



This morning I want to talk about white privilege. White privilege is a short phrase which encapsulates an enormous amount of social meaning. So let's unpack it briefly. Privilege is anything that you have and take for granted that others don't have. This may include finance, education, access to legal help, being able to vote, having a voice, being respected, being

valued, freedom to move and to develop a career. If you are enjoying privilege, as we all are to some degree, you probably take it for granted. It's just the way things are.

So let's look at the **white** part of white privilege. For centuries, white people have been the majority, the dominant culture in this country. Those of us who are white take many things for granted. We expect people in power to look like us; we expect to be treated with respect when we are pulled over for speeding; we expect that when we go to a hotel the shampoo will be a kind that works with our hair; and to be completely trivial, when we buy flesh colored band aids we expect them to be a kinda pink color.

We live in a predominately white country – 63% of Americans are non-hispanic whites. Yet our nation was founded on racial violence. There were people living here before white men came. Most first nation peoples were wiped out by war or disease and many were forced to work for the white invaders. I hardly need to remind you of the creation of reservations and the forced relocation of people whose lives had been centered on the land. For example, between 1830 and 1850, the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole, and Cherokee people (including mixed-race and black freedmen and slaves who lived among them) were forcibly removed from their traditional lands in the Southeastern United States, and relocated farther west.<sup>[4]</sup> They were forced to march to their destinations. Many died on the way, along the Trail of Tears.<sup>1</sup>

The Civil War ended the enslavement of blacks by whites, but apartheid continued for a century afterwards with black Americans being officially treated as second class citizens. It continues today in more subtle ways.

More recently we have witnessed white privilege in North Dakota. In the early stages of route planning, it was proposed that the Dakota Access pipeline would run 10 miles northeast of the predominately white Bismarck. This idea was rejected because of its potential threat to Bismarck's water supply. Instead the pipeline was routed only 500 feet from Sioux nation land and crossing under the Missouri river, severely threatening the water supply of the Sioux people.<sup>2</sup> Some authorities argued that the Sioux nation should have taken a more active part in the planning process if they didn't like the route. But white privilege



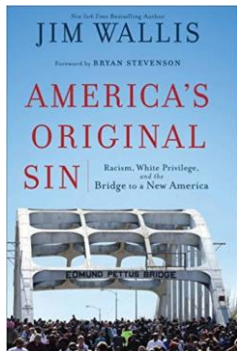
<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trail\\_of\\_Tears](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trail_of_Tears)

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dakota\\_Access\\_Pipeline#Route](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dakota_Access_Pipeline#Route)

includes not only the power to make decisions that favor white people but also access to the political process.

It's difficult for us to see it because it's so natural, it's like the air we breathe, yet people of color are deeply affected by white privilege. Racial minorities are more likely than white Americans to be arrested, and once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted; and once convicted, they are more likely to face stiff sentences.<sup>3</sup> One third of black men will go to prison at least once in their life. This isn't because black men are more badly behaved than white men. For example, according to Department of Justice figures, between 1980 and 2010 police arrested black youth for drug crimes at more than twice the rate of white youth, nationwide. Yet a 2012 study found that white high-school students were slightly more likely to have abused illegal drugs within the past month than black students of the same age. So the white kids were more likely to be using drugs, but the black kids were more likely to be busted. Blacks are also far more likely than whites to be stopped by the police while driving and as we have seen this year, such traffic stops can end tragically.

These are worrisome and documented incidents of racial bias. It is easy for us to see the problems and shake our heads, but think they have nothing to do with us. Yet these are systemic biases – racism built into the system, and we are part of the system. We have grown complacent because we enjoy so many privileges. Even those of us who are financially poor enjoy many privileges that are denied to most people of color. Even the most privileged black person cannot shed their skin which lays them open to prejudice and harassment by those who think they are superior because they were born with white skin.



During Lent here at St Ben's we offered a book study on the book by Jim Wallis, America's Original Sin, in order to help us more fully understand the underlying problematic of race in this country. But the only ones who came were those whose lives are directly impacted by racism. The rest of us stayed home, thinking perhaps that racism doesn't affect us or that it wasn't important enough to consider.

