

Those of you who have been members of our church community since the summer of 2016 probably remember how aghast I was at the video footage of Philando Castile being murdered in cold blood during a routine traffic stop. Hopefully, you also recall my sermon on Black Lives Matter, in which I argued that the black community's centuries long experience of victimization at the hands of the white power structure legitimated the phrase, "Black Lives Matter." There was a movement... There was cause... after cause... after cause... after cause... after cause... after cause... There were demonstrations... I thought I knew how the movie would end...

Anyone who has bothered to educate themselves about the black experience in white America for the last 400 years realizes that this same movie has been playing over and over and over again, since the first slave ship landed in North America. The black community has known for a long time now how this movie ends...

Now the film is rolling - again: Stephon Clark, Botham Jean, Atatiana Jefferson, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd. Unarmed black man after unarmed black man after unarmed black woman after unarmed black woman after unarmed black man after unarmed black man has been murdered by our law enforcement officials. We have a movement... We have cause... after cause... after cause... after cause... after cause... after cause... We have demonstrations... Now, do you really think you know how this movie is going to end?

This movie is going to end the way it has always ended... unless... And that's what the rest of the sermon is about, the "unless."

So, what is the "unless" of which I speak? The revolution that is at hand must be a revolution that embraces all people. This means that white people who seek to be part of the revolution must realize that they, too, are up against "whiteness." And what does *that* mean? It means a great deal more than individual white people having a personal desire for equality and justice. It means that individual white people must collectively commit to dismantling a white power structure that is more powerful and deeply rooted than most white people realize. From deeply ingrained, instinctual, tribal tendencies that interprets difference as "otherness," to the one percent's economic and political stranglehold on power and institutions, white people must be willing to engage in a generation long project of doing away with "whiteness." This begins with the realization that one actually "learned to be white" in the first place.

For a white person to be told that they actually "learned to be white" is likely to create some cognitive dissonance, which will be in proportion to one's naïveté about

“whiteness.” To help us wrap our minds around this, let us begin, counterintuitively, with Langston Hughes. “It was a long time ago,” wrote Hughes,

I have almost forgotten my dream.
But it was there then,
In front of me,
Bright like a sun—
My dream.
And then the wall rose,
Rose slowly,
Slowly,
Between me and my dream.
Rose until it touched the sky—
The wall.
Shadow.
I am black.
I lie down in the shadow.
No longer the light of my dream before me,
Above me.
Only the thick wall...

What is this “wall” of which Langston Hughes wrote?

In 1897, *The Atlantic* magazine published an essay by W.E.B. DuBois entitled, “Strivings of the Negro People.” This same essay would later be incorporated into his book, “The Souls of Black Folk.” As a prelude to that essay, DuBois wrote: “It dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.”

DuBois “veil” is Langston Hughes “wall.” Both metaphors convey the barrier black people have historically felt in trying to gain equal access to the resources and prosperity of white people, let alone recognition of the common bond of our shared humanity. Stated otherwise, the white power structure has historically been an impediment to black people. This impediment is inescapable for black people and led W.E.B. DuBois to write about what he termed “double consciousness,” “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” as we heard in today’s Reading. Every black person in America today lives the reality of “double consciousness,” minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, week by

week, month by month, year by year... White people, if they understand this at all, and most don't, probably only understand this is an abstract concept. But we have to start somewhere... so back to Hughes' poem...

This wall of which Hughes wrote is unknown to white people, generally speaking. (Although it must be remarked, there are many different types of walls impeding many different groups of people, for instance, white women, though white, encounter a wall. Members of the LGBT community encounter a wall. Asian people encounter a wall. Hispanic people encounter a wall. And so forth...) But generally speaking, the wall of which Hughes wrote is unknown to white people. This is because learning to be white places one with in a power structure replete with implicit benefits that are presumed and therefore remain unquestioned: easier access to the job market, better educational institutions, and what have you... That's "whiteness," folks.

Some of you have heard me tell the story of my learning to be white. I will tell it again, in hopes that it will provoke your own memories of learning to be white, if you are a white person. If you are not a white person, my story may give you some ideas about how to have such a conversation with white people.

