

Pulpit Exchange: 4/9/16
Ohavi Zedek Synagogue
"The Open Sore of Race and Privilege"
Pastor Sally May

Leviticus 13:47-59⁺

“And should a garment have in it a scaly affliction, whether in a wool garment or a linen garment, whether in the warp or in the woof of the linen or the wool, or in a skin or anything made of skin, and the affliction be greenish or reddish in the garment or in the skin or in the warp or in the woof or in any article of skin, it is the scaly affliction, and it shall be shown to the priest. And the priest shall see the affliction and sequester the article with the affliction seven days, And if he sees the affliction on the seventh day, that the affliction has spread through the garment or through the warp or through the woof or through the skin for anything that the skin may serve for a task, the affliction is malignant scale disease. It is unclean. And the garment or the warp or the woof in wool or in linen or in any article of skin in which the affliction it shall be burned, for it is malignant scale disease. It shall be burned in fire. And if the priest sees and, look, the affliction has not spread through the garment or through the warp or through the woof or through any article of the skin, the priest shall charge, and they shall launder that in which the affliction was and sequester it another seven days. And the priest shall see after the article with the affliction has been laundered, and, look, if the affliction has not changed color and the affliction has not spread, it is unclean. In fire you shall burn it. It is corrosion, whether on its inner side or its outer side. And if the priest sees, and, look, the affliction has become faded after being laundered, he shall tear it from the garment or from the skin or from the warp or from the woof. And if it shall still appear in the garment or in the warp or in the woof or in any article of skin, it is eruptive. In fire you shall burn it – that in which the affliction is. And the garment or the warp or the woof or any article of skin that you launder and from which the affliction disappears shall be laundered again and be clean. This is the teaching about the scaly affliction of a wool or linen garment or warp or woof or any article of skin, to declare it clean or unclean.”

⁺Alter, Robert, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc, 1984, p 596-598.

“The Open Sore of Race and Privilege” (Leviticus 13:47-59⁺)

Before I begin I have a confession. When Rabbi Amy and I first met to talk about how we might offer a pulpit exchange with our two congregations I shared that I thought it would be a great idea to use the equivalent of the Christian lectionary in the Jewish tradition to decide the scripture on which we could both offer a sermon, our understandings of the text, as it might be relevant to us today. (I need to explain that the Christian lectionary is on a three-year schedule using both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and while I hesitate to say it goes all over the place it goes all over the place. And there are many texts in the Common Lectionary that simply are never shared. Leviticus is one of those texts.) Then, Rabbi Amy shared with me what the Jewish “lectionary-equivalent” would be: Leviticus 13, with the focal text of verses 47-59. I have to admit my initial reaction was to tell Rabbi Amy how very sorry I was to suggest what I suggested but this text would be outside the comfort zone of many in my congregation, it was outside my comfort zone and beyond my understanding, and there were few to no Christian resources in terms of commentaries or sermons to help. Then we met to discuss the text and she offered wonderful insight, wisdom, and relevancy that I now can see and understand. Thank you!

This particular text is embedded in other texts that speak to how to cure an individual of life-threatening and contagious diseases. As Rabbi Amy taught me, these scriptures describe perhaps the world’s first public health system. Our ancestors recognized the need for separating people who harbored disease so as not to infect others. And Jewish commentators, again a gift of resource given to me by Rabbi Amy, offer tremendous vision in seeing and recognizing these scriptures not only literally – diseases of the skin - but figuratively: individual disease of body, mind, and soul, and how they have tremendous influence on the health of the society in which the person lives. That the concern is about skin diseases reminds me of the quote “having your skin in the game.” If we are involved in life with our life our

skins are necessarily involved in the game, and our skin can be either blessing or malignancy in our families, communities, nation, and/or world.

It is in the understanding that this text surpasses my understanding and goes beyond the literal that I can say “Aha!” For example, if we think about the public health issues we have today – poverty, homelessness, livable wages, clean water, safe housing, addiction epidemics, desecration of God’s creating earth.... there are many infectious and malignant skin diseases in America for which we, the people, are responsible for spreading.

For me, today’s focal text – verses 47-59 - takes all of it a step further. The law of Leviticus addresses the threat of clothing as infecting the community. What we wear can be contagious, malignant. And.... that threat can be so difficult to recognize, so deep in the fabric, in the warp and in the wolf, that without careful, faithful observation, exploration of the threads of the fabric, it can go undetected. Really, who would think that garments, or things we wear, the ways in which we choose to be seen and visually understood could be contagious or malignant?

