

5th Sunday of Lent
March 17 & 18, 2018

Kevin Frank
All Saints Parish, Syr. NY

Reflection on White Privilege

Lori Lakin Hutcherson wrote an article in response to, and I quote, “What I told my white friend when he asked for my black opinion on white privilege.” (Everydayfeminism.com / August 25th, 2016)

In the article she shares her personal experiences of white privilege at different ages. Here’s one of her many examples, “When my older sister was five, a white boy named Mark called her the “N-word” after she beat him in a race at school. She didn’t know what it meant but in her gut, she knew it was bad. This was the first time I’d seen my father the kind of angry that has nowhere to go. I somehow understood it was because not only had some boy verbally assaulted his daughter and had gotten away with it, but also because it had way too early introduced her and me to that term and the reality of what it meant – that some white people would be cruel and careless with black people’s feelings just because of our skin color - or our achievement. If it’s unclear in any way, the point here is if you’ve never had a defining moment in your childhood or your life, where you realize your skin color alone makes other people hate you, you have white privilege.”

According to Jim Wallis in his book *America’s Original Sin, Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America*, “Racism is America’s original sin and must be named as such.”

Audre Lorde, a revolutionary black feminist, defines racism as the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance. Inherent in this definition is both a belief and a power dynamic, and because the power dynamic has not changed, reverse racism is really not possible.

White privilege is commonly understood as the ways white people benefit from institutionalized racism and discrimination.

Audre Lorde continues, “Certainly there are very real differences between us of race ... But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.”

It’s in this context that I want to talk about White Privilege – as our refusal (as white people) to recognize the very real differences between us on race and to examine the distortions and injustices, which result from our misnaming them.

White privilege is our systemic reality! Systemically, we’ve made it a part of the air we breathe and the water we drink! Said a little ocean fish to an older ocean fish, “Can you tell me where to find this thing they call the ocean?” We too swim in the currents and tide of white privilege and it’s so commonplace, we don’t even see it.

A 1963 letter from eight prominent white clergymen in Alabama told black protesters to stand down and not march under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in protests because he was an outsider and they were inciting “hatred and violence”.

Dr. King responded with his famous letter from a Birmingham Jail where he powerfully proclaimed, and I paraphrase: We are not inciting hatred and violence – on the contrary, we are recipients of it on a daily basis. We choose to non-violently march to simply reveal and bring to light the hatred and

violence that is always and already there. Next week we celebrate Palm Sunday and it's with this same spirit that Jesus, non-violently and courageously marches into Jerusalem to reveal the systemic injustice within the Roman occupation there and bring to light the hatred and violence that is always and already there.

Racism and white privilege are always there – but we don't see it – we have our heads stuck in the sand. Having our heads in the sand, leaves our butts in the air! And if you get enough butts in the air, it really begins to stink.

Why don't we white people see our white privilege Why and how do we miss it?

Let me offer two (of many) reasons I believe we miss it.

First of all, on Sunday, November 17th 2014 the headline in the Syracuse Newspaper read, "Syracuse and Onondaga County suffer from hyper-segregation and an architecture of segregation." In the article, they outlined causes, including, white flight to the suburbs and specific governance policies. The point that jumped out to me in reading the article is that our hyper-segregation and architecture of segregation is not by chance but systemically produced by our human choices and decisions.

I can remember visiting St. Augustine's, a well known African American Church in Washington DC and the African American pastor proclaimed to all of us from the pulpit that if each one of us don't have a friend who is a different color than us, "Shame on you!"

The second reason I believe white people miss white privilege and racism is because these realities are very painfully engraved both within us and within our society as a whole. Some common responses to our pain are to deny it, run away from it and avoid it at all cost. Like in the book and movie, Harry Potter, we want to imagine that we can use our invisibility cloaks to magically have racism and whiter privilege disappear. And yet our denial, fleeing and avoiding doesn't make these hard and harsh realities go away, on the contrary, they increase them. White people need to be talking about and educating ourselves about racism and white privilege and not expecting our brothers and sisters of color to do this work for us.

So follow me through some very important quotes and statistics.

Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative says, "We imprison people of color at record levels by making up new crimes, which are disproportionately enforced against those who are black or brown."

During my four years at Cornell University and being privy to the social and party scene of students, which included underage drinking and drug use, not once do I remember seeing a police arrest on campus. In our ministry at the Brady Faith Center on the Southside of Syracuse, hardly a day goes by that we don't witness both a heavy policing presence and arrests.

Bryan continues, "We have a system of justice in this country that treats you much better if you are rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent. Wealth, not culpability shapes outcomes and yet we seem to be very comfortable."

The % of white person going to prison in their lifetime: 4-11 %

The % of people of color going to prison in their lifetime: 44-50%

The % of people in white people in prisons: 11%
The % of people of color in prisons: 88%

Causing Michelle Alexander, author of [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#) to say, "We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it." Right here in Onondaga County, African Americans make up less than 10% of our population but 56% of the adults sentenced to jail.

Growing up in DeWitt, I didn't know one person impacted by incarceration - I'm sure there were people, I just didn't know anyone. On the southside of the city, I don't know anyone who isn't impacted, either personally, or through a family member, by incarceration.

Whites are 78% more likely to be admitted into a University because of race.
People of color with the exact same grades have only a 22% chance of admittance.

A white man with a criminal record is 5% more likely to get a job over a man of color with a clean record.

82-91% of homicides are intra-racial, (meaning white on white or black on black ...) but major news outlets focus on inter-racial homicides more than 60% percent of the time. This percentage jumps up to 75% if it's a black male killing a white woman.

So here's what I don't believe white people can say: I don't believe we can say, "We're color-blind, and we don't see the color on a person's skin."

If we don't see race, we probably don't see racism and we are most likely in denial about white privilege.

As stated on J-popsicles tumblr. - "White privilege is the privilege to be ignorant of the world around us."

Bishop Costello and Father Fahey both tell the story of daily dinners with Father Brady at their home on West Onondaga St. and how often he would come to the table angry over an injustice rendered to an African American! They even had a symbol, the sign of the cross, that they would secretly sign to everyone in preparation because Father Brady's passion, anger and foul language were about to blow into the room like a mini tornado!

One such evening, Father Brady began to share his anger about an African American family that had a very negative encounter with the police. Father Dan Lawler, Director of Catholic Charities, chimed in by saying, "Now, we all know this is a complex issue!" Father Brady banged his fist on the table and yelled, "Dan, if the Lawler family had been shit on all their lives it wouldn't be a complex issue." Then he apologized by saying, "I'm sorry, I know I just lost my membership in the Holy Name Society," only to start all over again with the yelling and swearing.

A Franciscan priest, Rohr Rohr says, "If we do not **transform** our pain, we **will** most assuredly **transmit** it."

I believe that we can say the same thing about white privilege: If we do not **transform** our white privilege, we **will** most assuredly **transmit** it.

Or as we read in today's Gospel and inserting white privilege into it:

If you love your white privilege, you will stay in denial, becoming the blind leading the blind, and increasing injustice and oppression in this world and thereby losing your life.

But if you begin to die to your white privilege, recognizing the differences and distortions around race and choosing to act according to the Gospel values of Justice, Inclusion Compassion and Kinship, then you will keep your life and it will rise up to eternal life.

Then, as proclaimed in Amos 5:4, "We will let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

Then, as proclaimed in Isaiah 40:31, "We will be like those who hope in the LORD - we will renew our strength. We will soar on wings like eagles; we will run and not grow weary, we will walk and not be faint."

I close with the words from the authors of "Healing from Toxic Whiteness" an online training program for white people committed to racial justice.

"We need to shift the question, "Am I a racist?" to "What can I do towards undoing the racism I was raised with and have internalized?" We'd all love it if we could jump from being raised in a deeply racist society to becoming completely anti-racist. It doesn't work that way. The desire not to be racist is not enough, by itself, to stop someone from being racist. By becoming conscious of your own conditioning, you will be able to choose whether or not to continue to do as you've been taught, or to act in accordance with your values of justice and humanity.