

Privilege

Their lives of late had been a series of miracles. After centuries of enslavement by the Egyptians under harsher and harsher conditions, one of their own had stood up to Pharaoh and had convinced him to let his people go. Moses had accomplished this with the help of God, who sent more and more dreadful plagues upon the Egyptians. So awful had the last plague been, the death of the first born of every Egyptian home, that the Egyptians had given the Israelites clothing and jewels to speed them on their way. And when Pharaoh had changed his mind and sent his armies to recapture the slaves trapped in their flight by the Red Sea, God had parted the waves for Moses and the Children of Israel had crossed to safety with dry feet. Not only that but God had returned the waters to their proper place just at the right time to catch the Egyptian army mired in the mud at the bottom, drowning every last one of the Chosen People's pursuers. When they camped at a place where the water was bitter, God showed Moses how to make it sweet. And when their supplies began to run low, God sent them a miracle of bread from heaven in the mornings followed by flocks of quail at suppertime. Truly, they had been blessed by miracle after miracle.

So you would think that the Children of Israel would be thankful. You would think that they would learn to trust in God, as their forefather Abraham had done. You would think that when they ran out of water again, they might have gone to Moses and asked him to pray to God for them and that they would have done so politely, in view of everything that had been done for them to date. You would think they would have realized how deeply God loved them and was invested in them. You would, of course, be wrong.

The picture we get of the Israelites in the seventeenth chapter of Exodus is not a flattering one. In the face of what faith might have told them was a temporary setback, they threatened and murmured and complained. This is one of the stories in our Bible in which God's people are clearly being used as a negative example. This is what can happen when we get used to God solving all our problems for us. This is what can happen when we expect to be able to snap our fingers and have things go our way. This is what can happen when we begin to feel entitled. This is what can happen when we are privileged.

The topic of privilege and especially of White privilege in America has gotten a good deal of attention in the last few years. Sometimes, the concepts have not been presented very well and the result has been that White Americans feel attacked and unjustly blamed. That's unfortunate, as the concept is not about placing blame but about seeing how askew our systems are and, with that newfound clarity, imagining how equity can be brought more and more to our culture. It is an exercise in creating the Beloved Community. I am hoping, in beginning with this story from Exodus, to introduce some of these ideas this morning and, in the weeks to come, we will have the advantage of hearing from some of our friends from University Baptist and other Evergreen Association churches who have been making a careful study of this phenomenon of privilege and the part it plays in the multivalent problem of racism. Next week, Rev. Dave Roberts, a former interim pastor of this congregation, along with his wife Merletta and former GSBC member Rev. Wim Mauldin will take my time in the pulpit to describe to you their own experiences of privilege and racism. Beginning April 2nd, a group from University Baptist will meet with us during the Adult Sunday School time to help us begin our own "Sacred Conversation on Race," as they have done at UBC. They will meet with us for a few Sundays and then it will be up to us

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to decide how or if to continue the conversation with our own parameters. It promises to be a fascinating and fruitful journey.

This morning, then, I want to discuss briefly the broad parameters of White Privilege, drawing from one of the most well-known articles on the subject. Perhaps more importantly, I want to prime the pump for our upcoming conversation by sharing with you some of my own experiences with privilege and racism. As you can imagine, having grown up in the South, I have some vivid experiences. But I imagine we all have. And all of us, no matter whether we have experienced racism as victims or as unwitting perpetrators or in a mood of maliciousness, are still beloved by God, just as those entitled Israelites were. And God, while we were yet sinners, sent the Son to die to show us a way out of self-centeredness, privilege, and sin.

The article to which I referred is included in your bulletin this morning, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh. It’s actually an excerpt from a long piece by McIntosh written in 1988, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies.” This is not, in other words, a recent development. In the article before you, Dr. McIntosh lists 50 daily effects of White privilege. Reading through them, which I hope you will do later, is a reminder of how different experiences of life can be for White folk and people of color. Those of us who are of the dominant culture can easily forget how the society in which we live has been built to offer us the easiest possible path through life, how we are afforded the benefit of the doubt in many situations which derail our sisters and brothers of other cultures, and how even our notions of justice can become skewed when only looking through the lens of privilege. Just as the escaped slaves in the Desert of Sin began to expect that God would tilt the table for them, making sure that everything went their way without too much effort from them, so we Euro-Americans, in our own wilderness of sin, have begun to expect that our society provide us with a clear path to success. And, just like Moses’ recalcitrant flock, we tend to throw a fit when we don’t get what we want when we want it.

Although it took me many years to see it, my family’s history is marked by incidents of White privilege. Take my maternal grandfather’s story as one example. Troy Glaze grew up in Northeast Arkansas, in the foothills of the Ozarks, where the land he and his family owned was too rocky to farm in any successful way. During the Depression, he and his young wife hit the road to California, where they joined the throngs of migrant farm workers, travelling to wherever fruit needed picking, returning to their home place only in the winter, when hands were not needed. As the years passed, they added three children who were expected to join them in the fields as soon as they were big enough to be useful. Unlike some, they held this requirement only when school was not in session, and they could always find a school to taken in their bright, cheerful kids, unlike the experience of Black or Latino families whose children were not always welcome among the children of White farm owners. When my mother was in junior high, Troy relocated the family to a small town south of St. Louis, where the post-War boom in construction meant steady work in a trade he had acquired along the way – welding. Troy Glaze became a union welder, eligible for good pay, insurance, and retirement benefits. Stabilized, the family thrived; my mother met my father and married and the rest is history.

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Except I had an experience four years ago about which I have told some of you some but not all of the story. You may have heard me tell of how I experienced a family reunion of sorts on a trip to Arkansas with my mother's younger sister after the ABC Biennial that year. I may have told you about listening to my uncle, my mom's youngest brother just four years my senior, and how I finally couldn't help but remark on his constant use of the "N-word" to describe the African-Americans of his acquaintance. As I've said, I got him to stop using that word around me, although I don't kid myself that I altered his attitude in any way. What I've not talked much about is the story he told that prompted that exchange. He was explaining to us why there were no Black members of the Pipeliners Union. There was no racism involved, my uncle explained, those people just didn't have the skills. Time after time, they would be given the standard welding test and time after time, they would fail. The men who judged them were fair, he assured us, the Black candidates just couldn't cut the mustard. Having achieved the one small victory, I didn't have the heart to ask him how many chances he got to pass the test and how long he'd been working as an assistant first. I didn't ask him if the test administrators ever gave the test blind – viewing only the results and not the activity itself. I didn't ask him if he didn't think there was an unfair burden of tension on the black candidates who, I'm sure, were quite aware that they were bucking decades of "proof" that they couldn't do the job. I didn't ask him whether or not he thought either he or his father, Troy, would have passed that test if they were Black. But I was pretty sure I knew the real answer to that one.

My own father's story is not dissimilar. His father was killed in a workplace accident when David was 13. But because his dad, my grandfather, Cornelius John Boyer, had left the mines of Southern Missouri and settled south of St. Louis and become a riverboat pilot, with good wages and a government pension, his semi-invalid widow and kids were able to survive in genteel poverty. My grandmother took in wash and watched other people's kids but nobody went hungry and she was able to afford the insulin that kept her alive as it now does for me. David was a good student in high school but quit school at Southeast Missouri State College after just one semester, unable to rest easy so far from his mom and younger siblings. Instead, he took classes at DeVry Tech and at another local trade school where the founder befriended him. With that well-connected mentor behind him, he joined McDonnell Aircraft, where his hard work, intelligence, and personality carried him up the corporate ladder until he took early retirement as one of the Vice-Presidents of the McDonnell Helicopter division of McDonnell-Douglas.

I've always been proud of my dad's career, even when he and I were not seeing eye-to-eye on a number of other fronts. In between his start with McDonnell and his Vice-Presidency, he served in a number of other roles, including as McDonnell Aerospace's representative to their subcontractor, Honeywell, in Florida in the early Sixties. The project for which David was responsible was the inertial guidance system for Project Mercury and Project Gemini, the series of gyroscopes that made controlling the capsule for navigation possible. Dad's work helped bring Alan Shepherd and John Glenn and all the rest home safe and sound. But I found myself wondering as I watched the award-winning "Hidden Figures" a few months ago, what if he'd been Black or his name had been Hernandez instead of Boyer? Would his dad have been successful in getting out of the mines and getting government training as a boat pilot? Would that mentor have been so ready to champion David? Would the supervisors at McDonnell in that still-Southern city of St. Louis have given him a fair shot? What would those good ol' boys in

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Florida with NASA have done with him? I can only imagine the answers but I don't have much confidence that they would be much like my life.

