

I begin my sermon this morning in a way I've never done before. I begin with an apology. I apologize for a third heavy sermon in a row. Normally I try to spread dense, strong or difficult sermons out over time. But given this is Black History Month I decided to go into depth on issues of race and the social injustice associated with race in our society. Rather than talk about all those folks of color who have been historically left out of our view of American History. I ask your forbearance to sit through one more venture into the territory.

Truth is, I'm beginning to get a bit tired of talking about this very difficult subject. There's not a lot of good news in this territory in our culture and society, never has been. And as a black man and someone who's sold my knowledge and skills as a consultant on managing issues of differences, I know full well, white America, both inside and outside of corporations, has a limited tolerance for addressing issues of race, power and inequality.

My apology also, in blunt honesty, is to help insulate myself from being accused of being a one-trick pony, as so many women who talk about sexism and gay people who talk about homophobia are accused of. People who live in a particular segment of society have a particular experience and view of the world not shared by those who live outside that segment. That difference in worldview is often labeled as someone having a chip on their shoulder, as having an ax to grind, as being overly sensitive. And, if you will, as seeing through colored glasses. We run the risk of being ostracized or devalued because we often sing a different song.

The issue I've just raised is embedded in what I want to talk to you about this morning. In fact, I believe this is the most important subject to speak about during this Black History Month. It's the issue of privilege.

So far this month, I've talked about the importance of a cultural reference point as it relates to god. Not just a personal belief in a god, but about the role a god may play in a cultural view of the world. I've also talked about institutional racism as something infinitely more powerful, pernicious and impactful than the personal racism that may be meted out here and there by individuals.

This morning I want to turn our focus to what I believe is the central issue in the perpetuation of racism, any ism, any power differential and social injustice. It's the issue of privilege, in this case, white privilege.

Privilege is a particularly difficult issue to get our hands around. It's also hard to get our heads around, because, fundamentally, I suspect it's counter-cultural, maybe even counter to human nature. It seems, our natural inclination is to focus on, to pay most attention to, who has the most. We rarely hear anybody say, "oh goodie, I got the biggest piece, or "I make more money than you do". That would be seen, and probably experienced as impolite, rude, crass, arrogant and a bunch of other "negative" attributes.

Instead, our tendency is to notice who got the larger helping, the bigger piece of pie, more candy. It's not at all unusual to hear a child say "but she got more than I did". Or for grown-ups to say: "yeah but, my house isn't as big as theirs" or "but I don't make what he makes". We tend to compare ourselves to those who have more than we do, implying "they" are better off than I am. Or, "if only they would work harder, or had a better education, or better behavior, they could be equals."

So the dynamic that gets set up is, on one hand, "they" are better off than I am, OR, in those circumstances where we are clearly in the one-up position, it's because of the "lack" in the other. Our collective tendency is to say poor me or it's their fault, and it doesn't have anything to do with me. Our tendency is to be totally blind to our privileged position. To be totally blind to the way the rules of the game have been set up to our benefit.

It is not an accident that we have never had a black president before, nor a woman, nor someone who is gay or who doesn't espouse a belief in god—a Christian god. The rules of the game are set up to devalue those who are not white, heterosexual, male and Christian. And oh yeah, have significant amounts of money. So people with those particular characteristics have a leg up on the rest of us. Completely separate from individual qualities or characteristics, they are in a privileged position in our society.

We as a society have to name the truth of this reality, if that reality is to ever change. Like the one who gets the biggest piece of the pie, you shouldn't expect that person to tell everyone else they got the biggest piece. It's the one who has less that complains, not the one who got the most! Why should they? Truth be told, we are all a little bit greedy, and some more than a little bit.

Truth be told, we seldom, knowingly, do anything that has a deleterious impact on what's important to us. That is not to say we do not offer assistance to those in need. Many of us do give to the poor, the needy and we do talk of equality and fair play. But almost always, only to the extent that it does not have a noticeable impact on us.

We give to the poor only that portion of our income that we can afford to throw away. We feed the poor only to the extent that it doesn't impact our own meal. We may march in solidarity with women, gays, blacks and immigrants, but we don't do it when it may cost us our standing in society, or our ability to get elected or our jobs, let alone our lives.

There is a way, where such behavior is wholly rational, wholly legitimate, it makes perfect sense. After all, we all want to be comfortable, we want what's best for ourselves and dear ones. We want to live to fight another day.

