

White Privilege Sermon

By

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I can only come to you today as I am, from the place where I experience things. So bear with me. Perhaps you have done a lot of deep work on racism and white privilege. If so, thank you, and please keep at it and continue to educate the rest of us. As I look around the room, I see the majority of you, like myself are middle aged, middle class white people. If you are from this part of the county that has probably been the majority of your life experiences as well. What we have been taught, what we have experienced has been formed around the normative behaviors and expectations of people who look and live like us.

I have always viewed myself as opened minded, liberal and accepting. I was taught to be grateful for the blessings I had in my life and to give back to the community and help others. I grew up in white, middle class neighborhoods in Iowa and Minnesota. I went to mostly white schools. I have always lived and experienced my life as a member of the white dominate culture, perhaps just like many of you.

Ministry is a second career for me, so I began seminary in my 40's. Seminary takes what you think you know and strips it down and makes you really look at what you know and what you believe. This happened to me when it came to how I had understood racism. It was in seminary where I realized that I had fallen into a trained way of thinking about race.

I had a class on the Old Testament. In that class I learned that Moses was married to an Ethiopian woman. I had always understood that Jesus was Middle Eastern and I accepted that the majority of characters within the bible stories were not white. But in that class, fellow African American students shared that they had always felt as outsiders in the stories that came from the bible, it was never their story. They had been taught about a white savior who was going to save them.

Seeing this story through their eyes woke something up in me. Because in reality, Jesus was a brown man. Hearing that Moses was married to an Ethiopian made me realize that black people were just as prevalent in these stories. In fact, if anything, white people were probably in the minority.

But how have we learned the story? We have been shown pictures of a white Moses, a white Mary and Joseph, and a white Jesus. I guess I had known it before, but I had never really thought about what that meant.

A veil had been lifted for me. I saw how the dominant white culture had stolen a story that belonged to its people of origin and changed it into a story about themselves. That is what colonization does, that is what people in power do. In doing so, this white version of God and Jesus encouraged more reliance on and referral to the dominant white culture.

In seeing this and accepting this, I felt so angry. I realized that a story that had been these African American students' story, had been stolen from them, changed to support white dominance and then taught back to them as a story of white salvation.

As the reality of this unfolded, I could hardly bear my own people. And then it took a surprising and uncomfortable turn. After much reflection I realized that deep down inside my own racist underpinnings, I held to a belief that white people were nicer, kinder, they wanted to help others, they would never do this kind of thing. I was a white person, I never wanted to harm others or take advantage of them, if anything I wanted to help them.

And yet whites like me, did this. Peeling back the layers of privilege and dominance, it opened my eyes to the reality that white people were not more caring or benevolent. In fact it made me see that whites were interested in keeping this myth alive so that they could also keep the power. Ministers and people of faith have preached from pulpits for centuries about this white Jesus. Artists and sculptures have carried on this myth for so long that when I showed a group of children a painting of a black Jesus, they laughed at it. That wasn't Jesus, Jesus was white, everyone knows that.

This way of supporting white privilege keeps us in ignorance about how prevalent this power is.

When we live in a culture that supports us in the lifestyle we have, we don't realize it's even happening.

Let me give you an example that might show what I am talking about. While I was in seminary, I drove to Minneapolis once a week for four years. I would set my speed control at 75 in Appleton and take it off when I got to Minneapolis. This was before the speed limit was raised to 70. So I was purposely speeding, and I knew it. I figured I would get caught one day but the risks of getting caught seemed low.

So guess what? I did get stopped, three times over those four years. And each and every time, the officer took one look at me, a nice, middle aged white woman in a Prius and let me off the hook with just a warning. This happened every single time, I was never issued a ticket.

Now imagine if I was a young black man. What do you suppose might have happened? I told this story to a young man I met this fall. He was 30, and Hispanic and he told me a similar story. He had just finished working out at the Y and was driving his older car home. A signal was out, an officer stopped him because of this. Because he was sweaty, the officer immediately assumed he was high on drugs and made him get out of his car and do a sobriety test. He passed. The officer grudgingly gave him a ticket for the signal but he forgot to give him back his license. The driver now had no license.