The earliest lesson in learning to be white that I can recall occurred when I was five or six years old, I believe. My family was at the local Dairy Queen waiting in line to purchase ice cream. I was holding my mother's hand and like many young children, was lost in absorbing the environment around me rather than paying attention to my immediate situation. At some point I let go of my mother's hand for a brief period of time. Inattentively, I reached out and took my mother's hand again. Looking up at my mother, I discovered that it was not my mother's hand that I grasped but the hand of a large black woman. Trauma ensued. I started crying, only to find my mother a short distance away, laughing at the situation. I believe the emotional intensity of that moment is what makes the memory so lucid in my mind. I was a very young child terrified at the prospect of having lost my mother.

Not long after - I believe the next day - I heard my mother recount this story to a neighbor. My mother's version of the story ended with me being terrified by a large black woman, whom she called "Aunt Jemima," which my mother took to be hilarious. This version of the story troubled me because in my version, I was simply terrified at the prospect of having lost my mother. *Yes, I was conscious of this at the time. This is not historical revisionism. I have remembered this incident with great clarity my entire life...* Anyway, in listening to my mother recount this story to our neighbor I had learned that there was something about blackness that was demeaning and hence, humorous.

Obviously, I didn't wrap my feelings in these words at the time, but this gets to the essence of what I felt.

Another lesson in learning to be white again involves my mother. This lesson, too, is very lucid in my memory, because of its emotional impact. Some years later, I'm guessing around the age of 10, I had developed a fascination and attraction to dark skinned people, not just black people but Indian people as well. I remember saying to my mother with starry-eyed fondness, "Why can't we have dark skin, too?" My mother didn't say a word but shot me a look that was so searing it instantly made the subject of blackness taboo.

Now, I could tell similar stories about my father, who had his own lessons to teach me about learning to be white, having been a cop during the revolution of 1968. (You can probably imagine the stories I heard from him as a child.) After all, it's not my intent to throw my mother under the moral bus here. It's just that these two particular stories stand out the most to me. The point is, my parents successfully taught me how to be white. Learning to be white begins by "othering" difference and ends with all the benefits of being on the right side of Langston Hughes' "wall."

If you'll bear with me for just another moment here, I want to share with you that first moment in my life when I realized that I had learned to be white and that there was a cost to my whiteness. Specifically, my whiteness had subjected me to a type of sociological blindness that became a source of shame for me.

Fast forward to the age of 21, when I had reenrolled in undergraduate school at the University of Michigan and had made best friends with a fellow student; a black man named Bill. Bill and I had become quite close, so much so that we were completely unguarded in each other's company. So one day, while we were talking about race, I asked him this incredibly embarrassing question (indicative of my white blindness): "Hey Bill, how come some black people are really dark and some black people are almost white?" I don't know exactly what went on in Bill's mind at that moment but God bless this man for his tolerance! He simply looked at me with a tinge of disbelief and said, "You really don't know, do you?" "No, I don't!" I said. So he explained to me why this is the case and that the fact of it has created its own unique set of racial problems within the black community.

I actually believe that it is the shame of that moment that has made me sensitive to, and interested in race relations throughout my adult life.

The point of all this, if you're a white person, is that nobody is born knowing they are white. White people learn to be white. If you're not white person, and especially if you're a black person, the point of all this is that there is a process of becoming white, of which

most white people remain unconscious. And, there is a cost to all this learning to be white, what I have called “white blindness,” which results from not needing to know anything other than how to be white because the power structure is always in your favor. Stated a bit differently, unlike the “double consciousness” all black people possess, white people possess a “singular consciousness.”

The philosopher – epistemologists - logician in me knows that no one can know what they don't know. This fact brings us full circle, namely, to the beginning of the sermon where I said that white people who seek to be part of the revolution must realize that they, too, are up against “whiteness.” That individual white people must collectively commit to dismantling a white power structure that is more powerful and deeply rooted than most white people realize. From deeply ingrained, instinctual tribal tendencies that interprets difference as “otherness,” to the one percent's economic and political stranglehold on power, white people must be willing to engage in a generation long project of doing away with “whiteness.” In short, white people have got to figure out a way to come to know what they don't know.

