

got privilege?

A reflection on white privilege.

James 2:1-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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How can we claim to be followers of the ways of Jesus when we behave in ways that either discriminate against or show partiality towards others? This is the question posed through a simple and concrete illustration in the New Testament book of James. Special treatment is given to a rich person who enters an assembly of some kind, let's call it a church, while the same attention and favor is not extended to a poor person. **We learn that any practice that favors the rich over the poor is unacceptable and inconsistent with the Christian faith.** In this scenario, we witness an example of economic or **class privilege**. Yet even though this is what we usually think of when we hear that someone is privileged, that's just one kind.

Privilege can be defined as a right or immunity granted as a benefit, advantage, opportunity, or favor given to some people and not to others. Here are some other examples. Throughout our country's history it is a fact that women have not been extended the same opportunities, including job positions and salaries, as their male counterparts. That's **male privilege**. However, those of us who are men don't need to apologize for being male. But it's a good idea to be aware that we are granted privilege in our culture and society for no other reason than being born male.

We can apply this to other categories. For instance, those who identify their sexuality as straight automatically experience rights and opportunities *not* automatically extended to those who are open about being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. That's **heterosexual privilege**. Again, those who are straight don't need to apologize for being heterosexual. But it's a good idea to be aware that there are those who are granted privilege in our culture and society for no other reason than being born that way.

I'm sure you've figured out where I'm heading with this. Let's now apply that to race. Those in this country who are white are automatically granted rights and opportunities *not* automatically extended to those who are persons of color in similar circumstances. That's **white privilege**. And here's the important part in acknowledging this often misunderstood term, especially for those of us well-intentioned good white folks who strive hard not to be racist or openly prejudicial. For those of us who are white, being aware of **white privilege isn't about needing to apologize for being white**, or for paying the price of the sins of our forbearers. **It's not about assigning or accepting blame, shame, or even the common feeling of guilt over our country's racist past – and present.** Instead, it's about understanding that growing up white comes with a structural and systemic component that favors those who are white. That includes historical and current practices in our legal and judicial systems, in our educational structures, even in our housing and lending practices.

White privilege involves the simple recognition and awareness that those of us who identify our race as white are automatically, and often with unconscious bias, extended societal privileges beyond what is commonly experienced by people of color under the same social, political, or economic circumstances. And perhaps the most insidious element of white privilege is that **we are conditioned to not even recognize that we have it. And becoming defensive about it is a sure sign that we are deeply engrained in it.** Please note that this doesn't mean you or I didn't have to work hard to get where we are today. So as you can see, this is just one element of the larger issue of racism.

I would suspect that this term, white privilege, is fairly new to many of you. It was to me until our Adult Church School class explored the Presbyterian Church (USA) antiracism policy that was released last summer, after being adopted at our General Assembly. At the close of that 6-session class last September, I preached a sermon entitled *Facing Racism and White Privilege*. Looking back over it this week, I realized that I really just addressed the overall topic of racism, and how our denomination and congregations could move forward in its antiracism work. I didn't really explore this component of white privilege. So why do so today?

Since that sermon, I've joined with a group of about 20 white progressive pastors here in town to explore this issue, starting with a close look at ourselves. We call it the "What's Next?" group. It was formed as part of our response as pastors to the Terence Crutcher police shooting last year. As it so happens, the trial for the police officer charged with intentional manslaughter, Officer Betty Shelby, starts tomorrow. The fact that Crutcher, who was black, and Shelby, who is white, has already significantly raised the racial tension in this city. It may be a good idea to pay close attention.

Among the work we've assigned ourselves in that pastor group is studying the book, ***Witnessing Whiteness: The Need to Talk About Race and How to Do It***, by **Shelly Tochluk**. I highly recommend it to you. It now even comes with a detailed study guide. She describes and critiques strategies used to avoid race issues, leading to our racial discomfort with others. It also leads to our own personal discomfort when we begin to address the issue of white privilege. She, a white educator with a background in psychology, explains why **not paying attention to race is a problem, and how avoiding race ruins many well-meaning efforts**. I learned, for example, that **the common phrase, "I don't see color," is actually a response that comes from a white privilege perspective. Why? Because not seeing race is not a luxury afforded to people of color.** If you don't believe me, just ask anyone of a different race.

