

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, January 31, 2016
Text: I Corinthians 13; Luke 4:21-30

The Conceit of Privilege



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Years ago I had the privilege of eating dinner at High Table at Oriel College at Oxford University. I have a friend who was the chaplain, and while I was leading a group of church members on a Wesleyan Heritage Tour, I left them to their own devices for the evening, put on my tuxedo, and took my place at the head table in the refectory. High Table is precisely that, a long table set a few steps above the dining hall floor, with all of us honored guests seated on one side as if it were the Last Supper, with the Dean in the “Jesus chair” at the midpoint. We looked out onto several very long tables with long benches on either side where the students ate.

I was seated next to a mathematics professor who was grumpy that he had to sit next to a Methodist minister from the States. I tried to make conversation, but what do you say to a mathematics professor? “How are logarithms holding up these days?” “Again, what is the difference between sines and cosines?” The person on the other side of me was in deep conversation to her right, so I sat uncustomarily quiet and enjoyed a wonderful dinner.

But we could not have been more than into our second course when I saw the students getting up from their tables and leaving. I risked turning to my math companion and asked, “Why are the students leaving so early?” He replied, “Because their food is distinctly inferior to ours.” Ah, the privilege of dining at High Table.

Once we finished the main course in now an almost empty dining hall, a butler-like man instructed us to stand and move to an adjoining room through a door to our left for dessert. But he gave very clear instructions: “Let us begin at the far right end of the table. Please make a 270-degree turn to your right, and thereby facing left, proceed in a single-file line to the dessert table.” So, we followed his instructions, and I heard him say with delight when the procedure got 2/3rds of the way down the table to me, “Oh, a perfect peel!”

We were allowed to be seated next to other people at the dessert table, a freedom my math professor companion immediately exercised, and there we sat with exquisite desserts, more wine, and a box of snuff being passed around the table. “Well, when in Oxford . . .”

Now, at least three hours into the evening, we were invited, no peel required, into yet another room for brandy and conversation. So, I stood there in the middle of the room while a philosophy professor luxuriated in the truths of Machiavelli. I simply stood and sipped and nodded, astounded, not by his devotion to Machiavelli, but by his unconscious feat of somehow suctioning his brandy glass to his chin. He was standing there talking to me, gesturing with both hands, with a glass attached to his chin. A graduate student stood with us, oblivious to the glass chin, offering his own philosophical opinions, which I had trouble listening to because I looked down and saw that he was wearing only one shoe. Sometime in the evening he had thrown a shoe.

Oh, the peculiarities of privilege . . . the conceit of privilege . . . and my dinner companion’s matter-of-fact observation, “Their food is distinctly inferior to ours.”

A sense of privilege for people like ourselves, our “own kind,” that is a “given” in the human spirit; tribalism is nothing new, simply look at the history of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. It is a form of conceit, and it comes in many forms. “White privilege” . . . that will be one of the themes of our Lenten study this year, five Wednesday nights starting on February 17th. A basic text will be Jim Wallis’s new book, America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America. He confesses that the title is unsettling and maybe for some, provocative, but by calling our historical racism against America’s indigenous people and enslaved Africans upon which this country was founded what it is, “sin,” and that it still lingers, we might be able to deal with it more deeply, honestly, and spiritually, and move together toward real solutions.

So, there is white privilege. There also is male privilege, wealth privilege, power privilege, education privilege (competition by degrees), stature privilege (if you are taller you are more likely to get the job or be elected to office), celebrity privilege, geographical privilege (the conceit of American exceptionalism), cultural privilege (there are a lot of Polish jokes but not many Germanic jokes), accent privilege. It was lost on my Midwestern ears, but the opening scene in the film, “Chariots of Fire,” the biographical treatment of Eric Liddell, born in China to Scottish parents, attending Cambridge, winning the sprints in the 1924 Olympics, dying as a Christian missionary in Japanese-controlled China during World War II, the opening scene shows the new students arriving at their residential college. The accents of each one betrays their upbringing and immediately sets up a pecking order among them, Liddell’s broad Scottish accent being one of the most damning. The conceit of privilege.

Nothing new, hard-wired into the human spirit, but it mutates quickly into sin. That is what Jesus finds out when he comments on the passage he just has read in the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown, the vision from Isaiah about the time when God will make everything right for God’s people. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.” Jesus rolls up the scroll and tells his neighbors, “I am here to make this happen.”

And the people are ecstatic. “Is not this Joseph’s son, that kid who helped at the carpentry shop and played in the streets with our children? Now he is a prophet, one from our own town, and he will make us famous, and he will make us rich, and he will make us well, working his wonders right here for us.”

Then Jesus spoils it all by telling them the truth. He does it by reminding them of God's initiative in the past. There were many widows in Israel suffering from a terrible famine, but God sent the prophet Elijah to Zarephath, a town north of the border beyond the tribal boundaries, the home of Queen Jezebel, a center of Baal worship, to rescue an alien widow and revive her dead son. And when Elijah was followed by the prophet Elisha, God sent him to Syria to cure the leprous commander of the rival army there, Naaman, instead of tending to all of the lepers among his own people.

What? Jesus is not going to favor his hometown? He is not going to promote their causes, heal their illnesses, and make them a tourist attraction by having people flock to Nazareth from all over to hear his wisdom? The adoring crowd in the synagogue turns on him and drags him to a ridge outside of town with the intent of hurling him to his death, but, Luke says, he walks away, to die another day in another way. The good news is bad news to those who think they are privileged.