Having said that, here are two things white people can do to come to know what they don't know. First, white people need to educate themselves about racial disparity, both historical and current. It is not enough simply to be antiracist, as laudable as that impulse is. One must also have a significant understanding of historical and current racial issues in this country. Without such understanding, white support of the plight of black people in this country will be the emotive only. White sympathy in and of itself is simply unconvincing to many black people. Genuine understanding is the prerequisite to engagement because genuine understanding raises the prospect of meaningful action.

Second, white people need to listen to black people tell their stories - without any white if's, white ands, or white buts! White blindness is a real thing. Black people have the vision to guide white people through this country's 400-year history of racial disparity because black people are the ones who have actually *lived* it. Only by listening to black people describe the lay of the racial landscape will white people be ready to traverse the territory with them.

I realize that I have said a great deal about learning to be white in this sermon. And indeed, that was the primary theme I had decided to address this morning. In my sermon synopsis I said that I would also address how the moral outrage white people express at moments of heightened racism in this country is itself an expression of white privilege. That's a bit of a jarring claim so I want to take just a few minutes and explain this to you, as a capstone to the sermon.

The black experience is the experience of racial disparity, which manifests in numerous ways: as a lack of educational opportunity, occupational opportunity, economic opportunity, adequate healthcare, over policing, and what have you... It is important to recognize that for the vast majority of black people in this country this experience is persistent and inescapable - the grind of daily life.

When a tragedy such as the murder of George Floyd occurs, this racial disparity enters the consciousness of all people. Demonstrations like those we are now seeing sometimes ensue, including, through time, increasing numbers of white people. This is laudable. White people's consciousness *ought* to be peaked at moments like this.

That said, the demonstrations that reflect this moral outrage are short-lived. After a few days, at most a few weeks, people must return to their lives. It is the place to which one returns that interests me here. Black people return to life as they know it... and have always known it. White people return to life as they know it... and have always known it. Black people return to one side of Langston Hughes "wall," white people to the other - safe in the arms of the very power structure that creates racial disparity to begin with. This is white privilege.

If white people want to be part of a revolution that overcomes racism in this country, they need to recognize that their participation in demonstrations is insufficient to the cause. What is needed is a recognition of, and commitment to change the conditions of racial disparity that black people face on a daily basis. Persistent, demanding, difficult work must be engaged in order to dismantle the white power structure that is the root of the racial problem in America.

It is this type of commitment, not participation in demonstrations alone, that will build the types of relationships with the black community that are necessary if white people are to take part in this revolution in a meaningful and constructive way. To the extent possible, white people need to plug themselves in to the groups and institutions that are doing this work. This might be through Black Lives Matters. It might be through the NAACP. It might be through a local church group. It might be by building black/white alliances across invisible barriers to help the revolution gain momentum. There are numerous ways to do this demanding, difficult, persistent work of dismantling the white power structure.

Even symbolism matters - and with this thought I will end.

Last week a demonstration made its way down Maumee Street and this congregation proudly displayed its Black Lives Matter flag. This is an important symbol of solidarity with

the cause of racial justice. But it also begs a question, namely, is returning that flag to its interior space where it is unseen by the general public a reflection of white privilege? That question bears repeating. *Is returning our Black Lives Matter flag to its interior space where it is unseen by the general public a reflection of white privilege?* Stated otherwise, if our congregation truly stands in solidarity with the cause of racial justice, shouldn't we be displaying that flag every day? Because every day black people face the racial disparity we claim to want to overcome. Stated differently yet again, consider that while we can conceal our Black Lives Matter flag in the interior of our church building, black people cannot conceal their black skin – nor should they have to... Stated differently yet again, if we are unwilling permanently to display our Black Lives Matter flag for the general public to see, is it because we are counting some white privilege cost? If so, we ought to be questioning how well we are walking our talk, because love does not count the cost, my friends.