And speaking of my life, I've become quite aware over the years how I've benefited from White privilege, although I didn't learn to call it that until recently. I had very little exposure to people of other races until I was 10 and we moved back to the St. Louis area where I was born. For the first time, I went to school with Black kids. I couldn't quite understand why they didn't associate with the White kids, why none of them went to our church, why they all seemed to live in a tightly circumscribed neighborhood in the southeast corner of our town called Meacham Park. I was baffled but obedient when my dad said I was welcome to befriend the Black kids at school but that I wasn't to bring them home. It didn't matter much, I guessed, since none of them seemed to want to know me anyway. I learned to adopt the attitudes of my playmates and their parents, most of whom saw nothing wrong with the occasional joke at the Blacks' expense (although use of the "N-word" was frowned upon). The racism was rarely ugly or overt; it was polite and subtle.

When I arrived at Rice University in the late summer of 1978, I was not surprised to find very few young men or women of color in my matriculating class. I was surprised, shame on me, to discover that two of the young Black men in my class at Wiess College were not on athletic scholarship. I had already unconsciously bought into the idea that sports were the only ticket to schools of that ilk for Black students. After all, there had been no Black kids in any of my advanced classes at Kirkwood High – hardly surprising considering the lack of encouragement they got in our integrated elementary and junior high schools. I tried making friends among my Black acquaintances but I kept getting in my own way. I didn't understand that more than my desire to be nice was needed. That carried over into my Seminary years in the very segregated Louisville as well. Here's how unthinking I was: seeing a small group of my Black male (naturally) classmates on a street corner in Seminary Village, I leaned out of my car window and cheerfully said, as I would've to a group of white guys, "Hey, boys, what'chall up to?" The return was hostile stares, stiff spines, and a growled "I don't see any boys here. Just men." Since I couldn't sink into the crust of the earth, I rolled up my window and sped away. Privilege, privilege.

I've told most of these stories in terms of Black and White but I've had a lot to learn, or unlearn, in terms of relations with other minority cultures as well. Because I didn't have a lot of built up baggage regarding Latino/Latina culture, I never felt any particular friction dealing with those folks when I first encountered them in Houston. I got to thinking about it the other day and I think because my family was proud of our slim connection to Native American culture and because many Hispanics also have a blended Euro/Indigenous heritage, I must have unconsciously designated them as "cousins." I confess that it was somewhat more awkward for me to quell learned suspicion of the prominent Asian minority here in the PNW. Not only had I never been around folks from the other side of the Pacific Rim, I grew up with a steady diet of the World War II memories of the elders in my family as well as their generally negative attitudes towards the "beneficiaries" of American military colonialism in Korea and Vietnam.

But as I confess where I've come from and where I've been, I also want to give thanks to God that, in the words of the great Black gospel song, "I'm not what I ought to be but I'm better than

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I used to be..." Thanks to the patience and kindness and downright Christian love of brothers and sisters in the Evergreen Association and elsewhere, I've had my eyes opened to what life in these United States looks like to the descendants of African slaves, to the uneasy immigrants of Spanish-speaking countries under the thumb of Norte Americanos, to those whose parents or grandparents or even themselves were "guests of the United States" behind barbed wire in World War II-era "resettlement" camps. Because of men and women like Ken Curl, Clem Winbush, Manny Santiago, Leticia Guardiola-Saenz, Yosh Nakagawa, Jean Kim, and many more, my education into the Beloved Community has continued and helped me to celebrate the beautiful and amazing variety of human culture and expression.

These that I have named and all those others have extended grace to this poor dumb Southern White boy. They extended that grace, I firmly believe, because it had been extended to them. Not by the arrogant, unseeing dominant culture but by God, by the divine expressed through a brown-skinned refugee, a Middle Eastern day laborer, too poor to have a place to lay his head. My friends and mentors have shown me that I am worth their efforts to educate not because I have an intrinsic value that is different from theirs but because we are all the Beloved of God. "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." And, having been reconciled with God by Christ's death, now we are called to fulfill our salvation by living as Jesus showed us -- Jesus who did not assume privilege but avidly sought the will of God, bringing the news of God's love to all. For that saving love, for that saving life, thanks be to God.