



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Progress in Racism & Anti-Racism:  
On the Anniversary of the Lynching of Emmett Till**

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

August 28, 2022

[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

A few years ago I finally had the chance to visit the National Museum of African American History & Culture in D.C. Tickets are free, but they can sometimes be in short supply. Moving through the underground History Galleries up to the highest level of the Cultural Galleries is a devastating, inspiring, and ultimately ecstatic experience. I was reminded anew in an accessible and experiential way of how much I already know—*and how much I have to learn*—about African American History and Culture.

The biggest tip I would give you is to not miss the Contemplative Court. It is somewhat hidden on the Concourse Level, but be sure to check it out. It's breathtaking in its power and simplicity.

The insight that has lingered with me most is being reminded of the haunting parallels between the deaths and legacies of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin. The lynching of 14-year old Emmett Till in 1955 helped catalyze many people's participation in the Civil Rights Movement. The murder of the 17-year-old Trayvon Martin played a similar role in launching the modern #BlackLivesMatter movement. As the activist scholar Dr. Barbara Ransby has written in her book Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century (University of California Press, 2018): **"If the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson in summer 2014 was the fire that signaled the full-blown emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, then the vigilante murder with impunity of the young Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida in February 2012 was the spark"** (29). These are only a handful of ways that

the museum is a powerful reminder, call, and challenge to learn more about African American History and Culture.

Standing before you today, I am holding in my heart that today is the anniversary —67 years to the day—of Emmett Till’s death. Dr. Scott, if she were able to be with us this morning, planned to preach on “Till’s Whistle.” A white woman heard him whistle, and perceived him as whistling at her. Although it seems very likely that that was not his intent, her perceptions and choices contributed to him being lynched.

The second part of Dr. Scott’s sermon title was “Our Modern Call to Action,” pointing to connections between the past and the present. In contrast, I am aware that most of what I learned about racial history while growing up white in South Carolina was about looking back on *past* actions, even as connections to similar issues in the present were rarely if ever were made. As Dr. Crystal Fleming highlights in her provocative book How To Be Less Stupid about Race (Beacon Press, 2018), “**Our nation’s emphasis on racial progress has obscured ‘racist progress’—the evolution of racist ideas and practices alongside anti-racist transformation**” (25). I find this framework quite helpful in learning to notice both positive progress in *racial justice* and negative adaptations in *systemic racism*.

Let me give you a story from my own life. To be honest, it is a story (to use Dr. Fleming’s words) of learning to be less stupid about race. Almost two decades ago, I attended my first multi-day intensive workshop on “Dismantling Racism.” One of the parts of that training that I remember most vividly was the facilitator saying, “There has been *no progress* in working against racism in this country.” I was incredulous about the claim.

Although I found most of the workshop compelling, I was resistant to the idea that there had been *no progress*. What about the adoption of the 13th Amendment in 1865, *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and more? The facilitator’s counterpoint was that despite these instances of apparent progress in racial justice, *systemic racism* remained unchanged, on balance, due to the deliberate and insidious continued evolution of *racist* policies.

I didn’t really grasp this point until quite a few years later, when I read Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow*, which wasn’t published until 2010. To limit myself

to citing only one of Alexander's many profound points, **"Today there are more African-American adults under correctional control — in prison or jail, on probation or parole — than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began"** (Baradaran 218). More than anything else, that piece of data convinced me about the limited progress toward racial justice. Racist laws and institutions are far more entrenched and insidious than individual prejudice. If you don't have time to read Alexander's book, the Netflix documentary 13th is a powerful distillation of many similar points.

As I have continued my journey of striving to be *less* stupid and *less* fragile about race—and more *curious* and *more* committed to staying at the table to accountably dismantle racism—the most recent aha! moment was when I heard Ta-Nehisi Coates say that, **"What would prove to him that white supremacy was over in this country would be the closing of the racial wealth gap."** I thought, "That's interesting! That is a specific, measurable goal that we could use to keep ourselves accountable as a society—if we wanted to."

In researching the racial wealth gap, I discovered a book published by Harvard University Press titled The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap by Mehrsa Baradaran, a law professor at the University of Georgia. Significantly, recent studies in social science have shown that **"both whites and blacks tend to severely underestimate the extent of the racial wealth gap by about 25 percent...expressing 'unfounded optimism'"** about progress in racial justice and ignorance about the corresponding progress in systemic racism (Fleming 18).

So what does the data show about the racial wealth gap? In Dr. Baradaran's words, "Today, across every socioeconomic level, blacks have significantly less wealth than whites. Over a third of black families have either negative wealth or no assets at all. The 2008 financial crisis devoured more than half the wealth of the black community [since African-Americans were disproportionately targeted for sub-prime loans even when they were eligible for fixed-rates], proving once again the adage that, 'when Wall Street catches a cold, Harlem gets pneumonia'" (1).

