

## **How Christians Should Use Our Privilege**

A mediation for Wednesday, 23 September 2020

St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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Hello and welcome to this Wednesday evening meditation from St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Franklin, Tennessee. I am glad that you have joined us for the last in a six-part series on the Bible and Racism.

Tonight we want to talk about how we Christians should use our privilege. Like almost everything else associated with a conversation about race, the word “privilege” is a loaded one. So I want to begin there.

When I was born in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century just a few miles south of Atlanta, not many in my family would have thought of ourselves as privileged. We were working class folk and farmers who might have thought of ourselves as better off than the mill workers who lived in the village across the railroad tracks, but we certainly weren't part of the elite.

And yet, we were privileged. We could use the public library, attend the good public schools, swim in the public pool, use the public parks, be treated in the public hospital, sit down to eat in the few restaurants our town offered. The adults among us could vote and hold office. If one of us kids did something important in school, our photo would be in the local paper.

None of these opportunities were accorded the nearly 40% of the people in the county who were African American. While “separate but equal” was the mantra of the day, things were separate for sure, but nowhere near equal. In that I was privileged by the color of my skin.

A few weeks ago, as part of this series, I talked about the GI bill after World War II and about how its many benefits were afforded white veterans but not black veterans. All those things did not just benefit white people at the time, but have continued to benefit us and to influence how we live and how much we have.

Or consider this: growing up as a boy, I was told that the future belonged to me, that I could do and be whatever I chose to be if I worked hard enough for it. Doctor, lawyer, pastor, pilot – the sky was literally the limit. For girls it was a different story. In some states the law prevented them from serving in some roles. But the norms of society were an even bigger impediment than the law.

There is no better example of this than Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who died earlier this week. When she entered Harvard Law School, one of 9 women among 500 men, the dean reportedly invited the women law students to his home for dinner and asked them, "Why are you at Harvard Law School, taking the place of a man?"

And even though she went on to graduate first in her class at prestigious Columbia Law School, she was unable for a while to get even an *interview* with a law firm. In the 1950s, and well after, *men* were lawyers and professors and doctors and pastors. There were few exceptions.

You can see the reality of white, male privilege in how we referred to professionals – and in many cases, how we still refer to them. We have doctors and women doctors and black doctors. We have lawyers and women lawyers and black lawyers. And, sad to say, we have pastors and women pastors and black pastors. As if – and here's my point – the **default** is the white male and others are outliers.

I am glad that this situation is changing. I know it is changing in the church, but I also know from my time as bishop that a youngish, white, male, married with children, has a leg up in the call process in a great many of our congregations. And I know how hard it is to find a congregation who will call a black pastor.

And that is privilege.

Our question for this evening is "How do we Christians use our privilege?" Maybe more specifically we should ask, "How do we white Christians deal with and use our privilege?"

It seems to me that the most common way we deal with privilege is to say, "It ain't so." We find ourselves being defensive, or insisting that the playing field is even for all parties these days, that the days of slavery and Jim Crow and the like are over, that Title 9 did away with discrimination against women.

But, if you have been listening to these Wednesday evening sessions, you know that there is overwhelming evidence that this is not the case. The sins of our ancestors have been visited on us. And while the playing field may be closer to even than it was in 1950, it is far from equal. And we all know it, even if some of our leaders would like to write a sanitized and false narrative that paints over and tries to hide the rough parts of our history.

But when we deny our privilege, we are like those people described by Oklahoma football coach Barry Switzer: "Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple."

It is certainly true that many white people in this country have a hard time. Many have a lot to overcome. Clearly not all white folk are born to economic privilege or social privilege. But we are all born to white privilege.

But we white Christians don't have to deny our privilege. We are free in Christ to be honest with and about ourselves, to acknowledge our past – what we have done and what we have left undone – to rely on God's forgiveness, and then to do what needs to be done in rectifying what is wrong. That is the nature of the gospel of Jesus. We are all sinners but God loves us anyway.

There is much that needs to be done if we want to love and serve our neighbors who have not been awarded the privilege some of us have. We can vote and make noise and get in good trouble in order to change the systems of privilege that keep some of God's children at a disadvantage while it privileges others, for instance.

But perhaps the place to start is by listening to the pain of those who have not had our privilege.

Listen to St. Paul in his letter to the Philippian Christian community:

“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

Did you hear that? “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” What a concept! What if, rather than being defensive about our privilege, we were able to listen to our neighbors who have not had the economic and cultural leg up we have? How might that open our eyes? How might that make us “compassionate and sympathetic,” as Paul says. How might that change us and our society?

Several years ago, all around the states of this synod, we asked Lutherans and some others from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds to meet for a series of dinners and conversations. The large groups were divided into smaller tables with as much ethnic diversity as we could muster in our ELCA congregations.

In one of the sessions, we read a story from the gospels at our tables and then, as honestly and as vulnerably as we could, we talked about what that parable said to us. What character did we identify with? What issues did it raise? Where did it touch a point in our own story?

It was eye-opening for me to see white Lutherans and black Lutherans, Asian Lutherans and Latino Lutherans read the same story and hear on the one hand the good word of the gospel shining through, but on the other hand very different lessons and points of contact.

Talking together as Christians cross culturally will not solve the problem of racism in the church or in the world, but it is a start, a promising start, when we can hear one another's fears and pain and hopes – especially when we who have been the privileged majority can hear honestly from those we have not always listened to.

Yesterday I learned of the death of Pastor Bob Graetz, one of our synod's pastors. There was a story about him on NPR's "All Things Considered" this evening. Bob was a white Lutheran pastor sent to lead a mostly-black Lutheran congregation in Montgomery, Alabama. He became the only white person involved in the planning and carrying out of the Montgomery bus boycott which began after Rosa Parks refused to take a seat on the back of the bus.

Bob and his wife Jean's home was fire-bombed. They were threatened and vilified in that community for living out their faith. But they stayed and shined the light of Christ on Montgomery.

Bob pointed out that what happened in Montgomery was this: "Black Christians were teaching white Christians how to be Christian."

We might be amazed at what we can learn when we, too, are willing to listen to others.

St. Paul goes on: Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

Maybe we who are privileged ought to begin with praying for humility – a commodity that is in very short supply these days. To be humble and quiet long enough to listen to the cries of those who have been and are being hurt by our systems and structures and cultural assumptions. To lay aside our defensiveness and look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others.

Thank you for your attention during these past six weeks as Pr. Katherine and I have address hard topics. We both hope that these meditations will lead our congregation to deeper conversations about where the Spirit is leading us in these challenging days.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, you are full of compassion and love for your whole creation. Give us humble hearts open to the cries of our neighbors. Fill us with compassion and empathy so that we may hear one another and work together to bring about the justice and peace that is your will for all your beloved children. In the name of Christ or Savior, who loved us and emptied himself for us. Amen.



***The late Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg***