

## ***Race and Privilege (Part 2)***

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**Ancient Witness:** Galatians 3:28

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus.*

When I arrived here in Pullman four years ago, one of my first sermons was “Race and Privilege.” I remember suggesting that this church get its own Black Lives Matter sign. That idea didn’t gain much traction then, but we have one now. And so, I think it’s fitting for me to revisit this subject this morning.

After a police officer in Minneapolis put his knee on the neck of George Floyd for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, killing him, and after police in Louisville broke into the wrong house and shot and killed Breonna Taylor, protests erupted in cities throughout this nation in spite of being in the throes of a pandemic.

None of this is surprising, of course. This is another episode of a long pattern of excessive and deadly force by police against Black people in this country.

Almost six years ago we saw images Ferguson, MO burning. After the Grand Jury refused to indict the police officer who shot Michael Brown, a young, unarmed African American man, six times, killing him.

After that, we saw other horrific videos of unarmed African American men killed by police. A slogan, “Black Lives Matter,” emerged and became a movement. And the point of that statement is not that other lives don’t matter; of course, they do. But the whole point is to draw attention to the injustice and the persistent reality that for 300 years Black lives have not mattered, and that has to change!

In civics class we learned that at the founding of this nation Black slaves were counted as 3/5 of a person in our Constitution! But only because it benefited White southerners to get more congressional representation. In reality, their lives mattered even less and were not persons at all, as they were bought and sold as property on the auction block.

In April of 2001, all hell broke loose in Cincinnati. Anger and frustration had boiled over into riots and protests in the streets of the downtown and the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. The heavy-handed police response often added fuel to the fire. I was at a peaceful protest and witnessed police indiscriminately pepper-spraying and shooting nonviolent protesters with “bean bag” rounds from shotguns. The mayor enforced a city-wide curfew and declared a state of emergency.

A young unarmed African-American man, Timothy Thomas, had been shot and killed by a Cincinnati police officer. And a month earlier, another unarmed African-American man, Walter

Owensby, was choked to death by Cincinnati police. None of the officers responsible were convicted of any wrongdoing. Over a five year span, 15 men died in encounters with Cincinnati police. Most of them were armed; some were not. All of them were black.

I had been the Senior Minister at Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church only for about a year and a half at the time, and our church was in a neighborhood adjacent to Over-the-Rhine. A coalition of groups held a press conference in our church, at which I first met Angela Leisure, the mother of the slain Timothy Thomas. I also met members of the Sentinels, an association of Black officers on the Cincinnati Police Department, who were part of the protest. Later, I helped organize the “March for Justice,” at which several thousand people, including Angela Leisure, engaged in a peaceful march and protest in the heart of the city.

Racial tensions were high before these deaths; the city was a tinderbox just waiting to be ignited. Cincinnati was one of the most economically segregated cities in the nation. And well before the deaths and protests occurred, a coalition including the Black United Front and the ACLU filed a lawsuit in federal court against the police for a *30-year pattern* of racial profiling, “driving while black.”

What have I learned? Institutional racism is real. From the police forces in Los Angeles to Cincinnati to Ferguson to Minneapolis to Louisville, it is real. While many of us may be unaware, many African-American communities are all-too-aware of this persistent reality. The sense of outrage and frustration is understandable and justified. The deaths of Timothy Thomas and Michael Brown and George Floyd were not simply isolated incidents; for many, they are *part of a larger pattern*. They simply lit the fuse to a powder keg that is already there.

There are these *patterns*, if we are willing to see them, of unequal attention and suspicion by the police—“Driving While Black” and Stop and Frisk, a *pattern* of unequal use of force by police—African Americans are four times more likely to experience use of force when stopped by police versus their white counterparts, a *pattern* of death at the hands of the police, and a *pattern* of lack of accountability. Unarmed Black men are five times more likely than white men to be killed by police. We can see these patterns in Cincinnati, Ferguson, New York, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and on and on.

Several years ago I read *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander (2011). It’s one of the most important books that has been written in awhile, in my opinion.

The original Jim Crow was a name of a minstrel show character, and it represented a time of lynching and terror and the system of laws in the South that were implemented to demean and to keep black men, women and children “in their place” after the abolition of slavery. These were laws that prohibited intermingling of whites and black, laws against inter-marriage (finally overturned in 1967), voting and discrimination in virtually every sphere of life.

