

White Privilege
Bishop's Convocation, October 13, 2015
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Brothers and sisters in Christ,

As we planned this event I was asked to speak about a part of the subject of racism that particularly intersects with me as a White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant. I want to talk about white privilege.

“White privilege” is a term for societal privileges that benefit white people (in Western countries like the United States) beyond what is commonly experienced by non-white people under the same social, political, or economic circumstances. It has been a challenging process for me and one that I have only started. I’m certainly not an expert on the complexity of white privilege, but one thing I have learned is that white privilege and racial discrimination are opposite sides of the same coin. One does not exist without the other. So, as much as I may be tempted to deny it exists, both white privilege and racial discrimination are a part of my life and yours as well.

In preparing for this time I read a book I commend to you entitled, “When Affirmative Action was White,” by Ira Katznelson. He is a historian who walks through the ways in which this nation, particularly in its laws and the application of those laws, continued to keep the Jim Crow mindset alive. I want to start by sharing a few things I learned.

We know that the Emancipation Proclamation was a presidential proclamation and executive order issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863. In a single stroke it changed the federal legal status of more than three million enslaved persons in the designated areas of the South from "slave" to "free." More isolated geographically, however, Texas was not a battleground so its slaves were not affected unless they escaped. Finally, on June 18, 1865, Union General Gordon Granger arrived at Galveston Island with 2,000 federal troops to occupy Texas on behalf of the federal government and on June 19 declared the total emancipation of slaves in Texas. So, three years, five months, and 18 days after the Emancipation Proclamation, slaves became free in Texas.

This type of slow, intentional, resistance of racial equality is a kind of hallmark of white privilege. Throughout the decades after the Emancipation

Proclamation, the large numbers of Southern Democrats gave them prime Committee seats and they sought to exploit “the gap between the intensity of their feelings and the relative indifference of their fellow members of Congress.” So, there were both sins of commission and omission going on from the earliest days.

For example, in 1869 the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited government from denying a citizen the right to vote based on that citizen's "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." The major effect of this amendment was to give African American men the right to vote. However, after the Civil War some southern states passed "Black Codes," state laws that restricted the new freedoms of African Americans. They attempted to control their movement, assembly, working conditions and other civil rights. An interesting side-note of this is that adding African Americans to the voting census increased raw numbers so that it provided more representation in the House of Representatives, yet few African Americans voted. Hence, whites got more representation in the House than their white population numbers allowed, giving them strength to perpetuate the system.

It is just one example of the most consistent way this system of racial discrimination and white privilege was maintained - put the implementation of laws that were passed “into the hands of local officials.” This was codified by a landmark United States Supreme Court decision in 1896 (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537) upholding the constitutionality of state laws requiring racial segregation in public facilities under the doctrine of "separate but equal."

"Separate but equal" remained standard doctrine in U.S. law until its repudiation in the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Separate was always there, but not equal. Here are some examples that were startling for me to read.

Whenever possible, legislation left out as many African Americans as possible, for example:

- 1) Farm workers and maids, who made up 60-75% of the work force in the South, couldn't join unions, get minimum wage, have regulated hours of work, or get Social Security until 1950.
- 2) Health services were unequal, so that in the 1940s, statistics show that access to doctors in Mississippi was 1/1,800 whites, 1/18,000 for African Americans.

- 3) Metropolitan Life Insurance Company noted death rates 203 times higher for African Americans for the flu, TB, and pneumonia and life expectancy was on average 10 years less.
- 4) In 1940, the cost of the value of education in schools was \$162 per white student and \$34 per African American student, with only 3% of white schoolchildren who worked, compared to 16% of African Americans.
- 5) Any relief payments were not equal. Local authorities kept payments artificially low for African Americans so as not to undercut the labor market's low wages. "By decentralizing authority and fragmenting decision-making, national policies (of the New Deal) could be administered to suit white Southern preferences."

