

God, Life, and Everything "White"

I am white. It's nothing I'm ashamed of, but it's nothing I'm proud of either. It just is.

Nevertheless, this simple fact of my whiteness has played a large role in what my life is like.

I know, I know. Everyone's sick and tired of hearing all the "white privilege" hand wringing. We're all sick and tired of people blaming everything bad that ever happened to them on their race. Quit pulling the race card! Quit using race as an excuse! Take responsibility!

Look at all the successful blacks - if they can make it, so can all the other losers who are just too lazy and want to live off of Welfare.

See, I know how it goes.

But that doesn't change the way things are.

The way things are is that there's something wrong in this country, and it's been wrong for so long we don't even see it. That is, we don't see it unless we're the ones who are suffering. The suffering always see the problem before the comfortable.

Just look at Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus if you want to see how the comfortable just don't see the suffering. The rich man never even considered poor Lazarus until it was too late. Even then, after he was in hell while Lazarus was in heaven... even then, he only saw Lazarus as someone to serve his purposes. Maybe that's why Jesus felt the need to suffer and die with criminals.

Back to our country, we know there's something wrong. In a country where a job applicant - sight unseen but with a "black sounding" name is guaranteed to receive 50% fewer job interviews, something is wrong. In a country where thirty percent of young black men can expect to be incarcerated, something is wrong. I mean, come on, nowhere else in the world has this kind of the incarceration rate. In a country where a black lawyer is arrested for sitting in his car in his own driveway because it made a neighbor nervous, something is wrong. In a country where a black family of means can only buy a house in a nice neighborhood if they have white friends pretend to be the purchasers, something is wrong. In a country where 45.8% of young black children (under age 6) live in poverty - as compared to 14.4% of white children - something is wrong.

There are really only two ways of looking at the disparity between those of us who are white and those of our brothers and sisters who are black.

One way is to blame an entire people for their problems. Blacks simply must be inferior because they can't hold jobs, they can't keep out of trouble with the law, they can't manage to stay married and raise a decent family. It's just the way they are.

If that's the way to look at it, then the only problem is with the black folks themselves. And that means we don't have to do anything about it, except maybe avoid them.

The other way is to look at the system in which we find ourselves. Our country was founded - like it or not - on the backs of people we forced into labor and forcibly separated from the rest of us. Sure, in the beginning, there were white indentured servants. But when they became harder to come by and less easily controlled, rich folks

went for the non-white option. They experimented with enslaving Native Americans but found that they escaped too easily and did not work the way owners wanted.

So African slaves became preferable. With trade in Africa booming, there were plenty of folks willing to get those slaves. Better yet, when African slave women had babies, those were free slaves for life. It paid to have slaves, and it paid to sow seeds of distrust between those black slaves and their poor white neighbors (who were little better off than slaves themselves - other than they had the pride of being white and were given the hope of someday becoming wealthy themselves).

Let's remember that this state of affairs lasted on our continent for roughly two hundred years. Even after the Civil War, draconian laws made it virtually impossible for most African Americans to be anything more than dirt poor and in a constant state of fear for their lives. A black person could be lynched with hardly any provocation or justification.

Even after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, little changed. There were attempts. Bussing was supposed to end segregation, but whites just moved away - you've heard of white flight. The gap between black schools and white schools may even be worse now than before.

In the last year or two there have been countless protests against cops shooting unarmed black men (and children, as the seven-year-old who was sleeping on her sofa by a cop who felt threatened by her during a no-knock raid. The police had accidentally raided the wrong apartment.) But the backlash against these protests has been severe. #BlackLivesMatter, which means that black lives also matter, has been countered by #AllLivesMatter, which means, "shut up and sit down."

We live in a system the scales are so weighted against African Americans in particular (we could go into a whole other column on our abuse of Native Americans), that generation after generation finds it difficult to maintain hope.

I don't pretend to know how to address this problem other than to start with recognition that it is a problem of the system rather than any one group of people. None of us started this system - it's much older even than our constitution. But we are the people who are living in it now, and we are responsible for how we deal with it.

Our diocese has asked every congregation to address the issue of racism (which is what it boils down to) - with particular focus on the church's role. We have much to atone for. We've been asked to look at three books: *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration In The Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation* by Jennifer Harvey, and *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* by Jim Wallis.

Additionally, I am giving a lecture at the Henry A. Wallace Center this Sunday at 2:00 pm on Slavery and the Church in New York. You're invited to come - it's free.

I wish I could just wave a magic wand and make in prejudice and inequality go away. But I can't. All I can do is face the reality and understand not only how lucky I am, but also that I have a responsibility for every one of my brothers and sisters. At least, that's what my Christian faith tells me.