

Insecurity
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
July 10, 2016

Luke 10:25-37

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ²⁶He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ ²⁷He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ ²⁸And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ ³⁰Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ ³⁷He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

What are we doing here today? Why are we sitting in a church days after seven people were murdered, eight when you include the man who murdered the officers? And we must include him, name him, mourn him because we follow Christ who taught us to pray for our enemies at least as much as we pray for our friends. Why are people sitting with communities of faith this weekend? I come to church in times like this because I want a word of hope. I come because I want to know what I can do to make “this,” the condition of our country, better. I come because I want a safe space to feel my feelings and safe people with whom to feel my feelings, without judgment, without filter. I want somewhere where I can be angry, where I can be afraid, where I can be heartbroken. Those of us who sit among our faith communities – White, Black, gay, straight, Gentile, Jew – we all want these things: hope, guidance, safety. And for all of us, church is this.

But we're not done yet with church, or more accurately church isn't done with us. When we get here, we must be prepared because church is where the word of God challenges us. And **that** is where church is different depending on who we are and, yes, what we look like. Just a couple of weeks ago I shared the names of the two new co-moderators of our denomination, T. Denise Anderson and Jan Edmiston. They both offered profound words this week, of which I'll share some parts with you this morning. As a matter of context, it is important for you to know that Denise Anderson leads out of her Blackness as much as Jan leads out of her Whiteness. Denise wrote this:

For those of you who ask "How long?" or "How many times must this happen?" I'll tell you precisely when it will stop. It will stop when people en masse are aware of the ways in which whiteness/white supremacy have shaped the way people of color are viewed, engaged, and treated in this world (even by other people of color). To come to this realization, however, white people will then have to be self-aware and convicted of the ways in which they have benefitted from and promulgated the lie of whiteness. As necessary as this is for the well-being of society, it is also an uncomfortable undertaking and there is literally nothing forcing white people to do it. White people, then, will likely have to create the force.

White people, you have heard it said that you must talk to other white people about racism, and you must. But don't talk to them about their racism. Talk to them about YOUR racism. Talk to them about how you were socialized to view, talk to, and engage with people of color. Talk to them about the ways you've acted on that socialization. Talk to them about the lies you bought into. Talk about the struggles you continue to have in shedding the scales from your eyes.¹

We're going to talk intentionally and thoughtfully through adult education in October about the power that is equated with the language "white supremacy" and what is meant by the "lie of whiteness" and I'm glad to talk about them after this with you if you like. For today I'm going to start with my stories of racism. Sort of. I want to share with you first segments of the blog that first began to open my eyes. You see, I have extended family who think and say overt and horribly racist things, extended family who foment division instead of seeking our commonality as humans. I thought, because I did not do that, surely I was not

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/tawnya.anderson.7/posts/10208295744984661>

racist. And then, after the shooting of Trayvon Martin, I read a post on the blog *Under the Acacia Tree*. Here is what it said:

I distinctly remember one of the days I had to really own my racism. Yes, that's right. I'm a white mother of 2 black boys and I'm a racist. Shocked? You shouldn't be. As a white person with white privilege, it's in the very air I breath[e]. I am owning it. I can speak it, "I am a racist." I try not to be, every single day. But, I am.

... How do I know I'm a racist? There are a lot of examples, but I'll share one. I was teaching high school. 9th grade, cultural anthropology. One of my black students, 'Hank', called me out. I am grateful for his courage.

'Hank' was a B-/C student. Nice kid. Charming. Liked to tell stories about his mom. Football player...He did OK in my class — he was fairly engaged in discussions, did his homework (mostly). He was a good talker. I wanted him to stretch his conversational skills into written work, because he could do some good thinking out loud, but needed to build his writing skills. In my class of 24 kids, he was one of 2 students of color, 2 black boys, to be precise.

I noticed one day that 'Hank' was furiously writing in a notebook with his head down, writing on and on and on and on. Since he was not an engaged note-taker, I knew what this meant. In a word: GIRLFRIEND. I walked around the room, as I always did, confirming as I walked past him that he was indeed writing to his 'girl'. I did nothing to interrupt the writing (clue 1). Day 2 the writing continued, and while I called on 'Hank' for a discussion point, I did not saunter over and casually close his notebook (clue 2). On day 3 I ignored 'Hank', thinking to myself, "he's doing ok in class, he's a C student. That's good for him" (clue 3). Day 4 and I figured 'Hank' must really be 'into' this girl. And still, I let him write (clue 4). I remember thinking, "he's a B-/C student, I'll intervene if he drops to a D." Yes, I thought that. On Days 5, 6, 7 I started feeling a little worried about 'Hank'. I started to get uncomfortable. It slowly dawned on me that I was letting this kid slip away right in front of me, and I had let thoughts drift around that undervalued him, valuing him differently than his peers. I WAS VALUING HIM DIFFERENTLY THAN HIS WHITE PEERS.

After nearly 2 weeks...TWO WEEKS, at the end of class I gently tapped him on the shoulder and asked him to stay after the bell. My request was quiet and friendly, but he knew (clue 5). As soon as the class emptied out he looked me right in the eye and asked, "What took you so long, Ms. Plum?" He had me. It's all he had to say to let me know that he KNEW that I didn't value him like my other (read: majority white!) students. I felt my heart sink to the pit of my stomach. I had waited too long. I had let him slip away. My inaction had conveyed to him that I saw him in a more mediocre, expendable, "he's doing ok for 'him' (read: black boy)" kind of way. My actions WERE the

actions of someone who valued him, his black skin, his future, LESS than my other students. He caught me. And then I caught me. My only response was to look him right in the eye and speak from my best and truest place, “I’m sorry ‘Hank’. You are right. I took too long to tell you that you are an important part of this class. I took too long to tell you to put that pen and notebook in your bag and get back to work. I’m telling you now. I’ll see you tomorrow, ready for class.”²

Here is my story. Thursday I volunteered with a group of friends at Feed My Starving Children. At that point I only knew about Alton Sterling in Louisiana but it was enough to make me keenly aware of the pain of the Black community. When I noticed among the thirty or so volunteers three Black volunteers, I was already thinking about how I wanted to make sure I didn’t look the other way, or avoid them, how I wanted to look them in the eye and let them know I saw them, that they weren’t invisible or less than. Two folks ended up working at our station with us and I learned they were a mother and her young adult son. I’ll call them Sheila and James. As I made casual conversation I could not stop thinking about the unimaginable fear Sheila must have every time James leaves the house or gets in a car. I thought about the precautions James needed to take with what he wore, what he said, what he listened to – things my own Jim never even needs to consider. I decided I needed to say something to Sheila but the time on the work floor ended just as I had figured out what I wanted to say.

We prayed over the food we had packed and then went to hear how much we had packed and to learn more about the children who would be receiving the food. I figured I would catch her once all that was done. While I was waiting for the presentation to end, I noticed that James had a “volunteer service hours” sheet in his hand. And my first thought was “community service hours – that’s too bad.” It wasn’t until I caught myself that I realized it could have been hours for National Honor Society or some other positive reason. I am a racist. I am ashamed and I am a racist. I still did go on to tell Sheila I am working to make things better and to tell James I pray he stays safe. They both reached out for hugs and Sheila and I cried. She told me she didn’t know how I knew she needed to hear that. **But I am still a racist.**

² <https://blueberrybuzz.wordpress.com/2013/07/16/i-am-not-trayvon-martins-mom/>

Racism isn't **only** hateful speech or blatant oppression. It's in the tiny thoughts that slip in and out, often unnoticed. **And** it's in the lack of thoughts. Jan Edmiston wrote "I am so thoroughly privileged that I only notice it a tiny fraction of the time."³ Brené Brown writes "not paying attention because you're not the one getting harassed or fired or pulled over or underpaid is the definition of privilege."⁴ I know the idea of privilege makes people squirm – you might think "but I didn't ask for it." None of us who sit in the safety of our own skin color or our own sexuality asked for it but we have it nonetheless. And I bring it up because not seeing it, not thinking about it, is at the root of what's named systemic racism. This matters. Realizing how easy you have it **matters** because it makes you realize there are others who don't.

