

POWER LUNCH

© REV. DANA WORSNOP
ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
21 OCTOBER 2007

READINGS

We offer three readings this morning. The first is from poet Alice Walker.

Love is not concerned
with whom you pray
or where you slept
the night you ran away
from home.
Love is concerned
that the beating of your heart
should kill no one.

The Rose that Grew from Concrete by rapper Tupak Shakur

Please wake me when I am free
I cannot bear captivity
where my culture holds no significance
I'll whither and die in ignorance.

But my inner eye can c a race
who reigned as kings in another place
the green of trees were rich and full
And every man spoke of beautiful
men and women as equals
War was gone because all was peaceful;

But now like a nightmare I wake to c
That I live like a prisoner of poverty
Please wake me when I am free
I cannot bear captivity
4 I would rather be stricken blind
than 2 live without expression of mind.

We Need to Really Talk by J Lagoo, a high school sophomore from North Carolina

I am overwhelmed
Don't make me wash the colors, the heritage,
The language I don't want to.
We need to really talk...
As though no one is judging
But everyone is listening.
It's easy to forget that life is complex enough
That love and hate, acceptance and fear
Grow in one.
Don't just like me, ask me, make me question,
Make me uncertain and in this time of doubt,
Let's do something.
Forget stereotypes,
Lose our words to internal thought.
I am not saying we're going to move the world
But we can provoke a shift in our minds,
Moving away from ignorance, discrimination
And the belief that
We understand without experiencing.

SERMON

I have spoken before about how it can be more than a little ironic for a group of mostly privileged white folks to sing *We're Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table*. It's an African American spiritual about being left out, kept from the table of abundance. Some might look for the Welcome Table in heaven. Others hope that seats at the Table will open to all here and now through the human struggle for justice and equity.

Thing is, most European American people are already at the Welcome Table.

Now there is a deeper human truth that we all feel left out, marginalized in some way. Think back to middle school. Were *you* "popular"? Those of us who were less than popular, felt left out, uncool, unaccepted and unacceptable. Yet I've heard that those who were considered unbearably cool often felt insecure because they feared it was a sham. They harbored an uncool inner child and were afraid they would be found out.

I think it is fundamentally human to think there is a Welcome Table out there somewhere from which we are excluded by virtue of some inner or outer flaw.

But this sermon isn't about that. It's about how those of us who are white in America carry with us a kind of privilege. A privilege we didn't ask for, nonetheless a privilege that by its very nature excludes others.

White privilege is not something most of us spend a lot of time thinking about. It is so basic to our lives that we don't notice that we're swimming in it. It's not necessarily anything we do. It simply is what we live our lives in.

To be white in America is to assume that the culture is on our side. That we sit at the Welcome Table. I speak today as white woman of privilege to you who are also mostly, but not all, white. For there are some things that we must begin to learn to speak out loud. There are things that we must learn to acknowledge in ourselves. It is not easy work.

Yet the truth is that the Welcome Table for us is far more like a power lunch, even if we don't feel very powerful. And just by sitting at the table, we leave others out.

A dear friend has a hard time with this concept. He is white and male in America, but he doesn't see his advantages. I can understand why. John is the youngest of seven in an Irish Catholic family. There was never a lot of money, although he was well fed, sheltered and clothed. John and all his brothers and sisters attended Catholic high school and went to college – not because their parents could afford the tuition but by paying for it themselves. John started working when he was 12 or 13. He doesn't have much sympathy for affirmative action. He figures if he can do it, anyone can.

Not to take anything away from John. What he did is admirable, and I love him for it. He worked hard and accomplished a significant goal. Yet he cannot see the leg up he got from being white in America. It was an expectation in his family that all the kids would go to Catholic high school and to college. His parents and the family structure supported this goal. He didn't live in the inner city with its decay, crime and poverty. His father's professional connections got him his first job. He had examples all around him that showed him that what he wanted was possible.

White privilege, for those of us who have it, can be hard to see. It's not a matter of racism or any overt attempt to marginalize another group. It is a set of assumptions that our experience is normative.

In *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, scholar Peggy McIntosh writes, "My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will.... Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative and average, and also ideal."

McIntosh took on a self-study of the daily effects of white privilege in her life. She made a list which Phil and I excerpted and included in the order of service today.

Here is a sampling. You are experiencing white privilege if you can answer, yes, to many, if not all of these questions.

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

I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.

I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.

I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it had racial overtones.

I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race.

Some of these examples are obvious, some far more subtle. The point is that people who are white in America, don't have to think about these questions in our daily lives if we don't want to.

The problems from white privilege arise not so much because privilege exists, but because it so often goes unexamined. McIntosh notes that nothing on the list is inherently bad. Many are things we'd want for all people. Items on the menu at the Welcome Table instead of our private power lunch. Others give us a tacit permission to ignore the experiences of others on the margin.

And I'm not suggesting that we should guiltily beat ourselves up. Yet examining and understanding the privilege in which we swim is an important first step.

Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry, offers this theological reflection in her essay *Not Somewhere Else But Here*. I quote her at some length.

"To earn our citizenship as Americans, whites need to deconstruct the effects on our self-understanding of theological imagery that sanctions innocence and ignorance as holy states. This theological imagery is strong. For centuries, theologians have told the story this way: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden were innocent of themselves and of the knowledge of good and evil. Within the safe confines of the garden, all was provided for them. They were to ask no questions and be obedient to the rules outlined by God. In this state of primordial bliss, Adam and Eve were compliant and dependent.... The two were without sin, living in harmony with God.