In many ways, Jim Crow was dismantled by the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Voting Rights Act (1965) and Supreme Court decisions that overcame the “separate and unequal” structure of schools.

The old Jim Crow is gone, but we have a new Jim Crow, a new system that keeps black men, women and children “in their place,” a new system of social control.

Alexander argues, very persuasively, that “mass incarceration is, metaphorically, the New Jim Crow and that all those who care about social justice should fully commit themselves to the dismantling this new racial caste system.”

The criminal justice system, then, became the tool for a system that would keep black people “in their place.” It would begin almost immediately. “Barry Goldwater in 1964 aggressively exploited the riots and fears of black crime, laying the foundation for the ‘get tough on crime’ movement that would emerge years later,” Alexander writes.

The number of men incarcerated went from 300,000 in 1980 to 2.3 million 30 years later! This was fueled primarily by the “war on drugs” declared by Ronald Reagan in 1982. This was followed by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act in 1986, mandatory minimum sentences and huge expenditures for enforcement. According to a Pew Study, by the end of 2007, more than 7 million Americans, or one in every 31 adults, were either behind bars, on probation or on parole!

The United States now has the highest incarceration rate in the world, surpassing highly repressive regimes such as Russia, China and Iran. The U.S. imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of Apartheid! One in three black men will be incarcerated sometime in their lifetime.

From the beginning to the end of the criminal justice system, the black community is disenfranchised and marginalized. They experience more suspicion, scrutiny and arrests; less adequate defense, more plea bargains, harsher sentencing, and the stigma and obstacles to employment and opportunity with the “criminal” label. As a result, black families and communities are decimated and put “in their place.” The New Jim Crow.

I have some first-hand experience here. For four years I did social work at a halfway house for federal inmates, and I would help them follow the requirements of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, to whom we reported. Most of my clients were black. Most had been in prison for a very long time, many of them on drug charges.

I saw the New Jim Crow from the inside out, and it deepened my own spiritual reflection and awareness, as well as my interaction with my own spiritual tradition.

Jesus, the central figure of my primary tradition, sought to transform not just hearts, but he sought to transform systems and laws that uphold privilege. He challenged and broke the purity laws of his day that divided races—Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans—that separated the poor, sick, lame and lepers from those in privilege—that divided women to subservience. And by association, Jesus was, himself, unclean.

The writer to the Galatians would say that the spirit of Christ breaks down the dividing walls and that in Christ, there is no racial distinction—no Jew or Greek, no distinction between criminals and non-criminals, the “worthy” or “unworthy,” no gender distinction, no class distinction, no distinction between slave or free. All are one. All are one.

Jesus was on the side of all of those who were “out of place” and he challenged any purity system that would put them “in their place.” He challenged not just personal attitudes, but he challenged the entire caste system of privilege and dominance, a system of “keeping things in their place.” And this is why, it seems to me, he was such a threat and had to be killed.

You know, I used to subscribe to a pretty good definition that racism = prejudice + power. This is largely true and shows how charges of “reverse racism” are so absurd. Without power one cannot institute racism. But today I would go further.

*Racism, it seems to me, is anything that upholds white privilege.* It doesn’t need conscious prejudice to exist. It doesn’t need to be deliberate. It’s not just bad, hateful people who participate and perpetuate racism. It’s all of us good people who participate in a system that upholds and protects privilege. It’s not just about overt, hateful motives; that’s way too easy. But it’s mostly about unconscious participation of a purity system. And it’s important to point out that just as slavery supported an oligarchy in the American South, racism continues to uphold the position of a new oligarchy. It’s also about class privilege. For 40 years American workers have seen wages stagnate and their American dream disappear while the rich got much richer. And as the white working class is manipulated into fearing and scapegoating their black and brown sisters and brothers, the wealthy elite steal them all blind. Racism is more than just irrational fear or unexplainable, unjustifiable hatred. *It serves a purpose!* It serves the privileged, and mostly, the privileged few.

And so, my friends, as white people of faith, this is not so much a matter of falling to our knees and begging forgiveness. No, this is more a matter of opening our eyes to the persistent patterns—to connect the dots—and to see a reality that is right in front of our face.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*