

THE ARC OF JUSTICE

A Sermon by the Rev. Phyllis L. Hubbell

The First Unitarian Church of Baltimore

(Universalist and Unitarian)

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READING

Our first reading is from Kevin Boyle's book, Arc of Justice. Here, Boyle describes the racial climate of urban American in the 1920':.

The nation's cities sparkled in the summer of 1925...Detroit, home to the fabulous new auto industry, was American's great boomtown, an industrial juggernaut of unprecedented power...Massive immigration had made the major urban centers strikingly polyglot places....The war launched the Great Migration of Negroes from the South. There were fifty-seven hundred blacks living in Detroit in 1910. . .Fifteen years later, Detroit had eighty-one thousand colored citizens...

[With the Jazz age came a backlash....[T]housands of people poured into the newest and most exciting of the cities' many fraternal clubs, the Ku Klux Klan...By 1924, Detroit's Klan had 35,000 members....[H]atred spewed out from Klan rallies....

Bit by bit,... urban whites carved a color line through the city. When the migration northward began during the war, blacks had been able to find a range of factory jobs. Opportunities shrank in the early 1920s. as many employers decided that all but the most menial and dangerous work should be reserved for whites. More and more white shopkeepers banned black customers from their stores and restaurants. And, most ominously, whites decided that blacks couldn't live wherever they wanted....Businessmen infused the real estate market with racist rules and regulations. White landlords wouldn't show black tenants apartments outside the ghetto. White real estate

agents wouldn't show them houses in white neighborhoods. Bankers wouldn't offer them mortgages. Insurance agents wouldn't provide them with coverage. Developers wrote legal restrictions into their deeds, barring blacks from new housing tracts....and if a black family somehow managed to breach the defenses, they could always drive them out, quietly if possible, violently if necessary.

[African Americans and the poorest immigrants in Detroit were allotted an area in the Center City called Black Bottom where] two, three or more families shared tiny workmen's cottages built generations before. Single men jammed into desperately overcrowded rooming houses, sleeping in shifts so that landlords could double the fees they collected for the privilege of eight hours' rest on flea-infested mattresses.

Kevin Boyle, *Arc of Justice: a Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age.*, pp. 3-15.

W.E.B. Du Bois wrote an article in the magazine, Crisis, about the institutional arrangements driving northern segregation:

White men wail that Negroes depress property values, Du Bois wrote, but it was "an ancient and bearded lie" manipulated by profit-hungry real estate agents, bankers and builders to codify racial exclusion and by so doing to create the fetid ghettos that even "decent, quiet, educated" colored families cannot escape. And when, "by bribery, politics and brute force," a few brave Negroes manage to break through the barriers erected against them, they had to face white homeowners turned into murderous mobs by the fears that these interests induced... "Dear God! Must we not live?" he roared so that heaven and Harlem both would hear.

Boyle, pp. 256-57.

SERMON

Kevin Boyle, in his recent book, *Arc of Justice*, tells the story of Ossian Sweet and his family. Ossian Sweet was born in Florida in 1895. His parents were pillars of the black community. Still, they had no electricity or running water. They worked hard so that their children might have a good life.

When Ossian was five, a local white woman was killed. A black man working nearby heard her screams and rushed for help, but the rescuers were too late. The witness was too far away to see much, but his answers convinced the white crowd that a sixteen-year-old black named Fred Rochelle was responsible. Rochelle was not to be found immediately, frustrating the searchers. A large crowd of Whites gathered, and the black families feared that a pogrom would begin. Three local black men found him hiding and turned him over to the whites.

The sheriff and his deputies stood by as leaders of the mob interrogated him. The boy confessed. The mob chained him to a tree, stacked wood around the base, poured gasoline on the pile, and the victim's husband lit the flame. Sweet always remembered that as the most terrifying moment of his life, though other nearby lynchings followed in subsequent years

The only school to black children in their town stopped at grade eight. After Ossian graduated, his parents sent him away to get more education, to someplace where he would be safe. His parents wanted him to get a college

degree, and then help his brothers and sisters follow his path. He joined the local AME church before he left, placing himself in God's hands.

In the next years, Ossian worked hard at menial, low paying jobs to put himself through first high school and college at Wilberforce University and then four years at Howard Medical School. After he Howard, he moved to Detroit. Ossian had little money and his opportunities to practice were severely restricted, but he began to build a little practice for himself in Black Bottom where few doctors practiced and contagion was rampant. He fell in love with a middle class, light skinned, African American woman and got married. They moved in with her parent because there were no fit accommodations for them in Black Bottom. They traveled to Europe for a year where he attended lectures with Madame Curie and others in Paris and Vienna. They had a baby, whom they called Iva, in Europe.