When World War II was happening, men were volunteering for service. However, more white men than black men were accepted. When black men were accepted, they were kept segregated just as they were in society. A quote from that day: *"In the midst of a war defined in large measure as an epochal battle between liberal democracy and Nazi and Fascist totalitarianism, one that distinguished between people on the basis of blood and race, the U.S. military not only engages in sorting Americans by race but in policing the boundary separating white from black."*

An Army War College training manual said this:

As an individual, the negro is docile, tractable, lighthearted, care free, and good natured. If unjustly treated, he is likely to become surly and stubborn, though this is usually a temporary phase. He is careless, shiftless, irresponsible, and secretive. He resents censure and is best handled with praise and by ridicule. He is unmoral, untruthful, and his sense of right doing is relatively inferior ... On the other hand, the negro is cheerful, loyal, and usually uncomplaining if reasonably well fed. He has a musical nature and a marked sense of rhythm. His art is primitive. He is religious. With proper direction in mass, negroes are industrious. They are emotional and can be stirred to a high state of enthusiasm. Their emotions are unstable and their reactions uncertain.

Under these conditions, blacks entered the military. It happened in an odd way. Some Southern legislators noticed that many white men were absent from communities, but white women were present. They urged the military to make sure more black men were drafted. The results were, again, separate, but not equal. For example, the Red Cross kept the blood separate, rail cars going southbound became segregated in Washington, DC, and there were separate air

raid shelters. Also, all the training and housing was kept separate, though most officers of these units were white.

Despite all of this, the limited armed services experience provided African Americans with training they would never have received. They were put in Special Training Units, segregated classrooms that taught reading and writing. This would not only give them higher occupational skills when they left the service, they would serve as leaders in the Civil Rights movement.

After the war, the GI bill and Social Security came into effect. Again, they continued to be managed at the local level, keeping African Americans from receiving what they should on the same level as whites. Being able to get an education and buy a home lifted whites to the middle class, while African Americans were kept from doing so.

I found it interesting that in 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson addressed Brown University (an African American school) in a speech entitled, "To Fulfill These Rights." He wanted to address this history of inequalities, so he said: *"You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire, and choose the leaders as you please. You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'You are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. It is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates."*

I believe we continue to struggle with that challenge even today, fifty years later. All we need do is consider how racial tensions continue to exist as evidenced by the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, or Michael Brown's death in St. Louis, or the shooting deaths by Dylan Roof in Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston.

So what can we do, since most of us here are like me, White Anglo Saxon Protestants? If the goal is to open doors for conversation across races, I need to be aware of the barriers that come unbidden as part of my white privilege. So, how will I do that?

First, I need to deal with the guilt I feel, knowing that the history is true and is a part of my history and my being. In one sense, it is not about my trying to live

a life that seeks to not be prejudiced. It is, however, a realization that I am part of a system that gives me advantage because of the color of my skin. For example, when I was in Washington DC a week ago as part of the ELCA's Advocacy Days, we visited some offices in the House of Representatives. I was with two Latina women who had personal stories to tell about why it is important to end detention of immigrant children. They told their stories, but the staff person kept turning to me for comments. I couldn't believe he felt my words would have more weight than theirs, but then I was male and white.

Second, I have a personal desire to be kept comfortable. I don't like having these hard conversations or face these hard realities. I will avoid this conversation if I can, I will change the subject, I will make excuses, and I will deny it's true. I'm reminded of the Apostle Paul's words in Romans 7(19), "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." It's a constant struggle.

Third, when I am working with people of color, I have to get over feeling that "I know what you need, that my experience is the standard by which everything else is measured." We have a tendency to do that when we go on mission trips, not asking what the needs of our neighbors are, but assuming we know and taking with us things that don't help.

Finally, I have to stop being afraid and remaining silent. In wanting to avoid conflict, too often I don't speak up when God gives me the opportunity. This sin of omission can be as great as a sin of commission, because when I don't speak up, others assume I am agreeing with them. So, the nasty, loud voices continue unchecked.

As I said earlier, learning to address my white privilege is a life-long process. What I keep in mind to help me are those Scripture verses which remind me that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, as the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 3 (27-28): "*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*"

Thank you for letting me share.

