Barack Obama & Rev Jeremiah Wright

In March of 2008, presidential hopeful Barack Obama ran into a firestorm of criticism when video clips of sermons preached by Obama's pastor, Rev Jeremiah Wright, hit the Internet. From my point of view, the criticisms of Obama were fueled by the persistent racism and white misunderstandings of American racial history that have permeated our national history.

The current controversy over Barack Obama's relationship with his former pastor, Rev Jeremiah Wright, deserves our close attention. I say this not as an Obama supporter (although I happen to support him) but as a citizen deeply concerned about race in America. This is an important teachable moment: The issue is race and—as seems so often to be true—it's we white people who have something to learn, something to grow into.

As I'm sure everyone knows, clips of Rev Wright's sermons have ricocheted across the Internet, excerpts in which he tells his congregation that 9/11 was America's "comeuppance" for its foreign policy sins, refers to the US as the "KKK of A," calls on God to damn America, and, apparently, much else. Obama has forcefully and unequivocally denounced each of the offending excerpts and separated former mentor from his campaign. But his critics are not satisfied, demanding that he also renounce his relationship with his former pastor.

It's not my place to defend or judge Rev Wright's comments. They were spoken to his own black community in the context of what is, by all appearances, a remarkable ministry of service and reconciliation, in which whites are included. And that is to say that they were spoken in a context that most white Americans simply do not understand. When white America demands that Obama renounce his former pastor himself, it is demanding that he renounce the African-American community, its history, its struggles, and, indeed, its future. If we who do understand the inappropriateness of this demand (regardless of whom you favor for president) don't stand up at this moment, we will miss a crucial opportunity to work with our awful history of racism.

I've spent the last twenty-five years in and around the poor black community of Washington DC, and most of Rev Wright's comments seem pretty mild to me (true, a few seem over-the-top). What I don't think most of my white brothers and sisters understand is the breadth and depth of profound anger within much of the black community, not just for slavery, not just for Jim Crow, not just for ongoing segregation but also for the ever-present institutional racism and subtle discrimination, for the deep humiliation that still haunts the black community. As a

white American, I have only glimpses of the reality of that anger and its justification, but after all these years I can no longer deny the consistent and powerful feelings occasionally shared with me by the many black patients, friends, acquaintances, and artists who have been willing to trust me.

African Americans of my generation (I'm 63) have seen Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X gunned down, experienced the fire hoses and the dogs, personally suffered the persecution of Driving While Black, and seen too much of their community succumb to despair. Who am I to judge these men and women for their deep anger and the need to express it within their community. If you're not a person of color, you may never see it, but it's there, and we can be thankful that it can be worked with in a church like Rev Wright's rather than in the streets.

One function of a religious community is always to tell the story of the people so that they understand what has happened and what they have experienced. There is a language and a rhetoric within that community that hearkens back to slavery in Egypt; to oppression in Israel; to crucifixion in Palestine. It is a language of oppression and release, and it's often told in cadences of anger that do not ring well in white ears.

What I am saying is that unless you have lived within the oppression of the black community, you have no standing to judge Rev Wright. I will be told, I'm sure, that we're all Americans and that there is only one standard for appropriateness. Perhaps so. But all of his life Rev Wright has known segregation into two communities, known two standards for education (schools today are almost as segregated as they were in the 1950s), two standards for criminal justice (one-third of young black men who did not graduate from high school are incarcerated at any given time), two standards for poverty, two standards for unemployment, two standards for assets-owned, two standards for almost every aspect of American life. Yet now we insist that he follow just one standard (which we lay down) … and when he is talking in his own church to his own black congregation.

If Rev Wright were an extremist within the black community, Obama's critics would have a point. But he is not. The unpleasant reality for anyone who believes that white racism is mostly a thing of the past is that Rev Wright is firmly within the mainstream of his generation. We may not like it, but we had better face it, and we had better understand that there is good reason for it.

What is remarkable is that Barack Obama and a number of younger black politicians seem to

have transcended these dichotomies. There is every evidence that Obama's condemnation of what his former pastor said is absolutely genuine. He doesn't see hidebound racism in our nation; he does see us coming together. If Obama is going to be president to all of us, then it's reasonable to hold him to a common standard. Which he has more than agreed to. But it is not reasonable to insist that he renounce large parts of his own community. Indeed, let us pray that Barack Obama does not renounce such important parts of our history.

The depth of persistent racism in the United States is clear to virtually every African American and is becoming clearer to many of us whites. While many whites may not want to be prejudiced against African Americans, we do, in fact, hold those prejudices, at the very least unconsciously. (Some will call that "liberal guilt;" I call it simple reality, the consequence of growing up in what is still a racist society.) And you can bet that opposing candidates (especially during the general election) are going to try to tap into our unconscious racism by associating Obama with things we can consciously reject without recognizing our racism. Trying to tie him to Rev Wright's views is only the first of many such tries. It is, in itself, a racist attack, that attempts to speak directly to that racist part of virtually every white American.

I don't know of any evidence that the Clinton campaign has anything to do with the current controversy. Indeed, I know both of the Clintons to be deeply acquainted with and sympathetic to the black community. It was with good reason that Toni Morrison famously pronounced Bill Clinton the "first black president." Trying to beat down the current racist attack is something that all of us must do, whether supporters of Hillary or Barack … or John McCain.

If any of what I have written here makes any sense to you, I hope that you will compose your own letter to your e-mail list and begin to alert our friends to the seriousness of this time. If you live in a smaller community, perhaps you could write a letter to your paper's editor or an Op-Ed piece for its opinion page. Whether our country's racism is allowed to squelch Obama's candidacy has repercussions arguably more important than this election itself. Please make your voice known