

White Privilege Repents

Psalm 116:1-6

Philippians 2:5-11

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“Privilege.” That’s the current lingo. Privilege. Invisible, unearned advantages. The advantage some folks are born with in this country, just because of the color of their skin. But the hue of your skin is just the beginning. A couple of decades ago, there arose a classroom exercise called the “Privilege Walk.” The class would stand against one wall, and respond to a series of questions by stepping forward – or staying put. “If you had two parents in the home growing up, take one step forward.” “If you never had to worry about if your electricity was cut off, take one step forward.” “If you never felt unsafe because of your gender, take one step forward.” And so on. After enough questions, the trend was clear. Some benefitted from invisible advantages. Many did not. It is as if we are all running in a 100-yard dash – but some folks get to start the race at the 50-yard mark. Others forced to start back at the starting line. Wearing unmatched hiking boots. Two sizes too small. Some are thrown into this life with un-earned advantages – invisible to them. The exercise intends to reveal the advantages to the students. Paula Barrows nails the problem: “Privilege becomes a problem when the people who have the most of it,” she says, “don’t realize that they’re winning the race because of how lucky they are. They believe that they worked hard and are winning fair and square.”(1) Look around. Go ahead. We in this Zoom meeting today benefit from invisible privileges. Middle-class, most of us. Pale-faces, most of us. Not everybody, to be sure. But also male, some of us. That’s an invisible privilege that gets us ahead, too. Educated. And mostly able-bodied. Most of us don’t have to worry about negotiating tight corners, bathrooms, stairs. Privilege. Invisible advantages. Unearned.

But it gets worse. Those students who stayed put at the wall? Shamed. Indigenous Canadian Doug Cuthand points out: “Over the years I have known lots of Indigenous people who have indicated to me in one way or another,” he says, “that white people must be smarter and somehow better equipped to run things simply because of who they are.” And he adds, “can you imagine what effect this has on the self confidence and self esteem of a people?”(2) Those *not* as privileged start to believe the lie that it is their own fault. Somehow they just didn’t do enough. And the messages can be so much more subtle than moving or standing against a wall. The crayons we buy our kids. Up until just recently, what color was the “flesh-tone” crayon? Kind of pale-pink, right? The same with band-aids – until, let’s see... *last week!* What message does that give children with darker hues of skin? That pale-faces – Caucasian whites – are the norm. Glasses that are always designed for narrow caucasian noses.(3) White is “normal.” More than that, “male” is normal. The problem is that if “white-male” alone defines what is “normal,” then everything else automatically becomes “abnormal.” Wrong. Inferior. Deficient. Maybe even dangerous . . . Not only do “we” too often not notice our invisible privileges, if we do happen to see them, all too many folks just unconsciously assume that if we have them, we must *deserve* our advantages. And those who *don't* have them *must not deserve them*. Because, goes the poisonous logic, *we* must be favored by God, so *they* must

flawed. They are lazy. Inferior. Cursed by God. Maybe even dangerous . . . We start believing the lie that separates us humans into “blessed,” and “cursed.” Which justifies some beating up on others. “Jews” are cursed. “Muslims” are dangerous. “Gays” are threatening pristine society. Do you see how privilege can fuel prejudice? Especially if the whole culture in this country is established to preserve white superiority. Invisible privilege is like an acid that erodes the internal self-esteem of some made in the image of God. And be used as a weapon to hurt others made in the image of God.

What do we do? How can we overcome this invisible beast we never asked for? Well, all too many privileged folks pull the “la-la-laaa, I’m not listeninnng” move. I don’t believe you. It’s fake news. Why would you criticize something that is good? I didn’t ask to be born white. What can I do about it? So I’ll just ignore the whole problem. Others might head for the opposite corner. When you finally realize your privilege, it comes as a shock – wait, wait, I’m not like that! Oh... *I am*. And they find themselves paralyzed by overwhelming guilt. What can I do? But, look, ignoring the problem won’t make it go away. Letting yourself become helplessly paralyzed doesn’t help anybody. So, what *can* I do? I’m so glad you asked that! What if . . . what if we tried to imitate Jesus? I mean, after all, we *are* Christians, right? Trying our best to follow the God-Man, Jesus. What if we really did that? How? What did He do? Remember the passage from Philippians we just heard? Listen again to Paul: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did *not* regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but *emptied* himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.” Let the same *mind* be in you that was in Christ Jesus. He was the highest of the high, *and went low*. He did not exploit His privilege. He used His privilege for the benefit of others. What if we turn things around, imitating what Jesus did? Privilege does not mean you are better – or worse. It means that you have invisible advantages you didn’t earn. And those advantages support the entire white superiority game. You see, the whole point of racist policy is to keep whites on top. That’s the whole game. When we palefaces admit the privileges we have – really *see* them – then we can start to change the whole “some are up/some are down” game. Call it a revolutionary new kind of stewardship. Privilege as a resource that we can place in the hands of God: here you go, God, use my advantages for Your New Reality, formerly known as the “Kingdom of God.” Kind of changes the whole game, doesn’t it? What can we do? Imitate Jesus! Upset the whole top-down white supremacy game.

