism Committee will be conducting our worship service here, on that same topic. The theme color of End Mass Incarceration Month is orange, the primary color of incarceration, as it is the color of many prison uniforms across the country. I hope and suspect we'll all be seeing a great deal of orange throughout the month.

What I want to do this morning is to share with you why I think this is important, and why we might all regard mass incarceration as a spiritual and a religious issue. To begin, I'll hope you understand that I don't think I'm here preaching to the choir. I don't think I'll be saying anything that any of us here doesn't need to hear.

Like E.B. White, I suspect that many of us wake up in the morning torn between the urge to enjoy the world, and the urge to save it. I further suspect that, if there isn't a balance between those urges, that if we are more intent on the immediate gratification of enjoying things than we are on saving the world for current and future generations, we are likely adding to the large
number of issues from which this world needs to be saved. And more, we are diminishing the means by which it might be enjoyed by the greatest number. In an earlier era we would say, "If you're not part of the solution, you are a part of the problem."

Our spiritual journeys, if indeed they are journeys at all, and not merely selfish lingerings in a world of denial, need to connect us in our many relationships: to our own lives; to those who are in our lives; to those we don't even know; to the world itself and to all that are in it; to All-That-Is as far as we can imagine that to be. Spirituality cannot be about isolation; it is about being centered in our connections, being present in our relationships.

Our religious journeys are about the company we keep while we are pursuing our spiritual journeys. Our religious journeys are about having and giving support in living up to our expectations. Our religious journeys are about holding ourselves and each other accountable for being in right relationship within those many relationships that we are a part of.

W.E.B. Du Bois once noted that racism was the primary issue of the 20th Century. One sixth of the way into the 21st Century, the issues of oppression and racism continue to be the major bane of our society – from the way we treat our environment to the way we treat one another.

We live in a culture that is rife with racism. Many of us have an intellectual understanding of what that means. It's significantly more complicated to have an emotional, a spiritual, understanding of this truth. Has there been progress on this front in the past 50 years? There sure has. There are examples of many hopeful exceptions, even in this room, of individuals who have broken through the cultural norms, which more than likely stood against them.

Has there been progress? You bet. Yet just as well, there are now new disguises which that evil dons, disguises that have lulled us into a contentment with a status quo, a status quo that promotes ethnic cleansing at its worst and is steeped with great injustice at its best. The spirit of our nation is in peril because we are failing to pay attention to these relationships.

I'm not here to call anyone a racist. Name calling never has helped much of anything. I'm here to say that we live in a racist society; that racism is so ingrained in our culture that we are all, without exception, participants in it. Among the many results of that racism is that far too often, mothers of African-American children have great reason to fear for the safety and well-being of their children, especially that of their sons.

We hardly need look further than Ferguson, Missouri and the shooting death this summer of Michael Brown by the local police. We hardly need look further than Sanford, Florida, where Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer a couple of years ago. We hardly need look further than the violent deaths of these two innocent boys, deaths that were sanctioned by both law enforcement officials, as well as our by the judiciary system.

If we are going to somehow manage to achieve some sort of spiritual maturity on our journeys, if we are going to manage to be in right relationship with our world and with all who are in it, we'll need to look further than those two cases, much further. We'll need to look deeply at what's going on around us in our country, even at what's going on around us in our community. We'll
need to determine our own culpability in those things we discover, and we'll need to awaken our sense of outrage in response to our own compliance and that of the society we keep.

I don't want to give you a bunch of statistics about what we will find when we look deeper, but instead, cite a few examples that I know to be statistically true. I know that they're true because I’ve heard about them from mothers and fathers who are members of our congregation and from others outside of our congregation. I know that they're true because I’ve heard about them from lots of people who’ve been impacted by them. I know that they're true because we hear and read about them weekly, if not daily, in the news. I know that they're true because we have seen the statistics. I know that they’re true because I've seen them, we've seen them with our own eyes. And if we’re paying attention, it's heartbreaking.

They are these… Black mothers and fathers have to worry for the safety of their children, especially their sons, and wonder if they will even live to adulthood. Young black men have to fear for their well-being when walking down our city streets. Not just sometimes; but much of the time. Who are they afraid of? Often it’s the very police who are supposedly there to protect them. Black children, as a rule, are less likely to finish high school or to begin college than are their white classmates. Black men (and Black women too) are far more likely to end up in prison or on death row. They are far more likely to be imprisoned or paralyzed by the slow agonizing death of drug addiction.

