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# WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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## **Our First Amendment Rights and Racism**

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When one chooses to become a public figure, I believe that their sharing personal prejudices or entitlements across media are *NOT* healthy for the nation's welfare. Sadly, something seems to be in the summer air. It has people intoxicated enough that they are willing to speak or act in insensitive, demeaning and hateful ways to people unlike themselves. It has conservative talk show host, Dr. Laura Schlessinger insulting an African American caller on the air and conservative web publisher, Andrew Breitbart disparaging the reputation of the Department of Agriculture employee, Mrs. Shirley Sherrod via YouTube.

Further, it manifests through former governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin who tweets bizarre comments to radical followers that carry derogative signs of the first African American United States President at various rallies. Evangelical minister, Dr. Terry Jones, the pastor of a church in Gainesville, Florida is promoting "National Burn a Quran Day" slated to launch on the ninth anniversary of 9/11. They each avow it is their "first amendment" right which permits them to make such an assertion. Yikes!

Can someone explain how an amendment originally purposed at congress/government often gets co-opted and improperly directed against human beings? Answer: because it is misunderstood! Our founders understood the tyranny of government and wanted to make sure that the republic that they were creating didn't fall prey to such. Hence, it is listed **FIRST** within the Bill of Rights. This amendment grants each citizen freedom to peaceably assemble, speak against the government in the press or in public, practice their religion, or seek resolution from grievance.

On the other hand, one's bad behavior, disrespect, or rudeness isn't covered therein. Perhaps that unfortunate teaching is learned in one's youth. But

if we expect to live together in a civil society, then we must learn to practice civility. Any European American who would depict an African American as a monkey on a signboard, use the n-word when speaking to any person of color, or promote the burning of anyone's spiritual book could be seen as a racist and not merely prejudice or uncivil.

Incivility aside, *racism* is often defined as prejudice, but having the systems of institutional power from which to carry it out. These systems did not grant access to people who did not look like those who ran them. Such institutions were made manifest in the forms of: banks through lending/mortgages; government through public policy/judicial practice; and education with regard to books and technologies.

Sadly, racism is not limited to the US. It is a global phenomenon. At the end of August, the issues of race and xenophobia and its root causes will be addressed in Cleveland, Ohio at a global religious conference hosted by the United Church of Christ. Focused attention will be paid to the presence of racism within communities of faith and the indifference of many Christians who are not themselves affected by these issues. Hopefully by weeks end, the people addressing this issue which has poisoned and permeated our cultures for generations will result in possible next steps for eradication and then passed forward.

*The United Church of Christ has more than 5,300 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.*