In today's Gospel reading we heard a story of racism and prejudice. You will remember that society in Jesus' time was divided along gender and race lines. Just like ours today where women get paid on average only 80% of their male counterparts, and Hispanic women only 54%.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus was raised as a good Jewish man who kept to the law. Because of the complex purity rules, religious Jewish men avoided women and Gentiles. I don't know what Jesus was doing in Tyre and Sidon. Perhaps he was on vacation or perhaps he had taken the disciples on retreat. When

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/04/racial-disparities-criminal-justice\\_n\\_4045144.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/04/racial-disparities-criminal-justice_n_4045144.html)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.aauw.org/research/the-simple-truth-about-the-gender-pay-gap/>

the Canaanite woman started making a public scene, it disturbed his peace. At first he said he wouldn't help her, because his mission was only to the Jewish people but then he changed his mind.

Some of the commentaries say that Jesus did this to point out the prejudice of the disciples, but I think it was a pivotal moment in his own ministry, a moment when he realized his own racism and sexism. He realized that he was a person of privilege. Even though he was marginalized by the religious authorities, Jesus was still a person of privilege in first century Palestine. In this story, we see Jesus realizing that God's love is bigger than his previous human conception.

Both Peter and Paul have similar aha! moments. Peter, when he has a dream telling him not to consider unclean that which God has made clean, and then sent to the house of the gentile Cornelius, he realizes that the Holy Spirit was there before him. Paul, who was a man of even greater privilege, considered himself commissioned by God to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

We would not be sitting here today if these good Jewish men had not realized that God's love is freely available to all. If they had protected their Jewish privilege and maintained that one had to be a Jew to be a Christian, things would have turned out very differently. But each one stretched himself. Not because it was convenient but because God's love demanded it. Each one stretched himself to create a community where women and gentiles had an equality with Jews which had never been seen before.

I don't need to tell you that there is no place for white supremacist beliefs among the people of God. Our baptismal vows make it clear that we seek and serve Christ in **all** persons, and that we are committed to striving for justice and peace among **all** people, respecting the dignity of every human being. As St Paul said, we are in Christ and in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one."(Gal 3:28)

It's interesting that Matthew puts Jesus' teaching about uncleanness right before this story. Jesus says that it's not what we eat that makes us unclean, but what we say and what we create. From this perspective, Jewish men were not unclean when they touched women during their monthly cycle, or ate food that hadn't been properly prepared, no they were unclean when they created words and actions which were not in line with God's unconditional love and respect for all beings.

White privilege is not something that we can get rid of it. White privilege does not make us unclean, but what we say and what we create can be unconsciously or consciously racist and that's where we run into trouble. The abuse of white privilege in racism is systemic in our society. It is embedded in the sin matrix. The sin of racism is a sin that affects us all, that we are

all involved in. We may not think that we are individually racist but we benefit from having white skin; we benefit at the expense of our sisters and brothers of color.

The events in Charlottesville last week are a wake-up call for us. Hatred is alive and well. It is our task, as the children of God, to find ways to combat hatred and to transform our society into one of peace and equality. It is our task to learn all we can about the ways that we continue to oppress our brothers and sisters of different national, ethnic and racial groups and take action to change the structures of society. We can do some things by individual action, but systemic change requires that we use the political processes available to us.

Several of us attended the Outshine the Darkness vigil at Mission Plaza on Wednesday among about 1000 people. Putting your body where your mouth is, is an important way to make a statement. So is supporting legislation that increases equality. So is writing letters to the editor, especially when we notice facial bias in reporting or in other letters; and speaking up when we hear other people denigrating people of color or of other nationalities. The Southern Poverty Law Center has produced a guide to 10 ways to combat racism which is available through our church Facebook page.

This is a white community – 86% of Los Osans identify as white. This is a white church. More than 86% of us are white. We can choose to enjoy our white privilege together, or we can start to pay attention and work together to fulfil our baptismal vows by working for a just and peaceful society in which all people are treated with respect.



For all of us are the beloved children of God and, as Jesus realized, God has no favorites.

*The audio version has a brief but disturbing account of racism in SLO County from Dr. Patricia Henry.*