

Children of God

Psalm 113; Galatians 3:23-29

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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February 7, 2021/Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

Today is the final Sunday of our annual Faith Questions sermon series. I saved the easiest topic for last. ☺ Today we are discussing white privilege and racism.

How should we as Christians think about these concepts and ideas that have dominated the headlines recently.

Are we all racists? What does it mean to be the beneficiaries of “white privilege?” And even if we can arrive at some clarity on those two things, what are we to do?

Let’s start with the obvious. It would be great to hear from someone who isn’t white in a sermon about white privilege and racism. Alas, you’re stuck with me, a regrettably white male.

I say this only partly in jest. I genuinely do think that this would be a sermon better preached from someone who does not occupy any or all of the dominant categories that I do (white, male, straight, etc.). There is indeed much to be gained from hearing from different perspectives, particularly when it comes to issues that touch us in such personal ways like these do.

I should also confess that for weeks I have not been looking forward to writing this sermon. This is because, a) I feel inadequate to comment on injustices and insults that I have not personally endured; and b) my social location makes it difficult to say anything even remotely critical of the categories in which race and privilege are often discussed in our present context. But I *do* have a few questions, as you will hear.

But hopefully I can offer a bit of clarity or at least food for thought on these important matters that dominate our attention at the present moment.

I want to begin with a scene that took place almost exactly three years ago. My daughter Claire and I were sitting at the street side window of a café in downtown Lethbridge. We were sipping our coffees; I was answering all of her questions about life with perfect clarity and wit and maximum coolness. 😊

All of a sudden, two very drunk guys stumbled up to the front door. One of them started screaming at the front door, middle finger enthusiastically raised in glorious salute.

He looked over at us, grinned weirdly. More middle fingers, more yelling, and then the unpleasant culmination of his hostilities: he leaned back and spit on the front door before stumbling away.

The young men were indigenous. I later found out that they had been in earlier in the day causing quite a stir and had been escorted out by some of the staff. It was a scene that is, sadly, not uncommon in downtown Lethbridge.

I looked over at Claire who was just sitting there quietly with a look of mild alarm on her face.

(For those who might be listening or reading this and aren't part of our church community, my now-nineteen-year-old twins Claire and Nicholas are also indigenous, a mixture of Ojibway and Metis, to be precise.)

Anyway, I fumbled around for something intelligent to say. "Sad, eh? Unfortunately, those kinds of things tend to add fuel to all the racist stereotypes you hear around town."

It was not a particularly bright thing to say, but I was trying to open the door to conversation. I know that my kids see these situations through a much different lens than I do.

"Yeah," Claire said. "I bet there's a story behind it, though. And I bet it's a sad one."

This is the first thing to say in any conversation about white privilege and racism. There is a story behind it. And it is a sad one.

The history of the West is, in some ways, a glorious one. It is a story that includes the rise of Christianity, the founding of orphanages and hospitals and universities, the rise of modern science and the Enlightenment, the enshrinement of human rights. It is the story of great works of art and literature and the steady advance of literacy and technology.

But it is also a story that has included many ugly chapters and persistent themes. And at least since the time of Constantine, when Christianity became entwined with Rome and a long, complex relationship between a revolutionary Jewish sect and the Empire began, one of these themes has had ugly racial undertones.

Drew Hart is an African American professor at Messiah University in Pennsylvania. I have interacted online with Drew a bit over the years and even had the opportunity to meet him at Mennonite World Conference way back in 2015.

I earlier lamented the fact that you were stuck with a white guy for this sermon. I'll defer to non-white voice who offers this summary in his book, *Who Will Be a Witness?*:

Christianity has at times become the white man's religion. It is an undeniable fact that Christianity was weaponized by Europeans to justify their conquest of land and plundering of resources, as well as the enslaving, physically brutalizing, and subjugating black and Indigenous people's bodies all around the globe. In the fifteenth century, the church, through its official doctrines, gave its blessing to Portugal and Spain's mission of conquering and dominating the "heathen" worlds under the banner of Jesus. In the United States, like other places around the world, there is a direct correlation between racial oppression and white people's use of Christianity to justify their behaviour by claiming divine sanction... Christianity has been used as a white man's religion, even if that wasn't faithful to its origins seen in the person of Jesus.¹

These unpleasant facts must be set alongside all of the good that Christianity has brought to the world. This is the world that we have inherited and must reckon with.

