

“Love and Memory and 1921”

Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa, OK. USA
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Did you know there were some World War I veterans from Tulsa, who survived the war, only to return home to this city and be killed here... while in uniform? It is a story rarely told, and it is one that we still have not taken the time and effort to give sufficient meaning to. These brave soldiers made it back from fighting in Europe in time to witness this city's oil boom prosperity. In Europe they had risked everything to defend the American way of life. They went there to fight on behalf of our land of freedom, equality, democracy and justice for all. And yet, after surviving and winning one of humanities most atrocious wars, they became casualties of a war right here in the streets of this city. It is one of our city's most incredible stories, and this Memorial Day it is crying out for meaning.

Tomorrow is both Memorial Day, and the 89th anniversary of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot. Now, the words “race riot” in America today are typically used to describe a situation like the destruction of parts of Los Angeles in 1992, when white police officers were acquitted after they were caught beating Rodney King on video. Or the riots in Cincinnati, in 2001, under similar circumstances. In these situations, we are used to seeing ethnic neighborhoods being looted and damaged, often by members of the neighborhoods themselves in response to a real or perceived injustice. However, in 1921 in Tulsa, it was very different.

Here in Tulsa, it was a mob of white citizens, along with the police and other government agencies, that participated in the annihilation of scores of black Tulsans and in the total destruction of 35 square blocks of this city through burning and looting. Have you seen the pictures? It looks like Ground Zero in New York. A huge square of the city was charred and literally leveled to the ground. The Greenwood district went from a thriving community with families, restaurants, candy stores and movie theaters to a wasteland – overnight. My point is that this was not a race riot as we think of them today. This was a race massacre.

On May 31 and June 1, 1921, people were brutally murdered in this city due primarily to the color of their skin. It's a terrible subject to bring up, and most people would rather not talk about it. But this Memorial Day weekend, if we pay attention, we can hear their voices in the wind. They are saying:

*We were Tulsans; we were killed; remember us.
Our lives and our deaths are not ours – they are yours.
They will mean what you make of them.*

Can you hear them?

*Whether our lives and our deaths will lead to reconciliation,
and new hope,
or whether they will amount to nothing, we cannot say.
It is you who must say this.
We've left you our deaths. Give them their meaning.
We were Tulsans.
We were killed.
Remember us.*

In 1921 in America, especially in the south, lynching was common. It was so widespread that the great Billie Holiday sang about the "strange fruit." She sang:

*Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh!*

*Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.*

It was in that context that a 19-year-old shoeshine boy named Dick Rowland was arrested one day in Tulsa. He was accused of accosting a 17-year-old white girl, who was the elevator operator in the only building in downtown Tulsa in those days where a black person could use the bathroom. Dick Rowland was arrested and taken to the Tulsa jail, and rumor spread that a white mob was going to head down to the jail to lynch him.

A number of black Tulsans gathered to consider what they could do to help him. The group included a number of black WWI veterans who had recently returned from Europe where they had defended the American ideals of freedom and justice for all. They decided they were going to go down to the Tulsa jail to make sure that this young man, Dick Rowland, would be afforded due process and get his day in court. These proud veterans dressed up in their WWI uniforms, took their rifles, and offered to stand outside the jail to help the sheriff protect Dick Rowland so the mob could not storm in and take him out.

By then, a mob of over 1000 white men with guns had formed outside of the jail. The mob told the black veterans to give up their weapons, but they refused. A gunshot rang out and to this

day, we don't know who took that first shot. All we know is that over the next 16 hours, the sheriff deputized hundreds of the white men with guns, so that they became agents of the state acting with government authority as they pathetically terrorized and ravaged their fellow Tulsans and a specific neighborhood in this city.

Estimates of the dead range from 38 to well over 300, depending on who you ask, making it the worst race riot in American history. Homes and businesses in 35 square blocks of North Tulsa's Greenwood District were completely burned to the ground. Black men, women, and children were rounded up at gun point and interred in detention centers in Tulsa's baseball stadium and fairgrounds. They were detained, presumably, for their protection. But it made it impossible for them to protect their own property and neighborhoods. Over 1,200 homes were destroyed and 10,000 people were left homeless. When it was over, the insurance companies would not honor their insurance policies, claiming that it was a "riot" and there was a clause against reimbursements for riots.

Memorial Day this year coincides with the anniversary of these events. Normally, those black WWI veterans who died in uniform, and the others who died with them, trying to defend freedom and justice for all – right here on American soil, right here in Tulsa – do not get honored. Those veterans' graves are not marked with flowers and flags, in part, because most of the people who died in the Tulsa massacre of 1921 were buried in unmarked graves.

The ultimate meaning of these events to our city have yet to be determined. For most of Tulsa's history, our citizens, our government, and our schools systems have ignored, avoided and kept silent about these events. That is why it's up to us – those of us alive in Tulsa today – to remember the events. To remember the people whose blood was spilled, and to give them a meaning and legacy worthy of their loss.

As religious people, we are not called to deny death; we are called to sanctify it. We are called to do for our neighbors as we would want done for us. Arguably this is one of, if not the most, formative event in Tulsa's history. And yet we still don't talk about it very much. And when we do, we hear people say, "Why are you bringing that up... can't we just be over it?" But what people who say this don't understand is that our collective grief is no different from our individual grief. It doesn't go away through denial and avoidance. When you or I lose a loved one, the more we try not to talk about it and not to deal with it, the longer the pain and the sorrow lasts. We all know that the only way to heal from loss is by acknowledging the grief, talking about it, and making meaning of it. We cannot get around it. The only way out is *through*. A question that besets us all at different points in our lives is, "How do we turn painful and inexplicable loss into purpose, hope and even into a

blessing?” If a person’s death does not cause us to reflect, and call us into new life, and new hope, then we have lost twice. We have lost both the person who died, and we have lost the chance to grow from it.

We honor people who have died when we live in ways that gives their lives and their deaths meaning. As you may know, when my daughter died, my brother and my father began building schools in her name for children in Mayan Indian villages in Guatamala where my brother lives. My wife, Anitra, began instituting health and wellness programs for children in Tulsa Public Schools and began helping establish a Children’s Museum in Tulsa. When Jessie Williams, a Pastor of New Dimensions Church, passed away tragically 19 months ago, many people committed to do their part to ensure that Tulsa would continue to have a vibrant church with the good news of inclusion for all people regardless of color, class, creed or sexual orientation. These are just a few recent examples of people we know making meaning and creating a positive legacy out of a painful tragedy.

Did you hear that this week the 1000th American soldier has died in Afghanistan? And well over 4000 have now died in Iraq. Those wars continue, and therefore so will the parade of flag-draped coffins. The soldiers inside those coffins are of every color and religion known to humankind. This weekend as we honor all of the Americans who have died defending our democracy and the notion of freedom, equality and justice for all, let us also keep in our love and memory those who died (in and out of uniform) just a few miles from were we are right now, trying to defend those same principles in 1921. And let us live our lives so that their deaths will have meaning. So that our children’s children may sing of us:

*Once upon a time the trees bore strange fruit.
But they planted a seed of reconciliation and it took root.*

May we carry both the burdens, and the blessings, of all who have died to defend our freedom.

Amen.