When they returned home, Ossian brought a new car, a Buick touring car. He was determined to make his mark. His brothers Henry and Otis came to live with them while they started their own careers.

The young couple now began to seek in earnest for a home to buy. Wealthier Blacks still lived in white areas of Detroit, but the racial lines were hardening. Landlords knew that Blacks has little choice of where to live so rents in Black Bottom were high and conditions abysmal. "There were houses in ...Black Bottom where the water cascaded through the ceiling every time it rained; houses where the walls were so sodden the tenants had to pull their beds into the center of the room so they wouldn't spend the night drenched to the skin; houses where the walls had crumbled

so that the wind whistled through the exposed laths; houses without glass in the window frames all winter long.”

But it was one of the worst possible times for even educated, middle class black professionals to seek housing in a white suburb. The city’s population boom had produced a 67 percent increase in prices just in the last year.

They would have to add on to those outrageous prices a premium of several thousand dollars because of their race. Moreover, racial conditions were especially volatile in Detroit that year. Politicians were becoming increasingly divided over issues of race, class, immigration and religion.

The Ku Klux Klan had made great strides in the four years since it had sent an organizer to Detroit. A working class Roman Catholic ran for mayor, promising, among other things, to hire more “colored” police officers. The Klan was outraged. More than fifty thousand people gathered under a flaming cross in Dearborn shortly before the election. The inexperienced Klan candidate would have won the election had not the election commissioners thrown out every vote with even the most minor errors.

That summer, another black doctor, Dr. Alexander Turner decided to move to a quieter neighborhood, a white neighborhood. A mob gathered just a few hours after they had moved in and began to throw stones, smashing windows. The police did little to stop the crowd. Someone knocked at the door and said they have been sent by the mayor to give them protection. When Turner opened the door, dozens of people poured into his house and trashed it.

Representatives of a group called the Tireman Avenue Improvement Association, forced the doctor to agree to turn over the deed to his house. The police agreed to escort Turner to his office where he would sign over the house, but the crowd threw bricks at the car windows. Glass struck Turner in the forehead, and he and his wife cowered in the floor of the car. Their chauffeur managed to get them out of there and took them directly to Dr. Turner's office where the property transfer was completed.

Two weeks later, a similar incident happened to one of Ossian's oldest friends, Vollington Bristol. The Tireman Avenue Association gathered another mob when Bristol and his wife moved into a previously all white neighborhood. The few police who had responded to Bristol's request for protection were badly outnumbered. They fired a few warning shots into the crowd, but the crowd responded with gunfire of its own. Reinforcements came, and the couple were saved, but hardly dared to show their faces outside their home.

Ossian Sweet was frightened by these incidents. But his friends urged him to stand firm. His wife had lived in white areas and could not quite believe they would come to any harm. Besides, they couldn't see any other good options. There were several small African American enclaves in decent areas, but they would have required long commutes.

Three times they were rejected for promising houses because of their race. Finally a friend told them about a house being sold by someone he knew would sell to a "colored family." The house was in a blue collar neighborhood, but the it was lovely with a large back yard. The owners sold

it to them for five or six thousand dollars more than the market price, offering to finance it at eighteen per cent interest.

Rumors started immediately. Neighbors formed their own "Improvement" Association. Hundred of people came to a rally called by the Association. Speakers urged the use of force against any Blacks who dared to move into their neighborhoods. Ossian heard about threats to kill his family. Though he wavered, his friends again urged him not to back down. They would stand by him.

So the Sweets moved into their lovely new house. Otis Sweet requested police protection. Several friends and his two brothers joined him. Ossian brought along rifles and ammunition in case it got rough. Two women friends of Gladys' stayed for dinner that first night. A crowd began to gather outside, milling around. The women found themselves afraid to leave, fearing that their appearance outside would set them off. A few stones were thrown around midnight but the crowd dispersed.

The second night was worse. A friend had called that afternoon to report an threat she had heard on the bus. A woman talking to the driver had claimed that the neighbors were going to drive out the "niggers" that night. A plan had been made. Worried, Ossian gathered as many friends and family members as he could. The police were still outside, but the hundreds of people were gathered outside were far beyond any size they could reasonably control.