It reminds me of a personal experience as a mom. The experience made me queasy then and it makes me queasy now when I think about it. My son received a Christmas gift from a family member that was a stuffed giraffe when he was a young boy. He loved this giraffe. He slept with it close to him every night. Two to three weeks after Christmas I noticed he had an area on his wrist that looked strange and felt strange. The next day there was a palpable red streak that went up his arm, and the next day it went further. I made an appointment with his doctor, and then I poured hydrogen peroxide on the area. That following morning the red streaks were gone and the original area looked different, darker. I took him to the pediatrician who believed that this had been a parasite that had gotten under my son’s skin. The only thing we could think of is that this beloved stuffed giraffe had harbored the parasite. This experience speaks to me how clothing, objects, can infect us without our knowing. This happened @ 20 years ago yet I vividly remember. In the context of what I share today I offer that too often we fail to see, what we should see about ourselves and our lives, and as a result we risk public health, the common good, when we cannot, do not recognize the threat of malignancy and contagion in how we present ourselves or what we offer to one another and the world.

In particular, I am talking about the disease of racism and white privilege. This is a very personal and emotional malignancy for me. The term “white privilege” is a barrier for many yet I cannot think of a better or more accurate term. It is a difficult subject for many. Yet, it is too important to all who are infected and to the public health of this country to not talk about it.

In the early summer of 2013 my two oldest children shared stories about growing up in rural Vermont as non-white children. I first found my voice by way of a sermon in my home church later that summer because of my angst, my distress, my disbelief, my pain, my anger, my mourning as a result of my children’s life stories up to that point in time *and* the verdict of acquittal of George Zimmerman of the murder of Trayvon Martin.

And since then there are so many more names; so many more black and brown people, human beings, children of God, who are dead: Tamir Rice, Damo Franklin, Eric Gardner, Michael Brown, John Crawford, Rekia Boyd, on and on and on. I shared a version of the original sermon at FCCB, UCC, last summer and now there are more names..... Walter Scott, Yvette Smith, Freddie Gray, Eric Harris, Sandra Bland, Gynnya McMillen, and on and on and on..... I share anew what is so very old.....

When Trayvon Martin was murdered Barack Obama shared that 35 years ago it could have been him. Well, both then and now it could be my sons and my daughter. In fact, my daughter, as a result of her activism to care about black lives, has received in the last couple of weeks death threats from many including members of the Fraternal Order of Police in Chicago. It is a feared reality for too many, too many Americans, too many human beings.

Honestly though, it was a course in seminary and two particular assignments back @2012 that opened my eyes to ‘white privilege’ in this country. For the first time I recognized the privilege I grew up and lived my life with simply and only because of the color of my skin. Because of this privilege I had failed to recognize the systemic restrictions to access of equality, freedom, inclusivity, and respect.

Yet, beyond my book learning, it was my adult children sharing their life experiences as children born and raised by a white mother and black father in Vermont I had no idea....

And these were people I lived with – people I love more than anything in this world, my flesh and blood and I did not see, had not seen, the effects of systems rooted in white privilege in their lives.... Now it was not only my intellect that was informed; my emotional, my physical – and yes, my spiritual cores were shaken and awakened. It should not have taken a 3 credit seminary course or such an opening of old wounds by my children to open my eyes – but it did. As difficult as it has been, I am grateful that now I see.

I share with you a sampling of my children’s experiences that they have freely offered and allowed me to share with you. I must preface that their experiences are not unique for people of color. What they experienced has been, is experienced by people of color throughout the nation and in Vermont all the time. 1. They were presumed to be good at sports. 2. Their hair. Everyone touched it, talked about it. 3. When race was discussed in class everyone looked at them. 5. Lack of education in history other than history of white people. 6. Lack of role models – and assumptions of who role models were. 7. Being told by white people that personally they liked them but they didn’t believe in white people dating black people. Assumptions about black on black dating and marriage. 8. Other children insisted that they must be adopted. 9. New teachers were visibly surprised when they provided a thoughtful, intelligent response or comment. 10. Lack of access to products – make-up, bandages, panty hose, haircuts. 11. Black on the outside, white on the inside. They were compared to Oreos. And there was comparison among white students of the skin tone of students of color; who was more black, who was lighter. 12. Being told they were going to be lynched as a joke. 13. Too often they were not asked “Who are you?”, but rather “What are you?” This is in the 2000’s, the 21st century...

How did I not know about these things, and those that I did – the hair, the lack of availability of products – how did I not see the pain it caused? How can that be? How do we not see or hear or recognize racism? How do people see another human being as somehow so different that they may be perceived, understood, and treated so differently, so badly solely because of their appearance?

If we are to honestly tackle the racism that does exist in this country, in our state, in our cities and towns –we, the white population must recognize our role and work for change.

I admit that this is a shift in perception, and a shift in responsibility.

In the Christian tradition, I draw on the way in which Jesus frequently taught – parables. Jesus’ teaching in parables was centered in the idea that if we could understand our life and relationships in a different way, then we would be transformed to live in a different way.