"This interpretation of the story sanctions innocence, ignorance and lack of self-consciousness. It teaches that a carefully contained life, walled in by a providential God who is never to be questioned, is a good life. In the insular garden, human beings are in right relationship with God.

"But temptation disrupted this primordial state of innocence. The serpent enticed Eve with the desire to taste the forbidden fruit and gain knowledge of good and evil. To gain knowledge, however, was to defy God – to go against the will of the divine provisioner. The consequence was a punishing exile. Adam and Eve were sent away from the garden, cast out from God's presence.

"The implication is that to know the world in its goodness *and* its evil and to know ourselves capable of both, is to lose God. To taste reality is to follow the devil. Such a theology is admirably suited to the preservation of compartmentalized, alienated states of mind. It blesses white privilege. It teaches those who have absorbed its message that goodness is aligned with innocence and ignorance.... Furthermore, it teaches that a social structure in which one is abundantly provided for is not to be questioned. Abundant provision is a gift of God. This image comforts whites who thrive on current economic structures. It teaches us to accept privilege and never ask at what cost the walled-in garden is maintained."

Parker goes on to offer a different way of looking at the story of the garden. She says, "A different theology begins with the sanctification of knowledge and wisdom rather than the blessing of innocence and ignorance. The serpent can be re-imagined as a representation of a God who calls us beyond the circumscribed comforts of the garden. To long to know, to reach for wisdom, to taste and see the bitterness as well as the sweetness, to come to know good

and evil – these movements can be embraced as movements of God’s leading. Leaving the garden, we leave the God who rules by reward and punishment, who offers security and comfort at the price of compliance to divine orders. We become sojourners in the world, accompanied by the divine serpent who moves in the earth, sheds old skins, grows new ones as needed, slumbers long, and wakes to strike quickly.”

I like that one so much better. I have always thought that, given Eve’s choice, I’d take that fruit and take the biggest bite my jaws could fit. Life in the garden sounded so tedious. I’ve always been grateful to Eve. Grateful that I have the knowledge of good and evil, life and death. It makes life worth living. More beautiful and more painful.

In our tradition, we do find the Holy in seeking wisdom over ignorance. We want to know. Such knowledge can be so inspiring. It can also be harrowing. It can require of us a hard look at ourselves. It can require that we acknowledge our capacity for evil as well as good. If it means wisdom means knowing all of that, I still want it – passionately – even as it frightens me.

Yet it is my fear that keeps me quiet. I find I carry a silent shame. For I know that I am well a well-meaning person. I would never intentionally harm anyone. And yet I know I have. As Alice Walker puts it,

Love is not concerned with whom or how I pray, love is only concerned that the beating of my heart should kill no one. It is a horrific thought that, simply by living and breathing an unexamined life of privilege, I might be causing harm to someone else. Someone I do not even see because they are not at the table with me.

The knowledge I seek is not always pretty. I want to think of myself as a blameless white person, a recipient perhaps of privilege, but because it is a privilege I did not seek, I remain innocent. That’s just not entirely true.

To the extent that I see ignorance and innocence as holy is the extent to which I participate in a damaged world – a compartmentalized, alienating world which binds me to silence, just as it binds others to discrimination and prejudice

This understanding is the wisdom I need to begin my own healing and journey toward wholeness.

The state of our souls is at risk if we don’t do the work of being whole people, breaking down the walls of that false garden. That means acknowledging the deep and powerful goodness at our core, but it also means looking deeply at what Jung called the Shadow. Those dark and unknown places within ourselves which scare us. Which we prefer to be ignorant of because we fear they are not very pretty. The knowledge that we are capable of evil – that the simple beating of our hearts can do harm – is frightening indeed.

Yet our journey is not complete if we live in ignorance, if we do not embrace the whole – both gifts of the serpent-god’s fruit.

It takes courage. It takes risking vulnerability. It takes seeing that sense of privilege in the mundane things of life, as Phil did in his annoyance at buying stamps in Spanish. It takes the courage to share it out loud in public, as Phil did.

Listen again to the words of Tupak Shakur

Please wake me when I am free
I cannot bear captivity
4 I would rather be stricken blind
than 2 live without expression of mind.

White privilege keeps us in captivity. Keeps us in a wall-garden. Keeps us from experiencing the fullness of our humanity. Shakur sees his freedom circumscribed by poverty. As white people in America, we are trapped by privilege. Our work begins when we see the pain of privilege. There is much more to do, but that is where we must start.

Wholeness and Holiness demands that we acknowledge and embrace the fullness of our experience. As the high school poet from North Carolina instructs us:

Let's do something.
Forget stereotypes,
Lose our words to internal thought.
I am not saying we're going to move the world
But we can provoke a shift in our minds,
Moving away from ignorance, discrimination
And the belief that
We understand without experiencing.

We cannot fully understand privilege, racism and oppression without experience. Without experiencing the world as broken. Without knowing that we helped break it. Yet we can also acknowledge that we suffer from that brokenness. We can begin to heal our own pain, the first step toward healing the world. A place to start is with the questionnaire in your order of service. Consider your answers and their implications. Be gentle and honest with yourself.

Opening the Welcome Table is not simply about inviting others to sit with us. It means changing where and how we sit at the table itself. It may mean shedding a skin or two, transforming our own experience of captivity and freedom. Defining them anew.

For ultimately this is a journey toward freedom for us all. Let us break out of our walled, protected garden. Let us find a new place and set up our table there. Welcoming ourselves and others into a new life, a life that embraces the fullness of human experience and thereby heals a broken world.

Amen.
May it be so.