Who are God's chosen people? The children of Abraham? Yes, but not exclusively. You cannot mean the Syrians and Phoenicians and Egyptians and the Romans, can you? You cannot mean the Iranians and the Turks and the Iraqis and the Russians and the Chinese and . . . and . . . , can you? You cannot mean the Catholics and the Lutherans and the Presbyterians and the Assembly of God and the Schwenckfelders and the Baptists and the African Methodist Episcopalians and all of the none-of-the-aboves, can you? You cannot mean the Jews and the Muslims and the Hindus and the Buddhists and the Sikhs and the Shintoists and the Zoroastrians, can you? You cannot mean Republicans and Democrats, can you?

"Yes," says Jesus, as if there were a sign over the entrance to the synagogue proclaiming, "All Means All." "God's chosen people include the entire human race."

"Race" as a designation of union, not separation, the entire human race, a way of saying that we are all in this together, and none are more privileged than others. I wrote on Thursday to Russ Tuttle and said, "I need help with my sermon for Sunday. Do I remember correctly you saying that 'race' is a social construct and not a genetically verifiable distinction?" Russ is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Chicago. His "magnus opus" was published in 2014, Apes and Human Evolution, 1056 pages long. I have not read it, but I did discover that he thanked me on page xii of the Preface for previewing a few pages that he wrote on belief in God.

He immediately responded, "Yes, indeed!" and appended a 12-page syllabus for a course he is teaching right now in which he studies how the concept "race" has been used to retard social progress and to exterminate and exploit some populations and individuals. God does not honor the distinctions we make, and Jesus calls us to let go of them if we want to live life fully.

Jamil Khoury is a beloved friend who is a playwright and the Artistic Director of the Silk Road Rising theater that the First United Methodist Church at the Chicago Temple helped to start. For the past twelve years they have presented edgy plays written by people from the historic Silk Road . . . Italy to the Middle East to India to Asia . . . , plays written by people about themselves rather than the rest of us writing plays about them. It is worth checking out their website to watch Jamil's essay entitled, "Not Quite White." He refers to himself as a WASP, not a White Anglo Saxon Protestant, but a White Arab Slovak Pole.

The world is becoming more complex, and the categories we have used to label people have been revealed to show our inherent prejudice. The conceit of privilege is reflected in our public documents where we force people to register according to "race." When the son of a Kenyan father and an Irish mother marries the daughter of a Korean mother and a Chilean father, what box do they check on their public school application for their child?

What can lead us forward into a new understanding that Jesus embodied? The apostle Paul said, "Love." Most of us have heard the glowing tribute to love in I Corinthians 13, often in the context of a wedding. Love is patient and kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. It sounds so gentle and polite.

But whatever Paul was, he never was gentle or polite. He is not writing to a bride and groom on their wedding day, but to the contentious Christians in Corinth. He is insisting that, no matter what privilege you assume because of your own gifts, it means nothing unless the gifts are offered in love. If you are a powerful orator, you are nothing but noise unless you use that power in the service of God's love. If you are brilliant, your intelligence is useless, or maybe even dangerous, unless you employ it for love's purposes. If you are devout and spiritual but cannot offer your religious sensibilities to the common good, you are irrelevant.

No, it is love that makes us relevant to the world, useful to God's purposes among all people, not just "our own people." And what kind of love is this? Notice that Paul does not describe love as a feeling we have, but as a choice we make. We do not feel patience; we choose in a particular situation to be patient, or not. We do not feel kindness; we choose to treat another person kindly, or not. And so it goes through the whole list: avoid choosing to be envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, insistent, irritable, resentful, or delighting in someone else's failures. Instead, choose to love, writes Paul to the community of faith, and you will mature beyond childishness to full humanity.

This past week as I drove from Whitewater to Madison I listened to the CDs of John Dominic Crossan's presentation here at First Church a few years ago as part of the Lyons Lecture Series. What a relief from listening to the

“outrage-for-profit” tripe that dominates the radio stations these days. Crossan is insistent that love and justice are inextricably joined together. Justice without love is brutality; love without justice is banality. It is such just love, such loving justice, that can turn us around. Remember that to “repent” simply means to “turn around,” to face in a new direction. Love can turn us toward each other. Our privilege can be eroded by God’s purpose, for which Walter Brueggemann earnestly prays.

A poem by one whom I quote often, Brian Wren, whom we know primarily through his hymns; it is called “Listening,” written from his perspective as a white man:

White people need to listen

to people of color.

Don’t say, “I’m listening.”

People of color will tell us
when we’re listening.

Men need to listen to women,

not just say, “I’m listening.”

Women will tell us
when we’re listening.

Adults need to listen to children,

“ablebodied” to “persons with disabilities.”

They cannot always tell us

if we’re listening:
all the more reason, then,
to listen, listen,
and more than listen.

Suburb, Main Line, and First World people

need to listen, and more than listen,

to Inner City, Side-lined, and Third World people.

All of us need to listen,

and more than listen,

but “Ablebodied,” Main Line, First World White *men*

need the biggest ears,
because we have to listen to everyone.

(P.S. Dumbo had big ears

and learned to fly.) June, 1988.

For all of us who have big ears to hear, let us hear one another. For all of us with big hearts to love, let us love one another. The future of the world depends on it. Amen.