

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
June 7, 2020; Trinity Sunday, Year A

GOSPEL READING

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

SERMON

Privilege

Rev. Martin McGeachy

I have a confession. I don't know how to spell the word "privilege." It's one of those words, we all have them, that I have to think about when I'm writing it, and still usually get it wrong. It's confounded me since junior high school. The second "i" and the "e" like to jump around in whimsical abandon when I'm typing it. Or as Winnie-the-Pooh says, "My spelling is Wobbly. It's good spelling but it Wobbles, and the letters get in the wrong places" (Milne, A.A. Winnie-the-Pooh. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., p.81). Luckily for me, the operating system on my computer has a spell-check which takes care of that for me, and can auto-correct, so I don't have to worry about it. It occurred to me this week how incredibly ironic it was that I don't have to think about privilege because I have a system that will take care of it for me. Maybe if I were unemployed because I wasn't given the same opportunities, or if because of corrupt lending and mortgage practices I had to live in low-income housing where jobs weren't available, I wouldn't be able to afford a computer. Then I'd think about my lack of "privilege." (The word, I mean—how to spell it.)

I'm keenly aware of my privilege, even if I can't spell it. I'm white, I'm male, I'm economically secure—twenty years ago, in Little Rock, I attended a town hall on, ironically, diversity, and a female friend of mine who worked for City Hall (and by the way, she had a Master's Degree in cultural diversity and political science) was the moderator. The attendees were restless and uncomfortable as she spoke, and at one point her immediate supervisor, a white man, raised his hand to make a point, and there was a visceral shift in body language and rapt attention as all eyes turned around to listen to The Man. Privilege.

You should know what your minister is up to, and I'm pleased to report that I attended two peaceful but vocal protest rallies for Racial Equality this week, and spoke as your pastor at one of them. They were small—this is Carmel—but passionate. And not just from those gathered in support of Black Lives. At one of them, an angry man driving by on the street was so incensed by our presence that he screamed at us, drove down the road, turned around and came back to shout again, "White lives matter, too!"

Screamed it. There were those in the crowd who screamed back, and I understand that anger—how dare you scream at us, we want to scream! But when I heard his scream, first I felt a jolt of fear, and anger, and then I heard the pain in that voice. This is a person who fears that addressing privilege, acknowledging systems of racism and bias, valuing Black lives, will devalue his life. If it's not the original sin, it's the original fear, from the dawn of humanity when Cain was afraid that his own blessings were in danger because of Abel's, and killed him rather than share the blessing of God. I don't excuse such ignorant hatred, nor I hope, my own when it erupts from time to time, but I want to feel its pain, because lumping that man into a category of racist redneck ignores his fear and pain, devalues him, and devalues me, elevating my own fear and pain. That's not how to build a new system, the city of God. Ours is a kingdom of true equality, where all are welcome despite our sinfulness, where we love even our enemies, and we won't get there any other way than by reaching out with love and grace to those ignorant, privileged sinners—which on some level is all of us.

I saw a meme this week on Facebook that reminded me that in Luke 15, Jesus tells the story of the shepherd with 100 sheep. One goes missing, and he leaves the 99 to go search for the one. Some of the 99 say, "Hey wait, what about us? Don't we matter?" Of course the 99 matter. But they're not the ones in danger. The one is.

Acknowledging privilege is not in order to feel guilty, but to feel grateful. And why does God want us to be filled with gratitude for all we have been given despite not having earned it? It's true, God wants our thanks and praise, and yes, God wants us to be happy, and indeed, grateful people are happier than those who spend their days meditating on all they lack rather than their abundance—but primarily, God knows that feeling grateful, privileged, is to feel compassion, empathy, sympathy, love for those who don't have what we do. Love your neighbor as yourself. If you have, share. If you have possessions, gold, share it in abundance. The letting go of it doesn't reduce your abundance; it increases it. I'm not saying if you tithe 10%, God will reward you with 12% interest on your investment portfolio next year. I'm saying you will become more prosperous. Sharing our physical gifts increases our spiritual and emotional abundance. Life is better when we share. And it's not just our stuff—it's our privilege, our status, our power. We're called to share all of it. We try to teach our toddlers that sharing their cupcakes won't leave them with less, but fill them with more. Too bad we adults still haven't figured that out.

Imagine that you're a blue-eyed kid in kindergarten surrounded by toys. A brown-eyed child comes up and says, "Wow, that looks like fun. Can I play?" "No," you say, "I want these for myself. I feel guilty for having all the toys when you've got so little, but what can I do?" Well, maybe I can share what I have, and together we can go to the teacher handing out the toys, maybe ask the other kids to come with us, and tell the teacher and the principal and the school board that it's wrong to give only to the blue-eyed children. But until we admit that we participate in and propagate the blue-eyed/brown-eyed system, we'll just replace those officials with others like them.