I was talking with a Black friend the other day who was telling me what he taught his daughters about how to survive being pulled over. First, take that in: how to survive. That was never part of what I taught Jim when I was teaching him to drive. Until recent years, it never even occurred to me that not surviving being pulled over was even an option. The most I've ever feared is a speeding ticket. **His** daughters know they are safest if they ask the officer if they can reach for their wallets. They know that they need to keep both hands on the steering wheel and turn the interior light on. Jan's post continues, saying "I assume a lot of things that people of color cannot assume: that I will not be shot if pulled over in my car with a broken tail light, that I belong in the fancy department in Nordstrom, that I am smart, that I can live in any neighborhood I can afford, that I can get a bank loan based on my credit score (and not my skin tone)."⁵ We assume a lot, we don't think about a lot, because we've never had to. Today Jesus is asked "Who is my neighbor?" My neighbor, your neighbor, our neighbors are people who have to think about a whole lot more than you and I ever consider. Our neighbors are people whose days NEVER look like ours.

We need to be talking about these things. We need to admit these things. Brené Brown talks about facing a recurring problem and says "I wanted to solve this issue by doing more of what I already do...I think about how often we all try to solve problems by doing

³ <https://achurchforstarvingartists.wordpress.com/2016/07/08/my-name-is-jan-im-the-white-one/>

⁴ Brené Brown, PhD., LMSW, *Rising Strong* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), p. 166.

⁵ <https://achurchforstarvingartists.wordpress.com/2016/07/08/my-name-is-jan-im-the-white-one/>

more of what's not working – just doing it harder, grinding it out longer. We'll do anything to avoid the lowest of the low – self-examination.”⁶ This is what Denise Anderson was talking about when she wrote “For those of you who ask ‘How long?’ or ‘How many times must this happen?’ I’ll tell you precisely when it will stop. It will stop when people en masse are aware of the ways in which whiteness/white supremacy have shaped the way people of color are viewed, engaged, and treated in this world (even by other people of color). To come to this realization, however, white people will then have to be self-aware and convicted of the ways in which they have benefitted from and promulgated the lie of whiteness. As necessary as this is for the well-being of society, it is also an uncomfortable undertaking and there is literally nothing forcing white people to do it. White people, then, will likely have to create the force.”

I may be ashamed but people are dead, people are poor, people are incarcerated and my shame is nothing in comparison. You’ve heard a little about how I have had, and am having, a hard time shedding the scales from eyes. But I’m going to keep trying. I must. These are my neighbors. These are my brothers and sisters.

Let us pray:

July 8, 2016

Prayer in the Wake of Violence

Holy God, our hearts are breaking
as we learn of the tragic deaths of your beloved children,
each and every one created in your image—
in Baton Rouge, the Twin Cities, and Dallas,
Bangladesh, Baghdad, and Istanbul,
and all the places we too quickly forget or never even notice.
In your compassion, receive our tears and our anger,
our shock and our frustration that these cycles of violence continue

⁶ Brené Brown, PhD., LMSW, *Rising Strong* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), p. 179.

and even seem to grow worse.

Come to us now with your great strength and your healing power.

Help us to know what to do in our own lives,
in our communities, in our nation, and in our world.

Help us to grieve when we need to grieve,
to confront when we need to confront,
to confess when we need to confess,
and to change when we need to change.

Help us to turn our prayers into action that is
rooted in the power of love and integrity,
so that we may be healed
and that we may help in the healing of the world.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Christ in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Amen.

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