When I told him to just go down to the police station to get his license back, he said “No way, I will just go get a new one” He was afraid to approach the police because the police when approaching him, immediately assumed the worst because of the color of his skin. And what happened to me during those three speeding stops? The police immediately assumed the best, I was safe, a white middle class person, just like them.

That is white privilege.

With all that has been going lately with the killing of young black men by police officers, with

the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement within our denomination, with the numbers of black men filling our prisons, I felt that I needed to really look at white privilege. And it isn't easy, because you see for you and me, it feels like it is normal life. We don't even see it or know that we are benefiting from it. So how can we change something that we don't even realize is happening?

Our reading by Norma Johnson lifted up the challenges she faces daily by not being on the dominate end of these privileges. So lets take a look at those privileges that you and I take advantage of every single day.

This comes from Peggy McIntosh, she is the associate director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. The title of her article is *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. It has been around for awhile, maybe you have come across it. But I have to say, when I saw it years ago, I thought, "yea, that is all true about being white," but I didn't register how damaging and isolating it is that people of color are not given the same tools, the same knapsack.

With all that is going on with race issues today, I felt I really needed to embrace the place where all of us white people start from first, before I could even imagine what people of color are up against. MacIntosh lifts up 50 privileges that she feels are given to us as a birthright just by being white and in the dominate culture. I won't share all 50 but if you are interested in reading the article just Google *White Privileged Knapsack* and you will find it.

Here are just a few that really struck me. I had to really sit with these things and think about what it means and how these privileges influence my life. I saw how these privileges keep me safe, keep me supported and give me power without ever even realizing they are happening.

So here are just a few:

- 1) I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.

Do you even think about this? I never do. And yet folks of color do every single minute. An African American friend of mine said the first thing she does when she walks into an event or a meeting is to see if there are any other people of color in the room. In my community and in my work,

I never think about this. EVER. That is white privilege.

2) I can avoid spending time with people of other races quite easily. I don't even have to purposely avoid this, it just doesn't happen often.

This is so not true for people of color in our community.

3) If I need to move, I can be fairly sure of renting or buying housing in an area which I can afford and which I want to live.

I have moved many times in my adult life. I have never had to worry about this. That is white privilege.

4) I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be pleasant or at least neutral to me.

In our reading Norman Johnson said, "I didn't tell you about the look they gave me when I opened my door and they saw Black me standing there."

5) I can go shopping alone and be sure that I will not be harassed or followed.

6) I can turn on the TV or open the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

7) When I am told about our national history, I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

8) When I cash checks or use credit cards I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial responsibility.

A white woman shares a story about shopping with her half sister who just happens to have a black father. They went to the grocery store. Her sister wrote a check, the cashier brought out a listing of folks who had written bad checks and went through it before accepting her check. When the white sister wrote a check, the girl did not look. That is white privilege

9) I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers will tolerate them if they fit school norms, my chief worries about them do not concern other's attitudes about their race.

Did you ever worry that your child would not be accepted on a team or in a club because of the color of their skin? I never did.

10) Here is one I love, I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes or not answer emails or phone calls without having people attribute these choices to bad morals, poverty or the illiteracy of my race. Think about it, how many white people do you know that do things like this and we think that is just them, but do you ever blame a white person's race for this? I saw a meme on Facebook that said “ A Muslim commits a crime and we blame his whole religion. A black man commits a crime and we blame his race. A white man commits a terrible crime and we say that he is mentally unstable and a lone wolf. We never blame a white person's whole race for their behavior Why is this?

11) If I ask to speak to the person in charge, I am pretty sure that I will be facing a person of my own race.

12) I can feel welcomed and normal in the usual walks of public, institutional and social life.

Those are just 12 of the 50 privileges that McIntosh identifies. In our communities, white culture is the norm. Anything outside of that must be changed to “fit in” We see this happening in Brillion, WI where Muslims have been denied traditional times to step away for 5 minutes and pray.

Constitutionally we protect religious freedoms, but it seems it does not hold true if that is not the societal norm. I wonder, if the shoe was on the other foot, what Christian employees in Brillion would say if suddenly Christmas was not a holiday?

Just this week at my book club, a friend was sharing how her son is teaching at a Native American Charter school in Minneapolis. She felt that the school was a mess, that these kids needed to learn how to be “in this world” and how their own culture was trying to teach them to embrace their heritage. In her mind that “wasn't this world” This world is a white world. Why is white right and why do we feel threatened when it isn't?

