

July 5, 2015
Matthew 13:10-17
Opening the Blinds
Pastor Sally May

Matthew 13:10-17 (NRSV)

Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” ¹¹He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹²For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ¹³The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ ¹⁴With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: ‘You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. ¹⁵For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn— and I would heal them.’ ¹⁶But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

This sermon has been germinating for five years. It began in 2010 as a final project for a seminary course. In early summer of 2013 my two oldest children shared stories about growing up in rural Vermont as non-white children. I 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, Freddie Gray, Rekia Boyd, on and on and on to June 17 with the 9 gunned down at Mother Emmanuel AME. And how many we don't know about..... and the church burnings since Friday, June 26..... and the death threats against black female clergy, and on and on and on..... I share anew what is so old..... There is so much to mourn, to be discovered, to discuss, to do. I offer to you today an invitation to begin talking and learning together what is so wrong, and what we can and might do, what we are able to and must do to affect change.

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 boys and my girl. It is a feared reality for too many, too many Americans, too many human beings.

The previously mentioned seminary course was "Justice Matters." Two assignments in particular opened my eyes to 'white privilege' in this country. Time prohibits my sharing now, but would love to share two assignments in particular. 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. So my message today is not about individual attitudes- although those matter, too, as the Charleston massacre clearly shows - my message today is about history and systems, and our ability and our responsibility to affect change.

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 wasn't only my intellect that was informed; my emotional, my physical – and yes, my spiritual centers 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.

1. They were presumed to be good at sports. 2. Their hair. Everyone touched it, talked about it. 3. When was discussed in class everyone looked at them. 4. Lack of education in history other than history of white people. 5. Lack of role models – and assumptions of who role models were. 6. 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. 7. Other children insisted that they must be adopted. 8. New teachers were visibly surprised when they provided a thoughtful, intelligent response or comment. 9. Lack of access to products – make-up, bandages, panty hose, haircuts. 10. 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. 11. Being told they were going to be lynched as a joke, racist jokes, “can I say nigga around you?” 12. Too often they were not asked “Who are you?”, but rather “What are you?”

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.

The transition in perception that is required to comprehend this shift reminds me of the parables by which Jesus so frequently taught. The parables found in the gospels are both powerful tools and powerful examples of how we must shift, must transform our thinking and our perception if we truly desire heaven on earth; if we truly desire equality and justice for all people. 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, bringing about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is clear in his teachings and by his example that the kingdom of heaven is not possible as long as inequality and injustice among God's people exists.

The following parable offers necessary transformational understanding and living to eradicate racism, to create the kingdom of heaven we are called into.

(Matthew 13:44-46 [NRSV])"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; and then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." Imagine that that someone who found the hidden treasure is you or me, or any white person. What would we have to sell in order to buy the field?

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. But I tell you it is not always overt. We often don't recognize it when it happens. And that's 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, etc...." 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?

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.

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 As Christians we have been commanded by God, through Jesus, to love our neighbor as ourselves, have we not?

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, Nienhaus, Nancy, *Justice Matters*. Andover Newton Theological School. September 17, 2010.

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, or what our occupations are. 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 that the "first will be last and the last will be first." (Matthew 19:30) 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 requires risking ourselves and what we own for the common good. True equality will be realized when the systems white people have created and used to "legitimate the maltreatment of others"⁴ are recognized for their faults and weaknesses.

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 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 don't 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?

It is in my children's insightful and telling examples that I most clearly see and understand the pearl that must be sold in order that we may purchase the field in which the hidden treasure, the kingdom of heaven, lies in wait. The pearl we must sell is the pearl of life as we know it so that we may acquire the pearl that offers greater value; the pearl that is right relationship with God and with one another. The pearl of privilege is valuable indeed in a white person's world, but surely to you and to me, as Christians, it is worth selling all the privilege we have to be in God's world.

However, we cannot sell what we do not own. Before we sell our privilege and our power, we must own it. James Cone wrote "We all benefit and suffer from what happened in the past, and we owe it to ourselves to learn from the good and to correct the bad. We are one people. What happens to one happens to all. So, even

⁴ Ibid. 178.

if we are not directly responsible for past injustices, we are responsible for present exploitation. It is our responsibility to create a new future for all.”⁵

From the Gospel of Luke: “That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.” (Luke 12:47-48)

In the irony of this parable we can find purpose in seeking justice for all people. Before now we could claim ignorance to God’s call to work for justice, to seek the kingdom of heaven on earth. As we individually and privately accepted people of color into our lives and publicly decried racism, little did we know that these were not and are not solutions to existing inequalities. We can no longer claim that ignorance.

As Christians, as white Christians, we have been given much. It is our call to open the blinds that have shuttered the windows to the truth. This requires a surrendering of power and control, a willingness to be led in truth and in love. It requires what God requires 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.

As it is with the farmer who sells all he has to own the field in which the treasure lies, we too will find joy in selling all we have. For once we were blind but now we see that that what we once sought after and coveted pales in comparison to the value that is found in a peaceable kingdom. A kingdom manifested in the will of the people doing the will of God. Paul wrote to the Romans nearly 2000 years ago “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2) May each of us here today heed these words - do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. It is a treasure no longer hiding though it is still waiting to be found. Amen.

⁵ Cones, “Theology’s Great Sin. 8.