

THE PROBLEM WITH PRIVILEGE

2 Corinthians 5:6-17

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I.

[I wonder if the world will ever mourn the loss of letters. In an age of email and text messaging, correspondence has become quick and digital. Gone is the age when love letters accumulated in a box under the bed. Gone is the box dusted off and passed around on a 50th wedding anniversary.

Written letters have lasting power. They have personality. They are things to be handled gently, cherished, and visited over and over again. In the time of the early church, letters could become scripture. These letters, or epistles, were the sign of an on-going conversation. The church was in dialogue about the witness it had received. The church was in conversation about the community it was creating. The church was discerning what kinds of practices and beliefs it would pass on to the next generation.

The church in Corinth was Paul's problem child. Full of spunk and passion, they were often one step away from going off the deep end. Whereas other churches lacked vision and vitality, Corinth had those in spades. Their verve caused them to be way out in front. Paul's challenge was to encourage the Corinthians without dowsing their spirits, to remind them that their passion was not in vain, to convince them that their sense of purpose and possibility were not for nothing. It is obvious by the time that Paul wrote his second letter that discouragement was starting to creep into the Corinthian church's community. What was all this passion for if they couldn't discern results in the world? Would Christ continue to prove a container that could help their passion grow and become fruitful? How could they share the grace they'd found with the newest members of the community? Paul was far away and could not be there in person, so he wrote a letter. A portion of that letter is our epistolary reading today.

II.

Gathered today on our church's second annual Juneteenth Sunday, I want to consider a passage from Paul's letter to the impassioned church at Corinth, a church that, being comprised of human beings, longed to see the visible fruits of its labor in this lifetime. I want to consider, specifically, the passage from Paul's letter in chapter 5, the seventh verse: "For we walk by faith, not by sight." And I want to consider what, if anything, this insight that Paul shares in his letter to the Corinthians might have for us on this Juneteenth Sunday.

To outsiders, and maybe some insiders, we may not look like the right folks to celebrate Juneteenth. "Isn't that a black holiday?" some might say, and "Who are they trying to be?" and "What are they trying to prove?" Despite the potential for judgment behind these questions, they are good questions. "Isn't Juneteenth just a holiday for African-Americans?" "Who are we trying to be?" "What are we trying to prove?" Or, in the mindset of our brothers and sisters in the Corinthian church, "Where, O Holy Spirit, are you fixing to lead us next? We've got passion. Now, show us the way." Heeding Paul's words, what does it mean to walk by faith and not by sight?

Just before I started my ministry, I did a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, serving as a chaplain intern at the NYU Medical Center in Mid-town Manhattan. My reflection group included, among other participants, Abdul Hakim, an African-American, and as far as we could tell, the first Muslim ever to go through a CPE program. From the first day, when we began to get to know each other, Abdul and I adopted playful nicknames for the other. Abdul was tall and intimidating and had introduced himself by telling us that before he had become an Imam, he had worked as a bounty hunter and debt collector. My nickname for Abdul was "Repo Man." I had introduced myself as being a displaced beach bum who couldn't wait to get back to California. Abdul's nickname for me was "Melrose Place." Over the course of our 3 month program, our reflection group shared stories, struggles, tears, and laughter. By the last day, these names had taken on a new meaning. On day one, we had used humor to name the stereotypes we couldn't avoid assuming. On the

final day, these names were even funnier because our friendship had revealed how absurdly shallow our prejudices had been.

III.

If we look carefully at our wider culture and, in many ways, the church itself, we are a people obsessed with sight. We judge based upon appearances. We fix eternal values to those differences we discern with the eye. Advertising flourishes in such an environment, one in which the beautiful and the good are defined within arbitrary and superficial parameters. Through media images, a man is shown how to be a real man.

And a woman is shown what it means to be a woman. Success has a certain look. Images of war are carefully chosen. Stereotypes of race and gender and sexual orientation are conveyed through images that seek to define reality.

The problem with defining reality through what is seen is that when we choose to see one thing, we also choose not to see something else.

When defining race, for example, we look for those images that confirm what we already know. Blackness has a certain look and deviations threaten our definitions. Whiteness has a certain look and aberrations are dismissed.

A multiracial man is elected to the highest office in the land and a debate ensues. Is he black enough? Is he white enough? Will he conduct the business of the country through a racial lens? This debate reveals the extent to which we are obsessed with walking by sight. And if its not sight with which we are obsessed, then it's the choice *not* to see what's right in front of us, which, as I mentioned, is exactly the same thing. For example, the question, "Will he conduct the business of the country through a racial lens?" begs the response, "When has the business of the country *not* been conducted through a racial lens?" You see, the problem with white privilege, or any privilege for that matter, is that it doesn't see itself as privileged. It sees itself as the normal mode of reality.

While in seminary, I took a course called Race, Nation, and Democracy. I will never forget what happened one day during a

class discussion following the lecture. We were discussing the persistence of socio-economic inequalities based on race. There was some debate as to whether quiet perseverance or engaged struggle would be the better process toward affecting change. At the end of a heated discussion, a white male student, bravely and naively, asked, “What do you want, change overnight?” At which point most or all of the people of color in the course responded with an emphatic “Yes!” In that moment, I realized that, in our culture, whiteness is not aware of itself, not aware of its privilege.

