

With a service title like The Dirty Socks Theory, I find it difficult to begin with anything other than an explanation of the theory. I, actually we, first learned about the Dirty Socks concept while attending the Growing Stronger Program the district sponsored some time ago. Three years ago our congregation, along with several others from as far away as Virginia, started meeting to look at how to strengthen our congregations.

One of the first things we looked at was how to welcome first-time visitors. We were told that everyone in the congregation should view themselves as having responsibility for welcoming new people. We were told to engage people in conversation, not just say hello and point them to the coffee. Part of that engagement should be designed to find out a little bit about who they are, what their interest are.

We were also instructed to listen, really listen to what people had to say, because we might learn something important about how we are seen through “newbie” eyes, how others experience our environment from a fresh perspective. The notion was that we often don’t see our own place the way a new set of eyes might.

The example used was how someone new might notice the dirty socks on the floor that we’ve been walking past for days. I don’t think the instructor really expected any of us had dirty socks on the floor of our worship space. He intended as a metaphor.

I too use the concept as a metaphor this morning to talk about what might hide in plain view and not be seen, because we’ve grown accustomed to it’s presence, it’s very existence. I also want to talk about the anecdote, which requires being intentional about looking to see what lies in our blind spot.

We all have blind spots. None of us are perfect. And the vast majority of us are good people...but with the ability to offend with little or no awareness of the impact of our behavior.

I want to give you a bit of a roadmap of where I'm going...it might make it a bit easier to follow me through what can be a real thicket, less conceptually than emotionally. Very few of us are comfortable pulling back the curtain to expose what we might prefer not to be seen.

I'm going to start with issues of gender and move into issues of race. This is Black History month and our theme for the month is Healing. I'm hopeful my words will move us in the direction of healing the wounds of racial disparity that is embedded in the history of our nation.

I want to paint a couple vignettes for you. When I was a Human Resources Manager in the early 80's, I sat in a meeting with three managers, one of whom was the senior manager. They were all white men. We were discussing promoting two highly competent women engineers to the position of supervisor.

We all agreed they were promotable and had the skills to do the work required of them. Then one of the guys, with sincerity and concern for what these women might have to deal with, asked, "but will the men be willing to work for her?". After a moment of silence, I, the only non-engineer and non-white man in the room, said, "I've never heard that question asked before when we've talked about promoting people. It seems to me, the answer is yes, they will work for her... if they want to stay employed here. We do have the ability to ensure it".

From that manager's perspective, the issue was whether or not that woman would be "allowed" or "granted authority" by those that worked for her. In his mind, the issue was the woman, not his responsibility as a manager to manage his department.

During that same timeframe, I conducted training on managing issues of difference. With a room full of people, we were talking about how to manage issues of difference across gender. At some point, one of the supervisors became visibly agitated. As an engineer, he simply wanted the answer. He said something like, "I'm all in favor having women in the work place, just tell me what to do! Should I open the door for them or not?"

For him too, the issue was the woman, “the other”. For him as well, the issue was “out there”, therefore the answer lay somewhere “out there” as well. And all would be fine if he was only given the right answer, if he was only instructed on the right way to deal with “them”.

As Peggy McIntosh talked about in the reading this morning, he was willing to be supportive of women, but he was unwilling to give up the comfort of his maleness. He was unwilling to deal with the discomfort of not knowing, the discomfort of making a mistake and not being seen as right and good.

I’m sure he would have hated to be seen as a sexist. I’m sure he did not see himself as a sexist. After all, he was supportive of the idea of having women in the work place. But at the same time, he didn’t want to have to do the work of dealing with women as individuals.

His behavior wasn’t driven by meanness, or disdain for women. His behavior was driven by what was in his blind spot...his male privilege of being comfortable, not having to deal with all that “stuff” about women. He did not want to disturb his privilege of not having to think about it. Just tell me what “they” want, I’m not up for this becoming an issue. Please, give me the answer and we can make this whole thing disappear.

This all happened in the 80’s. Things have certainly changed a great deal since then. I would think it would be rare for these kinds of things to happen in most work places today.

But, male privilege is still alive and well. Just look around. Men continue to have disproportionate representation in upper management, congress, the banking industry. It’s not because, based on gender, they are more intelligent or work harder. The culture is simply more inclined to see men as authority figures than women.

This is a systemic issue. It’s not about individual men or women. This is simply the truth of the way our society operates and has operated throughout its history.

Likewise, the issue of white privilege is not about individual people, white or black. It's about the way our culture operates and how it impacts all of us. This is essential to understand if we are to recognize the existence of what lies in our culture's blind spot.

White privilege is not about this person or that person having more or less privilege. It is not about this group of white people having more or less privilege than another group of white people. This is a generic dynamic that McIntosh is trying to hold up for us to see.

It's my experience from working on issues of difference for 30 or so years that the dynamic of white privilege is very hard for many Euro-Americans to see or accept. In fact, it seems harder for Euro-Americans to accept the notion of white privilege than it is for men to accept the notion of male based privilege.

I've come to believe the primary reason this dynamic is so difficult to see or accept is that foundational to white privilege is an insistence on being seen and treated as an individual. This is particularly the case for white men. White women tend to have more experience with society lumping them together. There is an exception to the insistence on individuality, it's when one self-identifies as an IBMer or as Irish or the like.

In her article, McIntosh, says she believes "whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege"... that "[she's] come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which [she] can count on cashing in each day, but about which [she] was meant to remain oblivious."

In efforts to identify her white privilege, privileges she thought her African-American friends and co-workers would not likely have...she developed a large list. Including: 1) When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

2) Whether I used checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.

- 3) I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
- 4) I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- 5) If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
- 6) I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
- 7) I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
- 8) I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
- 9) I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
- 10) I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazine featuring people of my race.

These are a few of the privileges Peggy identified as active in her own life and circumstances. These are examples of privileges that accrue for reasons that have nothing to do with her individuality. They are benefits, if you will, that accrue to only a segment of our society, and by definition are not available to those defined as being outside of that normative structure.

Some of these privileges, she argues, should be given up, rejected, not accepted. Regarding others, an effort should be made to ensure all people in our society share those benefits or privileges. And she acknowledges that this is furtive, hard work. It runs counter to long-term training and societal reinforcement.

She tells us that to redesign our social systems, we first need to acknowledge their tremendous unseen dimensions. And that being oblivious to the powerful dynamics of white advantage serves to perpetuate the myth of meritocracy and democratic choice being equally available to all. The net result is that it serves to keep power in the hands of the groups that already have most of it.

One last McIntish quote: “since race and sex are not the only advantaging systems at work, we need similarly to examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion or sexual orientation.”

While these issues are not the same, she encourages us to look at them even though distinguishing between them can be difficult. We need to do our best to investigate these issues because all of the oppressions are interlocking and self-replicating.

Grappling with issues associated with unearned advantages, benefits and privilege, is at it's core, social justice work. And it's never too late to begin.