I believe that this is the discomfort we feel with protests in New York, Minneapolis, St Louis and Ferguson. African Americans are beginning to say no to this enormous system that has separated them from living freely in our culture.

Our own denomination has been active in these protests. The Black Lives Matter Movement has received much support from Unitarians. In Appleton the Fellowship displays a Black Lives Matter banner on their street sign. And yes, it has been vandalized. They have received emails and phone calls about it. “All lives matter,” people argue. Yes, they do, but clearly in a system that supports and rewards white people every single day, it is clear that all lives are not valued the same.

Our denomination feels it is important to get involved with this movement because the system of white privileged clearly shows us black lives do not matter as much as white lives. And it is time to be honest about it.

Long ago , I had given up on the concept of evil. I did not believe in an embodied force or Devil that was trying to work against us. Yet I confess, when my eyes were opened to the enormous system that has been created to support white privilege, I became overwhelmed with the complexity and size. I can no longer pretend that it does not exist. I do know AND with each moment I GAIN, as a white person who lives within this system. This awareness and the overall feeling that we can't escape from this system defines evil for me now. It scares me. It seems so wildly out of control and

now as a person who is called to restoring wholeness in this world through ministry I must be held accountable to do something, and that too is frightening.

OK, so what do we do, right here, in this room? You and me, white, middle class people, who live in white, middle class neighborhoods and send our kids to white, middle class schools. The system is so big, so supported and so ingrained that we can't separate ourselves from it.

First, I think it is important to recognize where we stand. Being honest about white privilege, recognizing it and naming it is an important first step. It is essential that we all recognize that we are racist and that we hold stereotypes that we teach each other and that our culture holds up.

I was challenged by UU minister Rev. Mark Morrison Reed to identify how I view the word "freedom". He says that for whites it means freedom to chose a place to live, a school to attend, a faith to follow. But for most other people, people of color, freedom means freedom from bondage.

Whites have never been in bondage to other races, at least not in our country. Because of white privilege I can never understand that definition of freedom. I can only learn from those who have experienced it and then work hard to insure that no one faces that again. White privilege holds non-whites in bondage to our rules, our mannerisms, our "right way of living."

If we are to hold to our 6th principle, the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, we have got to realize that OUR lives have to change. Our community that we have created that benefits white people, is not a world community, it is not just and it does not give peace to all people, only some.

As Norma Johnson said

"I didn't tell you that your world is not mine and that we are virtual worlds apart,

I didn't tell you that while you can walk boldly into any place you choose, I always have to consider where I am, who I am with and how I am going affect people.

I didn't tell you that being a good person and being clueless can come in the same package.”

Here in NE Wisconsin we live in communities that are mostly white. We are good people, but we can also be clueless. So how do we work towards this principle of peace, liberty and justice for all in a less than diverse community?

We get real with ourselves, and we get honest about privilege. We become a community that stands up and speaks out against rulings and policies that are unjust. We call out privilege, even when we know that it may cause us discomfort. We call out the neighbor who makes a racist joke. We share our thoughts when someone starts to berate “those people.” Our silence keeps white privilege strong and in place. I believe words are important, honoring and respecting all people and refusing to allow others to degrade or belittle is our responsibility.

As Unitarian Universalists we must work at becoming congregations that are known throughout the community as ones that will not tolerate injustice and will work towards a beloved community each and every day. Even if it means that we will have to change how we move and act within in our own lives. Even if it means that we have to let go of privilege. Because guess what? In twenty years, whites will be the minority.

This is a call to roll up our sleeves, talk with open hearts to one another to create strong anti-racist and anti-oppression partnerships within our community, and to become allies with those who are on the outside of this system of privilege.

Its time to really wake up. Justice means each person is treated with respect and dignity, not just some. Justice means that we all share in the bounty of this earth, not just some. Justice means equality for all, not just some.

Norma Johnson says,

“I didn't tell you about my day because I have been taught not to.

And you, have been taught not to even consider it.”

It's time to change that, it is time for us all to consider how our brothers and sisters of color struggle in a system that does not welcome them.

May it be so.