This is privilege in action. Those of us who can afford to deal with these types of issues on an optional basis, tend to do so. Those who have to confront the "smaller piece of pie issue" every day of our lives don't get to choose whether or not to engage these issues. Those of us with the smaller piece of pie live these issues. These issues don't come in and out of our lives by our choosing.

It is very hard for those with options, those with the privilege to choose, to see that they have choice. From the perspective of those who are in the one-up position, it's just the way it is. They are simply doing the best they can. They do not see themselves as perpetrators of inequity, of injustice. After all, it's unreasonable of us to expect anyone to give away all their money, to give their house or job to someone else. That would be irrational behavior.

But that does not mean there is nothing that can be done to address the issue of inequality, of injustice. That does not mean there is nothing that can be done to change the status quo. It does not mean, any of us who have the privilege of choice, have no accountability for the existence and perpetuation of inequality, of racial disparity, of societal injustice.

The fact is, we who benefit from unearned privilege, unearned advantages, have a very real obligation to come face to face with our unearned leg up. We have an obligation to begin to pierce the myth of living in a meritocracy. Otherwise, our silence helps to perpetuate that inequity, to the detriment of those who suffer its consequences.

Privilege comes in oh so many flavors. Men are privileged over women in our society. Thin people are privileged over heavy people. Moneyed people are privileged over those without. Heterosexuals are privileged over homosexuals, certainly transgender people. Couples over singles. Tall people over short. Those with degrees over those without. Whites over blacks. Christians, agnostics and atheist, over Muslims.

Even within groups, privilege exists. White men and black men are privileged over their female counterparts. Blondes tend to be privileged over those with dark hair, people with full heads of hair, over the bald ones. And lighter skinned black people are privileged over their darker skinned relatives.

Having privilege is not the problem. The question becomes what does one do with that unearned advantage, that leg up, that societal preference? None of which is earned, merely granted by dint of appearance or station. James Baldwin tells us "not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Those of us with unearned privilege must face the truth of our unearned advantage. We need to do the counter-intuitive, the counter-cultural work of making visible that which we have been taught to keep in our blind-spot. This work is about awareness, which leads to knowledge and understanding. We need to see the impact and manifestations of our unearned advantages.

The only way we can bring this awareness into focus is by having a willingness to question the normative, what's taken for granted as it relates to interactions across areas of difference. We need to be curious rather than sure, open rather than closed. We need to be willing to hear a different song than that which is familiar to us. We need to not simply assume a different viewpoint, even a contradictory viewpoint, is simply wrong and off key. We need to be willing to challenge and question our assumptions. We need to remember we have been taught to be blind and not take pushback as a personal slight or failure.

Part of this process of gaining awareness is to learn to think critically. McIntosh tells us we can “start by distinguishing between positive advantages which we can work to spread and negative types which unless rejected will always reinforce our present hierarchies.” Our faith tradition calls us to the former. We covenant and affirm the inherent dignity of all people, not just thin, able bodied, blondes.

Our belief in justice, equity and the democratic process calls us to be activists, not mere commentators on these issues. I think any Unitarian Universalist, any American for that matter, should be outraged at any and all attempts to interfere with someone’s right to vote, the most American of American rights of citizenship.

And I think we as a people, a faith community must seek to grant the same advantages we have to those who do not. We need to learn to tease apart those advantages and privileges granted us via race, and distinguish them from those granted based on class, gender and sexual orientation.

And some of us need to stand up and fight against these inequalities, these injustices and detrimental practices so prevalent in our society. But at a minimum, we need to begin a process that takes the blinders off. Begin a process that breaks the silence that keeps these maladies in place.

In order to do that we absolutely must adopt a perspective greater than an “I” point of view. We need to steep ourselves in a “we” perspective, a viewpoint that best serves the needs of the “all”, not just the advantaged, or me. And we need to acknowledge that the vast majority of us, in this room, we in this faith tradition, are disproportionately in those groups that are advantaged. We need to honor and be affected by that truth.

One last thing. We need to take the long view. We need to not be stopped by the steep path to higher ground. We need to not be stopped by our lack of knowledge of these issues—despite the fact that we are used to thinking of ourselves as bright, intelligent and knowing. We need to be willing to do work that may not have visible success this month, this year, maybe not even in our lifetime. But work that is just and right nonetheless.

I remind us that Moses, who led the Israelites, was allowed to see the Promised Land but was not allowed to place one foot on it. Martin Luther King, in his very last speech, said, “I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.”