Zooming out for a more historical perspective, "When the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863, the black community owned a total of 0.6 percent of

the total wealth in the United States.... **What is staggering is that more than 150 years later, that number has barely budged—blacks still own only about 1 percent of the wealth in the United States.**” This statistic is not new; indeed, in a line often forgotten from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1963 “I Have a Dream Speech,” he said that “America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds’ (Baradaran 9). It’s important to remember that the full title of the original context for that speech was the March on Washington *for Jobs and Freedom*.

To zoom in closer to home, today, only forty miles southeast of here in our nation’s capital, we find that whereas “Nationwide, white families hold thirteen times the wealth of black families, **in Washington, D.C., white households are *eighty-one times more wealthy than black households***” (Fleming 38). So I have come to take Ta-Nehisi Coates’s point quite seriously—that the closing of the racial wealth gap would prove to him that white supremacy was over in this country. (Also, be sure to study his essay, “A Case for Reparations,” available in his important book We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy.)

Now, there is a lot to be said about the history of how the racial wealth gap has been kept in place, and we explored a significant part of that story a few years ago in a sermon on The Half Has Never Been Told. So for now, I will limit myself to noting one other interesting point from a an interview with Ta-Nehisi Coates in which he emphasized that as racist as our recent President was, he is arguably not as racist as our 17th President, Andrew Johnson (1808 - 1875), who assumed the Presidency in the wake of Lincoln’s assassination.

We were on a path to making progress in dismantling white supremacy during the Reconstruction Period following the Civil War, but Johnson “joined the white southern backlash and rolled back Lincoln’s promises. He thoroughly undermined the Freedmen’s Bureau bill (which promised former enslaved Americans “forty acres and a mule”), and fought the black rights movement, asserting that America would remain a ‘white man’s government.’ After 400 years of slavery in America, **literally *months* after the end of the Civil War—Johnson was already advancing the argument that, “the Freedman’s bill was advantaging blacks over whites and that it was time for**

**blacks to fend for themselves”** (Baradaran 16-17).

The more you learn about the history of white supremacy in this country, the more you notice historical echoes. As Mark Twain said, “History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” So today when I think of Chief Justice John Roberts saying, “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race,” that statement sounds a lot like President Andrew Johnson’s position on racial justice, and willfully ignorant about what it will take to truly build a beloved community in this country based on what our UU 6th Principle calls “Peace, liberty, and justice—not merely for some—but for *all*” (138). Roberts is operating from a position of white privilege that tries to erase the history of systemic racism in this country and pretending that we have somehow magically instituted an equal playing field.

In contrast, our first African-American Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall (1908 – 1993) famously wrote a dissenting opinion in a 1978 Supreme Court case about affirmative action—that the “legacy of years of slavery and years of second-class citizenship in the wake of emancipation could not be so easily eliminated.” He continued that, “Bringing [African-Americans] into the mainstream of American life should be a state interest of the highest order...and a failure to do so is to ensure that America will forever remain a divided society” (223). Forty years later, it is Justice Marshall, not Chief Justice Roberts, whose prediction seems prescient. As our 8th Principle affirms, **if we don’t accountably dismantle racism and other systemic oppressions, the tendency is for them to perpetuate themselves.**

In The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s final book, *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community*, King said: “A society that has done something special *against* the Negro for hundreds of years must now do something special *for* him” (Baradaran 224). This point is related to the insight today that of course, ‘All lives matter, but given the history of racism in this country, there is a special need to be clear that *Black Lives Matter*. Or as the saying goes, **you wouldn’t attend a breast cancer fundraiser and protest that ‘all cancers matter’—nor if you broke your arm would you want your doctor to put you in a full body cast because ‘all bones matter.’”**

We know that we must proceed in the work of racial justice strategically, because so many bad faith actors continue to cynically stoke racial resentments for their own

political gain. The truth is that racial justice is not a zero-sum game, and the loss of white privilege is *not* the same as reverse discrimination. As the saying goes, “When you're accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.” We must be clear that failure to act for racial justice and for a more fair, equitable, and integrated society makes things worse for *all* concerned. Social scientists have demonstrated that excessive wealth inequality—such as that demonstrated in the racial wealth gap—erodes trust in society, increases illnesses, leads to corruption...and increases crimes” (280).

Langston Hughes wrote about it this way in his 1951 poem “Harlem”:

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?

May we be part, not of perpetuating a dream deferred, but of turning dreams into deeds. Together we can build the better world that we dream about. I am grateful to be on that journey with all of you.