

Sacred Ground Session 9: Racism's Long Life (Feb. 1, 2022)

This is the tenth article in a series to provide an insight into what the participants in the first St. Luke's Sacred Ground Circle learned over the past year of work. We will be providing one article a week through the summer to try to broadly capture the material that was presented. This will be supplemented by the personal statements of Circle participants describing what the experience meant to them and how they believe the Holy Spirit is calling them to respond.

We looked at examples of multigenerational legacies of slavery and racism in both the Black and White communities. We considered how the history of racism still casts a long shadow and how, even in a country containing many well-intentioned White people, inequality and “disparate impact” can persist, because of legacies of the past. The housing discrimination and redlining of the mid-20th century, which we learned about in a previous Session, are prime examples of how racist policies in one generation can ripple long into the future in terms of family wealth-building. The focus of this session was on what might be called “psychological legacies” – specifically trauma – and what tangible shape and form those take, which begs the question of how to “repair the breach.”

A documentary film “Healing Justice” and excerpts from a book by Dr. Joy Degruy entitled *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* laid out the ongoing impact of race-related trauma associated with slavery. Basically, when all the most basic relationships that would make the enslaved individual a person and a part of a community were assaulted, that led to injury. If the injury were not healed, the person would act out that injury, either on persons around them or on themselves. (Hurt persons hurt persons.) Psychology tells us that adverse childhood experiences like those existing under slavery lead to disrupted neurodevelopment; social, emotional, and cognitive impairment; adoption of negative health behaviors; and social problems, disease and disability. Recent research in the field of epigenetics has revealed that frustration and trauma can impact an individual's DNA, and the manifestation of the frustration and traumas experienced by prior generations can be passed along genetically to future offspring. Slavery also spawned defense mechanisms among the enslaved that became passed down through generations with negative consequences for the descendants of enslaved persons today. For example, enslaved parents learned not to praise their children and to inhibit their natural exploratory instincts so that the children would not stand out and risked being sold off by the slave owners. These behaviors learned to survive the stifling effects of chattel slavery have effects evident today among the Black community.

We also considered the legacy effects of slavery and racism on the White community, drawing on an article by the Rev. David Pettee and Susan Hutchinson entitled “Ghosts of the Masters: Descendants of Slaveholders Reckon with History.” Based on hundreds of interviews, the authors discovered that almost every descendant of slaveholders with whom they talked agreed there were lingering psychological impacts upon their families from the legacy of enslaving others. Some of these impacts played out in family dynamics, such as elders ruling over the family with an iron fist and an attitude of angry command and control, learned behavior of self-medicating with alcohol or drugs to deal with the violence that had been required to uphold slavery, or the adoption of an attitude of benevolent responsibility out of the racist idea that Blacks are incapable of managing their own lives effectively. Silence and “no-talk-rules” around issues that elicited painful emotions was another key legacy. Those who chose to become truth tellers in their families, to break the silence and confront the legacy confessed to being treated like “race traitors”. Irrational fear of people of African descent was also mentioned, often connected with a sense of guilt for what their forebears had done. For still others, there was no sense of guilt at all, and indeed these people were angry and dismissive of those who did feel guilty. Many seemed to easily accept the mythology of benevolent ownership and mutual love as an explanation of why former slaves stayed on plantations when the Civil War ended, ignoring the economic

realities of the devastation that occurred because of the War. There was no clear consensus whether slaveholding descendants shouldered any responsibility to repair the damage wrought by their ancestors. Many people were resistant to any conversation around “reparations”, which tended to agitate & shut them down from engaging their history more directly. In conclusion, the authors believe there is clear evidence of identifiable emotional & familial dynamics that have migrated down the family trees of former slaveholders. They argue that breaking silence is a fundamental first step to becoming accountable to family history and making connection with others that can lead to transformation and empower people to act to further heal the legacy of slavery.

To bring all this home to our community, we considered the report “Deeply Rooted: History’s Lessons for Equity in Northern Virginia,” authored by Dr. Steven Woolf at Virginia Commonwealth University which examines the history of fifteen “islands of disadvantage” in Northern Virginia – communities whose outcomes lag far behind the rest of the prosperous region. One central theme of the report is the history of Black community displacement as Northern Virginia shifted from rural plantations & farms outside Washington to a collection of built-up suburbs. And when Black communities were displaced, they were frequently subject to racist policies that prevented them from owning homes and building property wealth for their families in nearby White neighborhoods. Education also remains a factor in today’s “islands of disadvantage,” with White flight to the outer suburbs having created heightened segregation in Virginia’s public schools, leaving students of color in schools that are inadequately funded, unable to retain teachers and offering few advanced courses.

A reading from Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* and the film “Healing Justice” looks at another example of the legacy of racism in this country: the deep-seated problems with the current criminal justice system. The film shines the light on restorative justice processes, which recognize the humanity of both victims and offenders and call for taking personal responsibility. These processes defy simple categorization as “liberal” or “conservative.” All the readings and the film contribute to new angles for questioning “tough on crime” policies – again, in a way that harks back to the values of both conservatives and liberals, and of Christians too.

Howard Thurman’s views on the fallacy of hatred as a reaction to race-based oppression were remarkable. Hatred, he argued, often begins in situations where there is contact without fellowship. Contacts without fellowship produce unsympathetic understanding, which in turn tends to express itself in active functioning of ill will. As an example of the latter, Thurman offers the spreading of resentment among passengers in a rail compartment at the presence of a Black man seated among them. (Recall, this was written in 1935. An updated example might be the spreading of resentment among Whites of policies perceived as primarily benefiting Blacks.) From there, he argues, it is only a short step to hatred walking on earth. This hatred runs in both directions. In the mind of the disinherited, it is born out of great bitterness made possible by sustained resentment. The disinherited, facing systematic denial of their rights/privileges as humans and citizens can either except society’s judgment that they do not deserve better treatment, in which case they destroy their self-worth and hate themselves, or reject the judgment, in which case hatred may serve as a device for rebuilding their individual significance. Thus, hatred becomes a device by which the oppressed individual seeks to protect himself against moral disintegration. However, this hatred destroys the core of the life of the hater and ultimately cannot be confined to the offenders alone. For this reason, Jesus counseled to love one’s enemy, because he saw that hatred meant death to the mind, death to the spirit and death to communion with God the Father.

Debby Irving in her book *Waking up White* wrote about a third-grade teacher’s experiments exposing White students to the experience of harsh and arbitrary judgment and treatment as inferiors. She noted that cooperative, wonderful & thoughtful children turned into nasty, vicious, discriminating children. Adults, when

placed in the same experiment learned they could keep people down by lowering expectations of them and forcing them to live down to those lowered expectations. These social experiments showed that people aren't born inherently inferior or superior, they just respond to the environment in which they are placed. Irving asked why the outrage against the teacher's experiment, which ostracized White children for one day, doesn't carry over to how White people respond to the way that Black men, women & children have been treated for hundreds of years.

As a reminder, Sacred Ground, a film-based dialogue series on race and faith, is one tool that supports the Episcopal Church's long-term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation and justice under the banner of Becoming Beloved Community. The race dialogue series is an attempt to be responsive to the profound challenges that currently exist in our society, focusing on the challenges that swirl around the issues of race and racism, as well as the difficult but respectful and transformative conversation about race. It invites participants to walk back through history to peel away the layers that brought us to today, and to do that in a personal way, reflecting on family histories and stories, as well as important narratives that shape the collective American story. It holds the vision of beloved community as a guiding star – where all people are honored and protected and nurtured and beloved children of God, where we weep at one another's pain and seek one another's flourishing.