

Sacred Ground Session 8: Divisions in Present Day White America (Jan 18, 2022)

This is the ninth 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.

The opening scripture and prayer were decided spontaneously and, unfortunately, are lost to history.

The opening part of our discussion looked at the question of “Does where you sit determine where you stand?” We focused on the extent to which different political/policy opinions on racially charged issues (like immigration and programs that are perceived as being “Black entitlement programs”) can be related to one’s economic status and life circumstances. Understanding that White people in America often feel uncomfortable talking about race and racism, we asked ourselves whether we felt more or less comfortable talking about class differences and class conflict. We wrestled with the question of how we as individuals and as a society might increase sensitivity & compassion in all directions, across racial and class barriers, and then create economic solutions that work for the good of all. We reacted to readings that highlighted the phenomenon of White male backlash and considered how in the public sphere one could have a compassionate conversation on this topic.

In preparation, we had viewed a video entitled “White Anxiety” from the series *America Inside out with Katie Couric*, an article by Joan Williams entitled “What So many People don’t get about the U.S. Working Class”, and excerpts from the book *The Messy Truth* by Van Jones. We also had at our disposal a number of deep dive resources, including the results of one fascinating NPR poll revealing that the majority of White Americans believe Whites face discrimination www.npr.org/2017/10/24/559604836/majority-of-white-americans-think-theyre-discriminated-against.

The Couric video presented vignettes of four working class towns in America: Fremont NE, Johnstown PA, Erie PA, and Storm Lake IA. In interviews with members of the White Working Class, common themes emerged such as: 1) we don’t like being talked down to; 2) union labor is being undercut by imports, immigrants and plant relocations to non-union states; 3) we feel abused by corporations and ignored by politicians; and 4) we like rude and angry better than pretentious & arrogant politicians. The Storm Lake vignette was particularly interesting as leaders of the White community there recognized how minorities (who make up the largest share of town population) are breathing new life into the town. Still, there was fear expressed with the social & political consequences of being a White minority in the town.

The Williams article pointed out that economically insecure Whites are much more likely to feel threatened by perceived or actual competing groups, such as immigrants and other low-income communities of Color. There is more buy-in for the stereotype of the “undeserving low-income Black person using government programs and thus your hard-earned tax dollars.” Van Jones called on liberals and conservatives alike to be more open to the values the other brings to the table and to seek the good and not always assign malevolence to those “on the other side of the aisle.”

In light of all this, we considered our own family class histories and how those affect our ability to understand the viewpoints of others in our society. Can we empathize with those members of the White working class who voice resentment against the elites and the poor? We wrestled with the question of how we as citizens might contribute to ratcheting down tribalism in American society. Is this something the Holy Spirit is calling us to do?

Turning to our two core books, we continued to consider Howard Thurman's insights regarding the alternatives the disinherited face in attempts to protect themselves from the strong. He rejects the path of simply accepting one's lot because there is no other sensible choice offered. This, he argues, only can lead to continuous degradation of one's political, economic & social rights. Thurman also rejects adopting a sliding scale of compromise, assuming that it becomes more moral to compromise as the threat to one's actual existence increases. In his view, "if simply 'not to be killed' becomes the great end and morality takes its meaning from that center, then there is little scope for improving the lot of the disinherited." Thurman concludes that the third alternative, speaking the truth, without fear and without exception is the only viable option open to faithful people who face oppression and discrimination. "For the individual who accepts this," he writes, "there may be quick and speedy judgment with attendant loss. But if the number increases and the movement spreads, the vindication of the truth would follow in the wake." Thurman cites Matthew 5:37, 39 as illustrating what he calls the "Power of Jesus' most revolutionary appeal: The insistence of Jesus upon genuineness is absolute; man's relation to man and man's relation to God are one relation."

The focus in the chapter we read from Debby Irving's book *Waking up White* focused on "Don't fix others, fix yourself." She points out there is a long, painful history of People of Color, when in the presence of White people, conforming to survive. "Thus," she argues, "White people remain ignorant of their impact, while People of Color accumulate frustrations." She believes understanding and working towards breaking down this dynamic is central to dismantling racism in the 21st century. In her own journey, she found she had precious little to offer in terms righting racial wrongs until she began to examine how racism had shaped herself. In addition, she found that "Only when I began to explore and share my personal struggle to understand my racialized belief system did People of Color start opening up to me and engaging me in our common struggle."

We then reflected theologically on this personal position of Debbie White that "Until I began to examine how racism had shaped me, I had little to contribute to the movement of righting racial wrongs." This view of the world emphasizes the need to learn about the group we come from and other groups around us. In an interconnected world, the problems of others are the problems of us all. We need to take off the blinders we have donned to make ourselves feel good and admit our stake/part in the current racist structures in our society. Failure to recognize how racism has shaped society and interpersonal interactions has disrupted our relationship with God and with our neighbors. Applying this reflection to our lives, we felt that God is working to open our eyes to see the injustice, calling us to react and to do better. We have to start with ourselves, to see what I have done/not done to improve the situation.

We ended our session with a prayer that a Circle Member wrote based on this theological reflection:

Blessed are you, O Lord God,
You who sent your only Son to teach us the commandments of Love for God and neighbor,
Lead us now to use the various gifts that you have given each of us
To speak and act when we see injustice.
Guide us to find ways to reach others who hold opinions and beliefs different from our own.
Make us see beyond our facades and fears and long-held misunderstandings.
Through your grace we pray, 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.