For those of us who are white and Christian, we step on to the stage of our lives, whether we know it or not, whether we prefer to acknowledge it or not, as occupiers of a category that has historically done great wrongs, abused power, and mistreated those whose skin was black or brown.

And so, it's not just a *sad* story that leads to scenes like the one outside the coffee shop three years ago, which are all too common. It's a story of wrongdoing.

¹ Drew G.I. Hart, *Who Will Be a Witness? Igniting Activism for God's Justice, Love, and Deliverance* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2020), 23.

The story of white supremacy and colonial approaches to mission and the subjugation of indigenous people and the enslavement of black people is one that should have been *unthinkable* in cultures that claimed in any way to be “Christian.”

But it has been. And continues to be, in many ways.

Even though we instinctively say things like, “Well, I wasn’t involved in colonialism. I wasn’t involved in residential schools. I wasn’t involved in interning Japanese Canadians in World War 2 (as members of Naomi’s family were). I wasn’t involved in slavery...”

Even though all of these things may be true, it is also undeniable that each one of us who has white skin is an inheritor of systems and structures that benefit us in more easy and obvious ways than they do people of colour.

If I think of those two young men outside the coffee shop three years ago and I imagine what they likely endured before their second birthday, what dysfunctions they were raised in, what addictions may have been normalized in their childhoods, what forms of neglect and abuse they might have endured, what lack of support and guidance and motivation they were likely deprived of, what stereotypes they had to negotiate from their earliest memory compared to me, it becomes blindingly obvious that I am, indeed, privileged.

If a human life could be compared to a game of baseball, I started on third base while they were likely still stuck in the dugout. And this through no merit of mine or fault of theirs.

It is undeniable that there is indeed such a thing as white privilege and we must acknowledge this.

It seems equally undeniable to me that racial stereotypes are alive and well, even in the supposedly “enlightened and tolerant” twenty-first century Canada.

Part of this is at least partly understandable. Human beings are wired to be tribalistic. We do not naturally gravitate toward difference, whether it’s racial or ideological or some other thing.

Crossing boundaries takes effort and commitment and a strong, stable vision of humanity that transcends the things that so easily divide us.

The church should offer precisely such a vision, but we often fall radically short of this.

And so, for the times when we, as Christ's body, have yielded to the temptations of crude and damaging racial stereotypes...

For the times when we, as Christ's body, have happily exulted in the privileges afforded to us that we did nothing to earn...

For the times when we, as Christ's body, have not sought to bear witness to a reorientation of value and a re-evaluation of power...

We must confess our sins and repent.

I want to return to my conversation with Claire in the coffee shop. When we left, Claire was talking about how there almost certainly was a sad story behind the behaviour that we saw in downtown Lethbridge that day.

Our conversation continued...

"Dad, you know what I wonder sometimes? I wonder if Jesus was here today what he would do in a situation like this?" I thought about that for a bit.

"Well, I'm pretty sure he would be kinder than we often are," I said.

"Yeah, probably." Clare said. "I bet he would be nice to that guy. But I think Jesus would also tell him to smarten up."

What followed was a great conversation about mercy and justice and personal responsibility.

And this is where I have a few questions about how race and white privilege are often discussed in our cultural moment.

I wonder if, at times, we make race and other categories of identity (gender, sexual orientation, etc.) bear more weight than they are capable of bearing and were never intended to bear.

In a cultural context where many have left or are leaving Christianity behind, and where many people speak of having no grand narrative to guide their lives, I think that personal identity has stepped in to (inadequately) fill the void.

Whether it's race or gender or sexual orientation or some other thing, the grand narrative that now gives many people meaning focuses on what makes us different rather than the common humanity that unites us.

The grand narrative that now gives many meaning is not content to shine a light on the very real injustices (historically and in the present) that people of colour have endured but insists upon nearly constant shame and guilt and penance with no hope of absolution or forgiveness.