So, how do you pull that off? Where do you start? Well, first of all, we can decide: I’m not going to play that racist white-supremacy game any more. I repent away from it, and turn toward God’s vision: everybody is welcomed as they are. Nobody has to be on top. I’ll take a stand for justice. But, as the Dread Pirate Roberts said in that lovely movie “The Princess Bride”: get used to disappointment. Even when we are sincerely trying to do our best to overcome our white privilege, turn it toward justice, sometimes *we* will get it wrong, too: I’m doing this so *I* can feel virtuous. Or we’ll make stupid moves, false starts. Or we’ll discover even *more* invisible areas of privilege. Or we’ll just get *tired* of the effort all the time, resenting having to do this bothersome exercise over and over again. If *we* are tired of it all, can you imagine how bone-weary tired African Americans must be, having to face this racism game 24/7, every moment of their lives?(4) So we’ll have to monitor our efforts constantly to see how we measure up to Jesus’ model, ask forgiveness, and try again. Constantly. Congratulations. Now you’re starting to understand what we’re up

against. This is called: “repentance.” Turning away from sin, and turning toward God. Yes, it is hard. But in *God’s* power, the task is *not* impossible. When we find ourselves stuck, we can send up a fast “help!” to the very One we’re trying to copy: Jesus. He will help us figure out ways to make the connection. Jesus *will* be with us, sometimes leading, sometimes prodding, sometimes consoling... And He will show us how to become “accomplices” for racial justice, putting our privilege in the service of others. As Colleen Clemens writes: “An *ally* will mostly engage in activism by standing with an individual or group in a marginalized community. An *accomplice* will focus more on dismantling the structures that oppress that individual or group — and such work will be directed by the stakeholders in the marginalized group. Simply, ally work focuses on *individuals*, and accomplice work focuses on the *structures of decision-making agency*.”(5) So repentance means to *listen* to the voices of people of color. Becoming an accomplice means getting ourselves out of the way and *learning* what life is like when you have to start not even at the starting line, but 50 yards back. *Believe* the stories. Read the books. Read the blogs. Watch the documentaries. Listen to the podcasts. Get educated on the way things really are.(6) It’s the one wearing the shoe who knows where it pinches.(7) And we can include others who’ve been *excluded* for too long – women, African Americans, LatinX folks, LGBTQ+ persons, Native Americans, Asian Americans – in any decisions we make that will affect them. Policies, actions, you name it.(8) And not just to let them into the room. But make a bigger “us” at the table. And follow their lead. They know where the shoe pinches. And then we can show up. Be there at the protests. Show up in support at the city council meetings. Contribute to Black Lives Matter Phoenix Metro. *Use* the privilege we never asked for to push for changes. Because the truth is, these are not issues of black and white, they are issues today of *life and death!* Flawed as we are, we will *choose life*, by becoming accomplices. What can we do? We can show our repentance by showing up.

Now, I ask you: what else do you think Jesus was doing? When stuck, He gave up his claims to privilege, and trusted God. Maybe we can, too. Amen.

Notes

(1) “My Professor Made Us Do A Privilege Walk And Here’s What I Realized,” by Paula Burrows, “Unwritten” blog, 11/15/16; accessed online on 1/9/18 at

<http://www.readunwritten.com/2016/11/15/professor-made-us-privilege-walk-heres-realized/>

(2) “Cuthand: The white man’s burden of privilege still affects us,” by Doug Cuthand, Saskatoon StarPhoenix, 1/6/18; accessed online on 1/9/18 at

<http://thestarphoenix.com/opinion/columnists/cuthand-the-white-mans-burden-of-privilege-still-affects-us>

(3) “Emma Watson’s willingness to face the truth about race is refreshing,” by Lola Okolosie, *The Guardian*, 1/10/18; accessed online on 1/10/18 at

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/10/emma-watson-truth-race-white>

(4) “Black people are tired of trying to explain racism,” by DeNeen L. Brown, *The Washington Post*, 6/17/20; accessed online on 6/21/20 at

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/17/black-people-are-tired-trying-explain-racism/>

(5) “Answering White People’s Most Commonly Asked Questions about the Black Lives Matter Movement,” by Courtney Martin, *The Bold Italic*, 6/1/20; accessed online on 6/16/20 at <https://thebolditalic.com/where-do-i-donate-why-is-the-uprising-violent-should-i-go-protest-5cef9eac37ef9>

(6) A splendid resource to recommend for those who are serious about educating themselves on issues of racism, white privilege, and other associated problems is “Justice in June: A course of action and learning,” online here: <https://grad2cert.org/justice-in-june-a-course-of-action/>

(7) Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 107; who echoed Desiderius Erasmus, *Ten Colloquies*, Library of Liberal Arts (New York: Macmillan, 1957, 1986), 30.

(8) Taking to heart the sage advice from Deacon Joan Crawford of the Guardian Angels Catholic Community, Tempe, AZ.