Jane Elliott was an elementary school teacher in an all-White Texas school in the 1960's, and when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, and one of her students asked her, "Why'd they shoot that King?" She devised an experiment in which she divided up the class into two groups, blue-eyed and brown eyed. I have no idea where I would have been. There's no info on a Hazel group. Ms. Elliott designated the blue-eyed as Superior, the browns as inferior. Listen to what happened:

On the first day of the exercise, she designated the blue-eyed children as the superior group. Elliott provided brown fabric collars and asked the blue-eyed students to wrap them around the necks of their brown-eyed peers as a method to easily identify the minority group. She gave the blue-eyed children extra privileges, such as second helpings at lunch, access to the new jungle gym, and five extra minutes at recess. The blue-eyed children sat in the front of the classroom, and the brown-eyed children were sent to sit in the back rows. The blue-eyed children were encouraged to play only with other blue-eyed children and to ignore those with brown eyes. Elliott would not allow brown-eyed and blue-eyed children to drink from the same water fountain and often chastised the brown-eyed students when they did not follow the exercise's rules or made mistakes. She often exemplified the differences between the two groups by singling out students and would use negative aspects of brown-eyed children to emphasize a point.

At first, there was resistance among the students in the minority group to the idea that blue-eyed children were better than brown-eyed children. To counter this, Elliott lied to the children by stating that [melanin](#) was linked to their higher intelligence and learning ability. Shortly thereafter, this initial resistance fell away. Those who were deemed "superior" became arrogant, bossy, and otherwise unpleasant to their "inferior" classmates. Their grades on simple tests were better, and they completed mathematical and reading tasks that had seemed outside their ability before. The "inferior" classmates also transformed – into timid and subservient children who scored more poorly on tests, and even during recess isolated themselves, including those who had previously been dominant in the class. These children's academic performance suffered, even with tasks that had been simple before.

The next Monday, Elliott reversed the exercise, making the brown-eyed children superior. While the brown-eyed children did taunt the blue-eyed children in ways similar to what had occurred the previous day, Elliott reports it was much less intense.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Elliott

Elliott and her test are controversial—messing with the minds of elementary kids—but don't miss the point of how incredibly easy it is to create a system of oppression that humans will buy into—in just a few days.

You might wonder what the topic of privilege has to do with our Scripture today. It's Trinity Sunday, in which we lift up the doctrine of our faith in God as the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It can sometimes be a difficult concept to explain, but today I really want to emphasize this: God is so vastly wonderful that we cannot in this world fully understand the Divine Nature. And the Trinity offers us three ways of seeing the Universal God made manifest, as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. There is no one way to see or understand what God is, or to experience God. If there are more

than seven billion people in the world, there are more than seven billion ways to see God, and Jesus teaches us that it is in reaching out to our neighbor that we experience God—so seven billion-plus opportunities to experience God. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19) ...the diversity of the Divine. Baptize; anoint with love seven billion different people, because they have a right, a privilege to share in God. And if some of the seven billion have greater privilege, greater access, change it. Isaiah 57:14 says, "Build up, build up, prepare the way, Remove every obstacle out of the way of My people."

I'm not preaching this morning to wrench privilege and advantage out of the hands of those who have it, but to open it up to those who don't. Don't feel guilty about what you have, share it. The best way to teach your child to learn empathy, and not take their privilege for granted, is to bring them to a homeless shelter to serve a meal, or collect for the Food Pantry, or help hand out items to those are hungry. Then they really see the need. You remember when our parents used to yell at us, "Clean your plate! There are children starving in Africa." That doesn't work. We have to be shown. We have to see a human face. Thankfully, Jesus the redeemer of the Trinity is that human face given to us to see God.

We're about to commune with one another and Jesus the Savior in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We were commanded by the Lord to remember him in this way, but not because he was in any way insecure about the status of his memory. He was saying to remember him, and in fact become one with him, in this symbol of his sacrifice. If we only take in the symbol, but never enact in our own lives his essence of sacrifice for our sisters and brothers, we've forgotten him, no matter how many times we participate in the sacred rite. So present yourself at the Table. And today, hear this:

If you don't believe you are privileged, while people outside are hungry, you don't deserve to come to the Table today and participate in the blood of Christ, poured out in sacrifice, the body of Christ, broken for the world. If you don't think "those people" deserve the same rights and grace as everyone else, you don't deserve to participate at Table today. You don't deserve it. If you wag your finger in judgement at who does or doesn't deserve to come to Communion, you don't deserve it. (It's so strange to preach to a phone camera, because my face is always watching me. And if I point my finger and say, "You," I'm pointing straight at me.) We don't deserve to come to the Table today. Not one of us. "There is no one righteous, not one." (Romans 3:10-12, Psalm 14:1-3, Psalm 53:1-3) No is good enough, or deserves the comfort of forgiveness for sin, the salvation of eternity, and the challenge that it brings, which is to share that sacrifice with all our sisters and brothers. But ALL are welcome. You, who are not worthy, who are undeserving, are welcome. And "them," too. That's the system of privilege that is Jesus Christ. That is grace.

Cain, the first murderer, the first man to despise his advantage for fear of losing it, wore the mark of pain for his sin throughout his life. But he was still welcomed by the God of grace, our Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, Forgiver. Cain was not cast out of the

Covenant. He took a wife and she bore children. And every one of us is descended from them. He, the one who in rage killed his brother; she, the unnamed foreigner; they, the ancestry of humanity, sinful and grace-filled. Privileged.

Amen.

P.S. Update on Monday. I just saw that I misspelled the very last word I typed in that sermon. I think I'll leave it and not rely on autocorrect.