After dark, some people in the crowd began to throw stones. Soon a window shattered. Several of the men in Ossian's house took up their rifles and moved to places by the windows. People outside were screaming ugly threats. Stones rained down on their house. "Another second-story window shattered; the house was filled with the sound of splintering glass hitting the floor upstairs. Then came the deafening roar of gunshots from the bedrooms." Seconds later, one white man lay dead on the sidewalk. A second was hit.

The police arrested Ossian, his wife, his two brothers, and all the others inside the house and charged them all with murder. The police lieutenant in charge told the press there had been no mob and no violence prior to the shots. All the press avidly reported this interview with interviews from less biased onlookers. Even the Detroit News, whose reporter had seen the mob, the stones and the shots, refused to report his story and repeated the lies of the police.

Long held common law was clear that homeowners had the right to defend themselves inside their homes with deadly force if they had reasonable cause to believe they were under attack. "According to the State of Michigan a mob existed when twelve or more armed people or thirty unarmed people assembled to intimidate or inflict harm." As the police repeated their story, however, they lowered the number of people they reported gathered outside to fall just below the limits of the law. White witnesses followed their lead. "Just a few people were gathered." "They were just standing around talking." "No stones were thrown until after the shots were fired."

The NAACP was looking for a case that would generate outrage and raise money to fight housing discrimination. The Sweet case, with its very respectable doctor and his story of rising from poverty through his own efforts was ideal. After struggling to find the right lawyer, Clarence Darrow agreed to be the lead attorney. Witnesses were located. The reporter testified to the size of the crowd, as did a black couple passing by who had themselves been set upon. Some of the white witnesses stumbled in their testimony. Ossian Sweet testified in both trials, with dignity and courage. Still, the first case ended in a hung jury. The second, however, quickly entered a verdict of not guilty.

The title of the book, *The Arc of Justice*, is taken from Unitarian minister and Abolitionist Theodore Parker's quote, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." We Unitarian Universalists tend to embrace that optimistic view of the universe and of humanity. Still, there are times when it is hard to do. This morning's New York Times tells the story of a man in Richmond, Virginia, who refused to sell his house to an African American couple because he said his deed restricted the neighborhood to whites. The local prosecutor tried to settle the case by requiring him to take two hours of fair housing training. Thankfully, the Fair Housing Board rejected the settlement. The case is moving to court where the property owner will surely lose.

Arc of Justice powerfully affected me. The details made the story come alive. I am not one to easily accept stories of police corruption. Here, I had to. Yet I found hope in this story. Not happy ever after hope, but the possibility of some change, some improvement over time. Sometimes I

wonder if we have made any progress. This book made me feel that we have. Yet, I hesitate to say this, for I am a White person who does not experience race prejudice every day of my life. It is relatively easy comfortable for me to choose to live in neighborhoods that are likely to appreciate in value. My grandchildren live where they are relatively sheltered from gang violence. It is not as hard on them to be nerds in school as it is in some African American communities today. They assume they will be able to be whoever they want to be. They assume they will live to be 100.

Much remains to be done. Racial discrimination today is often more subtle than in the 1920's, but still destructive of the soul. Somehow our schools are still segregated. Our neighborhoods are still largely segregated, though mobs are unlikely to throw rocks at unwelcome newcomers. Some of the systems have changed. Some of the attitudes have changed. It remains difficult, I think, for many of us who are White, to recognize our own perhaps more subtle forms of racism that are partly responsible for the huge number of African Americans in jail and the disproportionate number of black victims of violence. It is hard to care enough about these issues when we have so much on our minds to fight to change conditions.

The holy calls us to know that we are one, that we might feel each other's pain. The holy brings us tears to remind us that all must live, all have a right to live decent lives and not be cast aside. The holy sends us word that the arc of justice is bending toward justice even if we cannot see it. Hope lives.

Today, this church will be voting on its mission and vision for the future. Our mission would call us to be “a beacon of hope, social justice ad liberal religious values.” Those are fine words, but our challenge is to make them come alive. Our work is to see that our mission and our vision are not mere words on a sheet of paper, but promises we have made and gladly keep. The work of the church is to help us see that God and the universe call us to lift that arc up on our own shoulders. May our mission and our vision sound in our lives like thunder from a mountain, waking us from our sleep, calling us to be people of vision, people of hope, people of justice.

Motoko Rich, “Restrictive Covenants Stubbornly stay on the Books,” New York times, (Internet) April 21, 2005.