In this narrative, if we are white, we must constantly be rehearsing our racism, acknowledging our privilege, demonstrating appropriate guilt. If we are non-white, this narrative at times deprives us of agency, and locks us into scrambling for status through categories of victimization, training us to be content as placeholders for this or that special interest group.

This reality may be a necessary station along the way toward a more just and equitable future. But it is not a stable or hopeful vision of humanity for the future.

From a Christian perspective, this narrative makes primary what should be secondary when it comes to who we are.

Christ did not break down dividing walls of hostility between differing identity markers so that we could enthusiastically re-erect them and obsess over them endlessly, splitting up the pie of power into ever smaller segments.

When Paul says, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus," he is saying that these things that divide us are no longer our primary identity markers."

I think the church should offer a more hopeful vision of humanity.

We are all children of God. Christ's sacrifice, his self-giving love that transcended all boundaries, his forgiveness, his way of peace, the new way of being human that he both modeled and, by the indwelling Spirit makes possible in our lives—these are our new identity.

Let's go back to my conversation with Claire in the coffee shop one last time.

Our conversation that day ended with us talking about our human fondness for throwing stones at “sinners” and about how Jesus persistently takes them out of our eager hands.

We talked about our tendency to judge people based on little snapshots of time and space, how we almost never know the whole story.

Near the end, Claire looked up and said, “Dad, when Jesus comes back, he’s going to have a lot of people to fix.” I smiled and said, “Yeah. And a lot of us to forgive, too.”

She thought about that for a bit before saying, “Well, in a lot of ways his forgiving is fixing isn’t it?”

I told her that sounded pretty deep. I might even be able to spin a sermon out of a sentence like that someday.

And this is where I want to end today. With this complex mixture of fixing and forgiving that we all long for.

I am deeply convinced that they are intertwined. If we occupy the positions of whiteness and cultural privilege, we cannot demand that anyone forgive nor can we impose our solutions to fix the problems. This has been tried and has failed many times.

From a Christian perspective, I think all we can do is point to the character of God and the vision of human life that he desires and makes possible, and then seek to live into it, in big ways and small ways, every day.

In a few minutes, we’re going to hear Claire and Sarah sing a song called “Royalty” by Mike Janzen. It’s from a beautiful two album set based on the Psalms that he recently released and which I highly recommend.

On Tuesday, when I found out that we were going to have to do something different for music this week, I sent this song to Claire and asked her if she could learn it for the weekend. She accepted the challenge and I’m very glad she did.

The song is based on Psalm 113 which was our Call to Worship this morning. I hope everyone watching has access to the lyrics which were emailed out yesterday morning. I want to read a the lyrics:

He lifts the poor from the dusty streets
He pulls the weak from the ashen heap
To be royalty
To be called His sons and daughters

He makes a way through the longing years
In a bottle gathers up our tears
And He makes a home
For the homeless, lost and forgotten

From the rising sun
Till the setting of our days
May the name of the Lord be praised

Generous we give
With the lavish love of Christ
Then the name of the Lord is praised

And He brings the poor to the kingdom feast
And He gives the sinner the honored seat
He restores the weak
Bringing dignity to the fallen

And He holds the sick till they're on their feet
And He puts the lonely in families
To be loved and love
To be friends and heirs in His kingdom

This is the heart, this is the way, this is the love of Christ
This is Your throne, this is Your seat where mercy topples might
Nothing too great, no one too small
This is the heartbeat of His call
This is the heart of God

This is not a roadmap for racial reconciliation in terms that would be accepted in the broader culture. There is no redistribution of power, no calling out of the powerful, no de-centering of guilty voices.

It is, however, a call to the church.

It is a vision for a shared humanity where forgiving and fixing are gathered up together under the purpose and promise of God, where all people, regardless of the colour of their skin, are friends and heirs in the kingdom, sons and daughters, royalty.

It is a vision where it is mercy that topples might, instead of a wearisome reshuffling of the same old power dynamics.

It is a vision where the lavish love of Christ is extended to and experienced by all.

May God help us to live into this vision of humanity. May God help us as a church to confess our sins, to acknowledge our privilege, and most importantly to love all our neighbours in the manner in which Christ has loved us.

Amen.

