

August 9, 2015  
 Luke 17:20 & 21  
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### The Kingdom of God

You would have to live a very solitary life today to not be aware of the issues of race in our country. So last month I spent some time talking about racism with The Rev. Joyce Whetstone, a retired United Methodist pastor. I've known Joyce for over 20 years and I was remembering some experiences we had shared – experiences that have helped me to understand the deep roots of racism better. We had a good conversation and she gave me permission to share these stories.

The first one goes back to 2001. We were attending a program in New Orleans that we hoped we might offer in New England one day on Family Systems. Joyce and I were together in a small group where we were sharing our genograms. A genogram is not the same as a genealogy though it begins with one's family tree. As Joyce shared she spoke of her grandmother who had been born into slavery and freed at age 8.

I was taken back at how close the experience of slavery was to Joyce. Her grandmother was born into slavery. I had been living in another world and had never considered that someone I knew might have known someone who experienced slavery. It was a sobering moment.

I recently read a book by Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow, in which she points out just how deep the roots of racism go in our country. To be honest, slavery is part of the foundation of our country as planters met the need for labor on their plantations by enslaving persons directly from Africa. This seemed optimal as they would not be able to speak the language and possibly connect with the poor white population in this country. To make certain there was no connection, the planters extended privileges to poor whites – privileges that would assure they were invested in the system of slavery.<sup>i</sup>

In fact our country's founding document defines slaves as three-fifths of a person... not a real, whole human being. Alexander notes that "upon this racist fiction rests the entire structure of American democracy."<sup>ii</sup> And this foundation held until after the Civil War at which time the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment nullified the 3/5ths rule as it eliminated slavery.

Yes, there were individuals who were against slavery, but the church in general did not stand against slavery. It's hard to imagine that we would consider slavery as part of a Christian Nation. But it was.

So here's another story.

Both Joyce and I were serving on the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry. We were attending an anti-racism workshop and the presenters had just finished explaining the practice of redlining where neighborhoods would be outlined in red identifying them as places where blacks and "undesirables" should not be sold homes. When they asked for comments and questions Joyce raised her hand. She started out: "Now I know what happened!" Then she shared a memory of when she was a little girl. She remembered her father driving past a house and telling the family that they were buying it. There was excitement as they looked around the new neighborhood. But they didn't get the house. She still remembers her father's disappointment. They found another house– in a neighborhood set aside for African-Americans. Now she understood that because of redlining her father was denied a loan. Joyce told me that in reflecting on this as an adult she realized her dad knew there had been discrimination, but there was no recourse.

We talk about the Jim Crow South and when my dad was transferred to Louisiana from Kansas in 1961 I saw firsthand the cruelty of segregation. I went to an all-white school, lived in an all-white neighborhood, and attended an all-white church. But as we drove to church I saw the dilapidated small shacks where the black population had to live, I saw their run-down school. When I went to the movies I'd catch a glimpse of black teenagers on the other side of the concession stand as they had entered through the alley and would be sitting in the balcony. They were separate, but never equal

and in New England – let’s face it - blacks were also separated. And though the laws have changed, segregation continues today throughout our country.

And the churches thought this was okay? Howard Thurman, a black theologian, wrote Jesus and the Disinherited in 1949. In it he writes ...“American Christianity has betrayed the religion of Jesus almost beyond redemption.” From there he goes on to point out that the church – the place “in which the relations of the individual to his [or her] God should take priority over conditions of class, race, power, status, wealth, or the like – is instead one of the chief instruments for guaranteeing barriers.”<sup>iii</sup> Where was the church in Jim Crow America?

The last story takes place with Joyce and me together at a conference. We had stopped by a drugstore to pick up a few things. I bought a card, and as I often do I told them I didn’t want a bag. Joyce and I were walking out to the car when she pointed to the card and said, “So you didn’t get a bag, hmm?” I thought she was commenting on “why?” so I explained to her that I was going to just tuck it in my purse, I refused a bag so we’ll have less plastic in the world. She looked at me and said she would NEVER refuse a bag. She continued, “If I leave a store without a bag I risk having someone running up to me asking me if I have a receipt. “ Joyce was adamant, carrying something out of a store without a bag was not a privilege that she had. I’d heard the term “white privilege” before, but now it hit home.

Especially this past year, over and over since Ferguson, I cannot ignore my white privilege and that of my family. I live in a world that does not fear the police, but believes they are here to protect me. My world is the same as the drunken man in Michigan who waved a loaded gun at police last year and they spent 40 minutes talking him down. They took his gun away and the next day he was able to pick it up at the police station. Contrast this to another world, one without privilege, the one where a 12-yr old black boy is in a playground with a toy gun in his belt and is shot dead when he reached for it.

