

Some Thoughts from a Recovering Racist

Dear Beloved in Christ,

The grievous fact of white privilege and white obliviousness to systemic racism was again brought home to me with sudden force during a diocesan Zoom meeting last week (a meeting that was not *about* racism – but of course, that’s where a whole lot of racism happens).

The meeting included small group breakout sessions, four gatherings of the same small group (7 of us) over two days to discuss the material presented. In the group I was in, there were two members from one parish who were lively contributors to the guided conversations.

In the final session of the breakout group, one of them (N.) shared that as she participates in meetings in her parish she always has to wonder whether someone’s reaction to her thoughts is “colored” by the fact that she is a Latina woman. She spoke of how she often seeks to have her thoughts put forward by someone of the dominant (white) culture to be sure they will be heard and fairly received.

When she had finished speaking, the other person from her parish, a white woman, said “N., I had no idea you were Latina.” There was a stunned silence among the rest of us, all white. I could see N., who had been so forthcoming throughout the sessions, shrink into herself. The comment silenced her, the one who had just expressed her fear of having her thoughts discounted by white people.

“N., I had no idea you were Latina.” What lay underneath that simple statement?

My bad? “Oh, I had no idea you are Latina.” (I realize I haven’t spent enough time getting to know you.)

Condescension? “White acceptance” or “white legitimization” of the “other.” “Oh, I had no idea, but don’t worry, it’s OK with me.” (Therefore you ought to feel better.)

White denial? “white self-justification” – “Oh, I had no idea, because I’m not one of those people who pays attention to ethnicity (or race, or . . .).” (The erroneous white claim of colorblindness.)

Is it possible that a person can say something that means one thing to them and yet conveys a different meaning altogether to the one to whom it is said? White people have so much work to do.

I tell this story not to be critical of the woman and her unthinking response, but to point to the problem of “oblivious whiteness,” of individual, cultural, systemic “white privileging”—a problem white people must address (it’s **our** problem and it hurts, demeans, and kills people of color). I would like to think I am not a racist. I don’t want to be one, I don’t mean to be one. I would like to think I have some level of self-awareness around the issues of racism. But even now, still just at the beginning of my summer reading commitment listening to the voices of people of color, I’m coming to recognize my own “oblivious whiteness,” my own “white obliviousness.” Honesty and humility must be the ground of this work.

A poem for this time:

Bullet Points by Jericho Brown

I will not shoot myself
In the head, and I will not shoot myself
In the back, and I will not hang myself
With a trashbag, and if I do,
I promise you, I will not do it
In a police car while handcuffed
Or in the jail cell of a town
I only know the name of
Because I have to drive through it
To get home. Yes, I may be at risk,
But I promise you, I trust the maggots
Who live beneath the floorboards
Of my house to do what they must
To any carcass more than I trust
An officer of the law of the land
To shut my eyes like a man
Of God might, or to cover me with a sheet
So clean my mother could have used it
To tuck me in. When I kill me, I will
Do it the same way most Americans do,
I promise you: cigarette smoke
Or a piece of meat on which I choke
Or so broke I freeze
In one of those winters we keep
Calling worst. I promise if you hear
Of me dead anywhere near
A cop, then that cop killed me. He took
Me from us and left my body, which is,
No matter what we’ve been taught,
Greater than the settlement
A city can pay a mother to stop crying,
And more beautiful than the new bullet
Fished from the folds of my brain.

To experience the poem, watch Jericho Brown read it at the New York City Poetry Festival at <https://vimeo.com/358910717> (If the link doesn't work from this document, you can copy and paste it into your browser).

We know from many reports and studies that communities of color, particularly African-American, Latino and Native American, are suffering greatly from the pandemic. Not because they are particularly susceptible in their bodies to the coronavirus, but because the racism endemic in our educational, economic, employment, health care, law enforcement and justice systems has already trapped them in positions of extreme vulnerability. They are so terribly at risk in so many ways.

If you are white (and most of us at Christ Church are), I hope you will join me in the reading I'm doing during this time when we can't gather in person for conversation. I see this as the *necessary foundation* of the work we have to do as individuals, as a community of faith, as a city, as a country. This work is about having the humility to listen and learn before we think we know anything about anything. My growing reading list is at the bottom of this letter and you can track my progress, and join me if you like. Some of you may already have been much more engaged in this work than I have been. Thank you. Keep on working.

If you are a person of color (as only a few of us presently are at Christ Church) perhaps you would kindly support your white siblings in your prayer, that God, who knows us more deeply than we can ever know ourselves, might enlighten us, help us see in ourselves what we would prefer not to see, know about ourselves what we would rather not know, open ourselves to God's searching and transforming Spirit.

"A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezekiel 36.26)

Dear friends, I continue to say: please be very careful right now, for yourself and for others. The number of Covid-19 cases in Pierce County, Washington State and around the country continues to rise at an alarming rate. Wash your hands, wear a mask, practice physical distancing. Protect your precious life and the precious lives of those around you.

With love for you in Christ,
Janet+

See below for Reminders and My Summer Reading List

Reminders

Read the Weekly every Friday for the latest parish news and information about new parish events and opportunities for worship and fellowship.

Check Our Website for ever-developing resources for worship, formation, service opportunities and connection in this time of pandemic.

Please remember: all our buildings are closed until further notice. At this time, it is critical that only parish staff be in the buildings, for essential work only, with a very few office volunteers, one at a time, (as invited by Parish Coordinator Shannon Farley), for tasks requiring their presence. **For the safety of our staff and volunteers, and so that they may observe required safety precautions, do not use your key** to enter any of the buildings. Multicare staff continue to work in their Trinity House offices, observing the same required safety precautions.

My Summer Reading List

My commitment to address my own racism and the systemic racism in our country begins by first responding to the *call to listen*. Here are the voices I want especially to hear this summer:

† Nickel Boys (a novel), Colson Whitehead - read week of Trinity Sunday.

The Underground Railroad (a novel), Colson Whitehead

Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America,

Ibram X. Kendi - **still waiting for book to arrive**

How to Be an Anti-Racist, Ibram X. Kendi

White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism, Robin DiAngelo

What Does it Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy, revised edition, Robin DiAngelo – reading week of Pentecost 4

Living into God's Dream: Dismantling Racism in America, Catherine Meeks

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, Michelle Alexander

† So You Want to Talk About Race, Ijeoma Oluo – read week of Pentecost 2

White Rage, Carol Anderson

† Another Day in the Death of America, Gary Younge – read week of Pentecost 3

Note: "What does it Mean to be White? Developing White Racial Literacy" my current read, is expensive, but I have a pdf of it that I would be happy to send you. Just let me know.