

## Sacred Ground Session 7: Selective Access to the Melting Pot & the American Dream: 1830s-1960s (Jan 4, 2022)

*This is the eighth 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 started by recalling the words of Ephesians 2:12-16 describing how Christ Jesus had broken down the dividing wall of hostility between peoples (in this case, Gentiles and Jews). The vision of Christ creating “*in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and reconciling both groups to God in one body through the cross, putting to death that hostility through it*” is inspirational for the Sacred Ground journey. May we accept it as our ministry to work towards breaking down the walls of racial suspicion and hatred that divide Americans from each other.

Our opening prayer was borrowed from the Episcopal Diocese of West Virginia: “*One God, in Three Persons, creator of one human species, in many hues: all who pray to you are descendants of Adam and Eve, all members of one race called “human.” Forgive the blindness that causes our eyes to notice and magnify those things we regard as different from ourselves in others. Teach us to see clearly, that we, your children, are far more alike than we are different. Help us to put aside the racial prejudices embedded within us, and to see within every person the Child of God you created, our sister or brother, destined for Glory. In the name of One who died for all persons, of all colors, Jesus Christ. Amen*”

We began our discussions reacting to two PBS videos: “*Slavery by another Name*” and “*Race: The Power of an Illusion, Episode 3: The House we Live in*”. We learned about how, in many Southern states, the systems of vagrancy laws, convict leasing and debt peonage served as constructed mechanisms to keep many African Americans in what was effectively a new form of slavery for decades after emancipation. We reflected on the question of how we might feel if constitutional rights that guaranteed us equal opportunity were effectively nullified by social practice, unequal or ineffective legal protection of those rights or flat-out discriminatory laws. We also followed the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of how the arbitrary concept of “Whiteness” became codified further in our laws, excluding others from the American dream in the process. We saw how the GI Bill after World War II helped White returning soldiers, but not veterans of color. This, and redlining (a federally-sponsored system that discriminated against people of color in home lending), paved the way for the federally-subsidized creation of a White suburban middle class, made up of second- and third-generation European immigrants who themselves had initially faced discrimination. In this regard, we also considered the immigrant experience of one particular European ethnicity, the Irish, in an article entitled “An Interview with Noel Ignatiev” about his book *How the Irish became White*. The author makes the point that social incentives were strong for European immigrant groups like the Irish to align themselves with White elites on the basis of “race” rather than to make common cause with people of all races on the basis of “class” (economic status).

We shared stories about how our own family histories intersected with these broader social trends. In my case, I attended the first White public high school in Delaware to be integrated (1952), two years before the landmark Brown vs Board of Education Supreme Court decision (the Claymont High School experience was cited in the Brown v BoE case). There was not much made of that fact by the time I came along in 1969, and it was simply natural to have a young Black woman selected on the basis of merit as our Student Body President during my Junior Year. Indeed, in an article published in 2008 when the school was closed, one of those original Black students commented, “I went to class, I had to study just like everybody else. I was never

treated any differently.” Ironic, then, that the school district decided to close this school due to declining enrollment and racial imbalance. “Its population, which had the highest percentage of Black students among Brandywine’s schools, was redistributed among the district’s other three schools,” according to a University of Delaware history professor cited in the article.

Turning to our two core books, we considered first the insights of Howard Thurman in his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*. He analyzed Jesus’ teachings dealing with the problems of fear (Luke 4:16-18; Luke 1:46-55; Matthew 10:26-31; Matthew 6:25-34), concluding “To be assured that God cares for me is the answer to the threat of violence and violence itself.” He went to argue that the power of Jesus’ most revolutionary appeal was the absolute insistence upon genuineness - speaking the truth to the strong, without fear and without exception. “In the presence of overwhelming sincerity on the part of the disinherited,” he wrote, “the dominant themselves are caught with no defense, with the edge taken away from the sense of prerogative and from the status upon which the impregnability of their position rests.” This transforms a relation between weak and strong to merely a relationship between human beings. “The awareness of this fact,” Thurman wrote, “marks the supreme moment of human dignity.”

Debby Irving, in her book *Waking up White* points out how Americans of color, including 1 million Black GIs, were largely excluded from the “great equalizer” of the melting pot. She cites various “examples of affirmative action programs for White people” during our lifetimes, including the GI Bill, redlining and blockbusting, quotas to limit the number of Black students in colleges & universities, the demolition of Black neighborhoods in “urban renewal” projects (90% of low-income housing demolished was never rebuilt) and other discrimination in federal government home-lending (between 1934-62, less than 2% of the \$120 billion in federal government underwriting of new housing went to people of color). She decries her own sense of color blindness, denying the way lives play out differently along racial lines, as “actually maintaining the very cycle of silence, ignorance and denial that needs to be broken for racism to be dismantled.”

We then took this concept of people of color having been largely excluded from the great equalizer of the melting pot and reflected theologically on its implications. We found that this was a world of unequal opportunity and division, discrimination and injustice. One in which there was a strong belief in natural White superiority, largely oblivious towards the situation of others and towards our own prejudices. This represented a failure to live up to our goals as a nation and as a people of faith. We have failed to see the humanness of each other, to recognize the individual as a human being. To promote reorientation towards wholeness in such a situation requires education, not accepting false rationalizations, opting out of the club, challenging false information and more communication among different groups of people. Our faith tells us that we have to look at each other in the way Christ looks at us, seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and strive for justice and peace among all peoples, respecting the dignity of every human being. From our faith tradition we connected to this focus the Parable of the Good Shepherd, the Golden Rule, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and the Old Testament focus on social justice in terms of providing for the widows, orphans, strangers among us. This reflection caused us to reflect that the focus in the “melting pot” should be on justice; that reward based on performance alone may not be truly equitable, given differences in starting points; and that there is hope for us – we do aspire to be better.

Applying this reflection to our lives, we felt that God is calling us to be a stronger voice, to be absolutely genuine, to continue to learn, to strive for self-awareness, to dismantle the machine, to make “good trouble”, and to strive for situational awareness.

We closed our session with the *Collect for Guidance* from the Book of Common Prayer, pg 100.

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

*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.*