

## Privilege and Prejudice

1 Corinthians 12:7-13

(Race Sunday -- May 18, 2008)

In 1988, Peggy McIntosh, an administrator at Wellesley College Center for research on Women, published an essay on white privilege. McIntosh compared the circumstances of her life to those of her African-American colleagues in the same building and line of work. After some deep reflection, and analysis of unearned advantages and disadvantages, she began to see that, as a white academic, she was born with what she calls “an invisible package of unearned assets...” which she calls “white privilege.”

McIntosh describes “white privilege” as “an invisible, weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks of unearned assets, which I could count on cashing in on every day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”

It was made very clear in her essay that she compared herself only to African-American women she knew and that her list of unearned advantages is autobiographical. She reminds us that having race or gender or sex or religious privilege doesn’t have anything to do with whether or not you are a nice person. We shouldn’t feel defensive about or attacked by this analysis.

Let’s make this “invisible knapsack” visible. These are some of the unearned privileges McIntosh found in her bag: She writes:

I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.

If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.

I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.

I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.

I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.

I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.

I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to “the person in charge,” I will be facing a person of my race.

If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.

I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children’s magazines featuring people of my race.

I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing, or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.

I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.

I can choose blemish cover or bandages in “flesh” color and have them more or less match my skin.

Those are some of the contents Peggy McIntosh found in her invisible knapsack. I wonder if you folks carry around such a knapsack. I believe I do.

I grew up in a small town in Washington State where race was never an issue. I can’t remember anyone of Jewish or Asian background, much less African-American, in Washington or South Dakota. There were no African-American students in our local high school. None. When I went to college, people of color made up only a tiny percentage of the student body.

Like many whites, I benefited from my parents accumulated assets. A study found that not only do middle-class blacks today earn only seventy percent of the income of middle-class whites, they possess only fifteen percent of the accumulated wealth.

Robert Kerry said, “To be white in America is not to have to think about it.” My whole life long, I’ve had the luxury of not having had to think about racial issues, unless I wanted to. So I do think I carry around an invisible knapsack of white privilege. It’s stuffed with advantages I haven’t earned, but can take for granted.

So what? Is that a sin? Does privilege equal prejudice? Not necessarily. After all, I didn’t choose to be born white. As Peggy McIntosh said in an interview, “People who are white benefit from white special privileges whether we’re prejudiced or not. It doesn’t have to do with whether or not we’re nice people. It has to do with having doors opened for us.”

But does unearned privilege make me less sensitive to the concerns of people of color? Am I, given my background, more likely to see racial issues as “no big deal, to wonder what all the “fuss” is about, to be less concerned than I should be about racial justice? Probably, yes.

Peggy McIntosh’s essay calls me to soul-searching and self-examination. It suggests that racism might be subtler, and more pervasive, than it seems, that racism is more than hate crimes, more than defacing synagogues, more than creating a hate-filled, Ku Klux Klan website, or posting despicable verses on buildings. It suggests that racism can be found in “nice people” like me.

It suggests to me that just accepting the status quo may be a subtle form of racism. That it might be racism to carry around my invisible knapsack, and never dump it out and see what’s inside. That it might be racism not to care “Is this fair?”, not to speak up, not to speak out about my unearned advantage.

Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote, “The greatest tragedy ...is not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.”

He wrote, “It is appalling that the most segregated HOUR IN Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning, the same hour when many are standing to sing, “In Christ There is No East or West.” He wrote, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Almost forty years ago he wrote, in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”: “I have been so greatly disappointed with the white Church and its leadership....here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a tail light behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading me to higher levels of justice....If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early Church, it will lose its authentic ring...and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club...”

The prophet’s voice, King’s voice, still rings, and stings today. Have we in the white church become too comfortable, too complacent with our invisible knapsacks? Are we a headlight or a taillight working for racial justice? Are our hearts open, or have we grown deaf to the cries of our sisters and brothers?

Another, W.E.B. Dubois, from Western Massachusetts, stated in 1900 that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” Will racism be “the problem” of the twenty-first century as well? Will you and I and this church be part of the problem, or part of the solution?

These are some of the questions I ask myself on this day set aside for discussion of the “race” topic. There are some questions I’ve listed for all of you in your church bulletin.

- \*What do you think about “the invisible knapsack of white privilege?”

- \*If you have a knapsack, what’s in yours? Can you illustrate?

- \*What can we, as individuals and as a church, do to combat racism and prejudice?

- \*Are there any other thoughts or experiences you would care to share?