Out of my white privilege I can critique what those of color should do, how they live. I can point out to them how great God’s blessings are, why don’t they just get a job, raise their kids right, buy a house and as they become more like me they’ll see God’s blessings too. But the truth is that I don’t know what it is like to have slavery in my family tree... I don’t know what it’s like to be denied the opportunity to buy a house wherever I would like and can afford, I don’t know what it’s like to live in a world where people assume I may be shoplifting, selling or using drugs, staying on welfare on purpose, too lazy to work... what I do know is that I have lived with white privilege long before it was named. As Peggy McIntosh notes “I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group.”<sup>iv</sup>

It was out of their white privilege that eight Alabama clergymen published an open letter to Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Birmingham newspaper in 1963. The eight included two Methodist Bishops. They called on King to cease the demonstrations and the marches and asked him to obey the laws of the land and to wait until a better time. They wrote from their place of privilege as laws protected them rather than oppressed, as they were able to freely move around and say what was on their mind while African Americans were being beaten and lynched for speaking the truth and seeking justice.

King wrote his now famous reply from the Birmingham Jail. You can easily find this letter online and it should be read by all. His letter includes an expression of his disappointment with the church. The church was not being the church. He wrote of a time when the church was very powerful – of a “time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed.”<sup>v</sup> He points out that early Christians brought about the end of infanticide and gladiatorial contests. But now, he added,” the church is an archdefender of the status quo.”

**...Which brings us to the scripture reading today. Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is among you.”**

And the early Christians believed him. They understood that God had already given them what they needed for the Kingdom of God to be with them. It was not up to God, it was up to them. It is not up to God, it is up to us. The early Christians glimpsed this vision as they came together, rich and poor, gentile and Jew, servant and master, Israelite, Galilean, Greek, Roman, Ethiopian. Some had to give up wealth, pride, or power to enter into community. Others had

to give up negative labels as they took their place and contributed to the community. And the church was powerful, not as a status quo, but as a community that was ready to “suffer for what they believed.”

What would it look like if we, the church in America today were to truly believe what Jesus said? If we were to believe that the Kingdom of God is among us?

*What would it look like if we were to believe that in the Kingdom of God we are called on to repair our racialized policing and criminal justice system?*

*If we were to believe that in the Kingdom of God we will not tolerate terrible schools anywhere and will work to see that all have the opportunity to receive a good education?*

*If we were to believe that in the Kingdom of God we will not tolerate a black unemployment rate that is 66% higher than the white unemployment rate?*

*If we were to believe that in the Kingdom of God we would not tolerate the fact that the median net worth of white households is 13 times higher than that of black households?*

*If we were to believe that in the Kingdom of God we would recognize and change the fact that three of every five black children live in low-income households?*

*If we were to believe that in the Kingdom of God we would recognize and change the fact that a cradle to prison pipeline has African Americans making up nearly 40 percent of the incarcerated population despite making up only 13 percent of the population?<sup>vi</sup>*

*If we were to believe that in the Kingdom of God all will be allowed to live in whatever community they choose and their neighbors will receive them peacefully rather than muttering about housing values?*

What would it look like if we were to believe that in the Kingdom of God we would recognize all as beloved children of God?

If we were to believe that in the Kingdom of God we participate in a larger community and how we live and what we cling to for ourselves will affect the lives of others?

What if we were to believe that in the Kingdom of God it is enough to be loved by God and we will rejoice at the opportunity to suffer so that others are not cast out or placed on the margins; that all can live fully human lives?

It is time for those of us who are white to take responsibility for the continuing racism in our country. I don't have answers, but there are ways for us to explore our questions and find the ways we can start to break down institutional racism. There are anti-racism trainings and there are books such as [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#). Because the United Methodist Church in New England has worked hard to diversify we have people of color within our conference with whom we can talk and who we can listen to, people who have experienced racism firsthand. We can acknowledge our white privilege – even start to list out those privileges in our lives that would not have happened if we had not been white.

At the end of King's letter from the Birmingham Jail he writes, “If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.”<sup>vii</sup>

How about now, in the twenty-first century? Will we enjoy time in an irrelevant social club, or will the church be the church? The Kingdom of God is among us. Let us make it so.

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<sup>i</sup> Michelle Alexander, [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Era of Colorblindness](#) (New York: The New Press, 2012).

<sup>ii</sup> Alexander 26.

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- <sup>iii</sup> Howard Thurman, ***Jesus and the Disinherited*** (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976) 88.
- <sup>iv</sup> Peggy McIntosh, ***White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack***. <http://www.turning-the-tide.org/node/403>
- <sup>v</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. ***Letter from the Birmingham Jail***, 16 April 1963 [www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.htm](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.htm)
- <sup>vi</sup> Jim Wallis, "***Charleston is Testing the Soul of America***" *Sojourner's Magazine* 26 June 2015 <https://sojo.net/articles/charleston-testing-soul-america> (all of the statements and statistics in the italicized section come from this article)
- <sup>vii</sup> King, Jr.