I was able to attend a meaningful workshop led by Shelly Tochluk herself just last week when I attended the 18th annual **White Privilege Conference**, held in Kansas City. I had never even heard of this national conference before. Either had my white pastor counterparts in that study group. The conference was attended by over 1,600 persons, most who were white. The highest percentage of professionals represented were school teachers and administrator. Yes, our education system is on the front lines of all this. We heard four keynote addresses, including one by a Native American, another by an Asian American. **White privilege is not just targeted to those who are African Americans.**

We had the opportunity to attend six workshops. There were 140 offered! So it was a bit frustrating having that huge of a selection and only being able to attend six. Basically every professional in this nation working in this specific field of study was in attendance and/or offered a workshop. In one, we were asked a startling question, **"When did you first recognize you were white?"** It wasn't too much of a surprise to learn

that so many of us grew up in all-white neighborhoods, even towns. People of color simply weren't a part of our day-to-day existence. **We lived in a white bubble, and most of us weren't even aware of that growing up. But it was indeed very intentional.**

I don't remember the very first time I became aware of different races, because they were basically non-existent on TV in the early 1960s, especially in cartoons back then. You could go from the Flinstones in prehistoric times to the Jetsons in futuristic times and never come across a person of color. I do remember, however, an early example of recognizing race when we lived in a suburb of Chicago, again in the 1960s. First of all, I can count on one hand the number of times in eight years we went into the city itself, which is where my dad took the train to work every day. Dad once said it was okay to visit the Brookville Zoo but not the Lincoln Park Zoo. When asked why, we were told that it wasn't in a safe neighborhood. It was known as a black neighborhood.

Have you ever locked your car doors when seeing a person of color near your car, or when you drove through what you thought was an unsafe neighborhood? When walking down a sidewalk, have you ever crossed to the other side of the street, or clutched your purse tighter when approaching a black person? Under those and countless other situations like them, **the best question to constantly ask is, Why? Why do we do those things, or at least think about doing them? Where does that fear and distrust – which we extend to an entire race – come from?** A lot of it has to do with the messages we were given as children – and not only by our parents, but also in the media, in our schools, by our government, and yes, even in church. 'God must certainly be against a mixed-race marriage, it's right there in the Old Testament.'

A lot of the messages we received when we were young were often filled with misinformation, including biased and missing history, which we then took as the gospel truth. White privilege then led us to internalize and hold onto those assumptions and stereotypes as we age. It all becomes part of the intentional architecture in this country that holds in place racism and oppression of the "other". This architecture, in my opinion, instead of being dismantled is now being strengthened in many regards by the current administrations of both our state and national governments. Look at their response to Muslims, for instance. **That's Christian privilege.**

I can honestly affirm, however, something that was stated at the conference. **Once you become aware of your white privilege, there's no turning back.** The veil has been lifted and you can see it for what it is, and what it does. I know I will be processing what I've been learning, and am now experiencing, the rest of my life. And I plan to continue on this journey.

Here's what I'd like to ask you. **Is this journey to understand white privilege and its effects something you are interested in and/or willing to take?** If so, should we then delve into the issue of white privilege as a congregation – as something we discern is part of our journey as followers of the ways of Jesus?

I'd say that we are already basically an antiracist congregation because of our intention to avoid blatant discrimination toward people of color, as well as our commitment to inclusion and social justice. But exploring our white privilege is something different, something deeper, something very personal, and something often hidden and unrecognized. This work, not surprisingly, means that we must become vulnerable, most likely uncomfortable, and if willing, accountable and responsible. So like the name we've given the group of us white progressive pastors doing this work, "What's Next?"

Amen.