For most of us, racism has been and continues to be perceived as isolated events. It is a personal act of overt discrimination and even hatred carried out by a person (or group of people) towards non-white people – a disease of the skin. But I tell you it is not always overt – it goes beyond the skin, to the personal, the visceral. Like the threat of disease in our clothing that is invisible to the naked eye, we, too, often don’t recognize it when it happens, when and where it exists. It is because we live in a society/culture rooted in systems that perpetuate structural racism. Page, my daughter, said it so well when she shared that “it’s the structural racism built into economics, discourse, culture, media, et cetera.” These systems allow racism to be acceptable and invisible to the victims. Page also shared she didn’t recognize what was happening until she grew up and then left. That was when she realized the internalization of so much “stuff” was because of the way she had been perceived and treated by others. She shared how interpersonal racism hits particularly hard because it exists in the midst of people you care about and presumably they care about you. How did that happen? How does it happen? It is in the warp and in the woof.

If we are to be honest we must look at the history of this country and the way in which we have treated people who are not white. White privilege is inherited and it is inextricably linked to the dehumanization of non-whites centuries ago with the arrival of white people on this great land. And then slavery was authorized and legitimized. The 13th Amendment allowed states to count Africans and then African Americans as 3/5’s of a whole person, 3/5’s of a human being. This identity separated white people, including poor white people, a political move, from people of color, and because the white people had the power and control, systems and institutions were created that reflected, promoted and supported an exclusively white culture. The threads that have been woven, the warp and the woof, to create the fabric, the

cloth of our American society are diseased and contagious, and we, those with the human privilege of having white skin unknowingly wear this contaminated cloth.

While progress towards inclusivity and equality has been made, we cannot deny that to this point the abundance one acquires in the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness in America has more often been determined by the acceptance of white people than by the grace of God. Every time we perceive another human being as other or different we give permission to treat them differently, less than human, and too often we do exactly that.

Vermont's general population is 1.2% black and >95% white,¹ while the ratio of black to white people incarcerated by the state is 12.5 blacks to 1 white.²

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Without understanding our position in relation to others within the complex various power structures operating in society, we cannot really know our neighbors. Without such knowledge, we cannot act ethically toward them. Without such knowledge, we cannot love them."³

If we are to extinguish racism, we must recognize and accept our role in the systems that foster and perpetuate it. We must also understand the strata that have been created and our place within these strata. This knowledge provides us with the power we need to be voices for the powerless, to provide space for their voices to be heard. It also provides a wedge for us to see that what we consider to be equal is not equal in the eyes of God. Equality is not about everyone reaching a particular goal in what we own, where we live, what our occupations are, and in the context of today's Torah reading it is not about in what we wear. That paradigm perpetuates white privilege and racism because it does not require or even encourage that white power be relinquished but rather requires non-white people to continue to endure living in a white person's world, conforming to fit in, and denied full humanity. True equality requires an acceptance, appreciation and embracing of the beauty and gifts we all possess in our uniqueness of being created and in our collective experiences. It requires giving up control and power. It

¹ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/50000.html> (accessed 6/29/15)

² <http://www.sentencingproject.org/map/map.cfm#map> (accessed 6/29/15)

³ King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968. 168. From lecture handout, Nienhous, Nancy, *Justice Matters*. Andover Newton Theological School. September 17, 2010.

requires dressing down, revealing our common humanity in our nakedness that we may risk ourselves, what we own, what we wear for the common good.

I do not believe the people in my children's lives intended harm or hurt. I know I never did, nor would I ever want them to feel ostracized, stymied, less valuable or less worthy in their personal growth. But it is what happens when we live within structures and systems that foster and perpetuate the concept of 'other,' and that "different" is somehow bad or subservient.

Today I not only recognize, but viscerally experience, my white privilege through the lack of privilege my children, and so many others, lived and live because of the color of their skin and the texture of their hair. They are half white; they identify as black. They do not deny their white heritage, but their life experiences, the world they live in has informed them that they are more black than they are white. I have to ask; why do they have to choose?

In a public health crisis not only centuries, but millennia ago, the author of Leviticus shares that the people, the community, turned to the priest; they turned to faith. As people of faith is that not we are called to do? Are we not called to surrender our personal power and control with a willingness to be led in truth and in love? Are we also not called to lead in protecting public health, in sequestering the malignant disease of hate and discrimination and privilege by recognizing it?

It does and will require what God requires that is to "do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8b). It is hard work that requires new vision, new life. It requires personal and corporate transformation. It requires new threads, new clothing, free of sores, of contagious infection and malignancy. Let us put on new clothing of linen and wool free of disease, new threads weaved together with God's truth and with God's love. Amen.