Just a few statistics that I hope you'll think are important: Black children and teens are at the highest risk of gun violence. Gun violence is THE leading cause of death among Black children ages 1-19. Every day, three Black children or teens are killed by guns. Black children and teens are nearly five times more likely to die from a gun than white children and teens. In relation to the old Jim Crow laws, the number of Black children and teens killed by guns in about the past 50 years is 17 times greater than the recorded lynchings of Black people of all ages from 1882 to 1968. Seventeen times higher! (Source: The Children Defense Fund's 2014 report on, "The State of Black Children in America)

Black children are also at greatest risk of being funneled into the prison pipeline. Black students made up only 18% of students in public schools in 2009-2010 but were 40% of students who received one or more out-of-school suspensions. A Black public school student is suspended every 4 seconds during the school day. A Black child is arrested every 68 seconds. Black children are more than twice as likely to be arrested as white children. Black children and youth make up 32% of all children arrested and 40% of all children and youth in residential placement in the juvenile justice system. (Ibid.)

In the past half century, the number of all felons doing time in our country has increased over 800%. For the sake of comparison, the percentage of white men in prison is a mere 36%, while Black men make up 42%, and Hispanic men 18%. In the general population those numbers are 72% white, 13% African-American and 15% Latin, respectively. Twenty-five percent, one out of every four Black men in this country, is likely to be imprisoned during his lifetime. (Source: Corrections.com) That is outrageous and it must become unacceptable!
Jim Crow laws that were established to legally marginalize and suppress Blacks in this country a century and a half ago, no longer exist. The Ku Klux Klan has lost its hegemony. But the spirit of Jim Crow is alive and far too well. Too many of our Black sons have been relegated to a penal system as vicious, as degrading and as dream-killing as slavery itself.

The right to vote is assumed by every adult citizen of our country. Isn't that right? Except for felons, who have lost their right to vote. Who are the felons in our prisons or the ex-con felons on our streets? I'm not saying felons should be able to vote. I'm asking, who are the felons? And why is there such a striking bias in their racial makeup?

To answer that question we might have to ask a few others. Who maintains the educational systems that repeatedly fail African-American students? Who maintains the employment systems that continually underemploy and underpay the traditionally marginalized? Who wrote the laws that are apparently blind to corporate piracy on the grandest of scales, and yet so vigilant of individual behaviors that stem from failing to cope with systems that yield the slightest of hope for overcoming those same systems that serve others of us so well? And who, we might ask, applies the laws that hold as suspect, not only those among the minorities who have not learned to cope with the inequities of the larger society, but those as well who have somehow managed to overcome the odds, and yet whose safety still remains in peril when they walked down the streets?

I remember a conversation I had with my nephew a few years back. He was angularly bemoaning the affirmative action policy practiced by the company he worked for. "Why should someone with the same qualifications as me be promoted to a position that I have been denied, just because he is Black and I'm white?" my nephew asked.

"Because," I answered, "until now, every card in the cultural deck has been stacked against him, while you've enjoyed every privilege that could possibly have been dealt to you. You've had the benefit of people who believe in you. You've had wonderful role models. And when you have walked through any door, no one has questioned the legitimacy of your being there. Affirmative action," I told him, "is only a very small way that we have of trying to atone for and correcting what has wrongfully been denied to a significant number of our African American brothers and sisters for a very long time."

Until the numbers of those who have been disenfranchised by society become aligned with the demographics of the larger society, there's a whole lot of affirmative action that needs to take place. We need affirmative action in our schools and colleges, in our workplaces and in our boardrooms. We need it in our state legislatures and in Congress, where the insidious War on Drugs has been designed. We need it to occur in law enforcement and in the judicial and penal systems, where that racially vindictive war continues to be engaged.

Racism will continue to be the defining sin of our nation until we recognize that mass incarceration is nothing less than the newest face of an evil that has formerly appeared as slavery and as Jim Crow. Racism will continue to be the defining sin of our country until the incredible wealth and the great blessings of this nation are finally made available to all of her men, women and children – until all of us have equal access to them on every step of our journeys.
I understand that we, here in this congregation, are not capable of solving these enormous, national issues, whereby the status quo of racism wears on. But while we may be incapable of fully resolving these issues here, we, the members of this congregation, are ethically and morally bound to working towards a solution for them. We are ethically and morally bound to doing our best in creating the changes needed to serve our largest ideas and ideals of goodness.

It's not as though we've been sitting on our hands. Our After School Program, run by Pete Williams, and our Undoing Racism Committee under the leadership of Becky Doggett, are good examples of some very sincere and effective efforts to stem this crippling tide. But each of us might want to ask ourselves – are we a part of the solution, or if by default, are we a part of the problem?

There are and will be opportunities here for us to stand on the side of love, to stand on the side of justice – justice for all! It is my firm conviction that we are called by spiritual integrity and by our religious values to make the most of these opportunities. It is my firm conviction that we are called to make the most of these opportunities by the mothers of Black sons, so that they might need no longer fear for their children's lives.

I conclude with words of encouragement from two men who knew a great deal about this struggle. First, W. E. B. DuBois, who wrote: "Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year." And finally from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who told us, “Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.”