Consider comments regarding Supreme Court nominee Sonya Sotomayor.

She said once, candidly, of course my racial and cultural background affects the lens by which I view the world. Of course my life experiences will inform the decisions I make as a judge. Meanwhile, the response has been to take these comments out of context, to bold and capitalize and italicize them, and to repeat them over and over again as a way of saying, “See, we caught you admitting that you see things through a racial lens.” In so doing, white male legislators and cultural demagogues claim to have somehow reached the seventh heaven of racial neutrality. You see, the problem with white privilege, or any privilege for that matter, is that it doesn’t see itself as privileged. Our country continues to be obsessed with racial difference and the only thing worse than absolutizing those differences is pretending that they don’t exist.

IV.

Walking by sight, we choose not to see the black children and their mothers who are the number one demographic among the poor, or we covertly conclude that black mothers and their babies somehow deserve the poverty they’ve chosen for themselves.

Walking by sight, we choose not to recognize that our prisons are occupied by people of color to a far greater percentage than in the society as a whole, or we quietly assume that young men of color are inherently violent.

Walking by sight, we choose not to acknowledge the positive impact that affirmative action has had upon the effort to integrate our

institutions of higher learning, or we privately resolve that the only reason a person of color could succeed is because she was given special preference.

Walking by sight, in this sense, is as harmful as walking blind.

Walking by sight, our differences are threatening and irreconcilable.

Walking blind, we pretend that our differences are an illusion, that they in fact make no difference in our lived experience.

Walking by sight, we automatically categorize by race, forgetting, for example, that not all blacks are African-American, not all whites are wealthy, not all Latinos speak Spanish.

Walking blind, we ignore the prophetic call for equality and pretend that everyone is equal even though the road to equality is a long one, a full distance we have yet to run.

Walking by sight, we see and judge but never say what we're really thinking, because that would expose our prejudice, and if there is one way we do not want to be seen, it's prejudiced. So we keep our prejudices private and unexamined and fail to do the substantive work required to confront prejudice, beginning without our own. It's painful work to admit one's privilege and to admit that that privilege is based upon misunderstandings of ourselves and others. Walking blind, we pretend that we've examined all that needs to be examined and that we now live in an enlightened state living over and above all those who still debate whether racial difference makes a difference, for good and for bad in our wider society.

Walking by sight, difference is everything.

Walking blind, difference is nothing.

Walking by sight, people are to be pitied.

Walking blind, people are to be ignored.

Walking by sight, impressions are everything.

Walking blind, I only pay attention to what I already understand.

Walking by sight, we're doomed by diverse identities.

Walking blind, we've just got to wait it out and hope for the best, not ruffle any feathers in the meantime.

V.

Oh, but it's my joy to tell you today to remind you, the church, you, the passionate and grace-filled body of Christ, you, the Spirit-inspired lovers of God and helpers of God's beloved humanity, that we do not walk blind.

The symbol of the cross is our constant reminder not to turn away, but to witness to pain and suffering, to injustice and inequality wherever we can find it, even when it is hard to see and therefore more able to escape the notice of the world which would rather not admit that these realities are our responsibility to correct.

And while we do not walk blind, neither do we walk by sight, admitting ultimate reality to mere appearances. The resurrection is our constant reminder that the deepest realities are not be perceived with the eyes alone, but must be discerned with a trusting and open heart.

No, we do not walk by mere sight and we do not walk blind. We walk by faith. We walk by trust. We walk by a deep trust in the God who created the diverse earth and its people as an expression of God's own diversity.

We walk with a deep appreciation of difference not as aberration but as expression of beauty. God created us different because God created us to be interesting to one another. God, the ultimate other, created other people so that we could see in them what God sees in us: an image of Godself.

No, we do not walk by mere sight and we do not walk blind. We walk by faith. We walk by trust. We walk by a deep trust in Christ, who is friend of all and kindred to all, a man of a particular race, yet a man who embodied a godly embrace of others as family. We walk with an appreciation of what others bring to the table. We walk with a humility that does not ignore our own or others' particularity, but a humility that acknowledges particularity as a gift. Jesus is Jewish, Palestinian, Arab, African; He is Asian, European, Samoan, and Indian; His name is Jesús, Iesu, Si Hesu; He is God's Sophia, incarnate.

No, we do not walk by mere sight and we do not walk blind. We walk by faith. We walk by trust. We walk by deep trust in the Holy Spirit, poured out upon the peoples of the earth, blessing our differences and making us one.

We walk knowing we have much in common and that much still divides us.

The Spirit gives us encouragement and strength to face the historic and systemic and political powers that divide us. The Spirit gives us the endurance to work through pain and awkwardness so that we can understand the life experiences and the suffering of others, to build new relationships that can be sources of new healing.

The new creation of which Paul speaks will not come about without the pain of confrontation. The new creation will not come about without letting old assumptions die. The new creation will not come about without opening the eyes of our heart to see and to trust what God is making possible for us. For this reason, in his letter to the Corinthians, a church on the move, a church ready to receive its charge, Paul can speak of the new creation in the present tense, echoing the words of Isaiah before him:

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” Faith has opened up a new way of seeing, a way of seeing that does not ignore the pain of the old world bleeding into the present, but which begins acting boldly as if the new creation has already arrive, because, indeed, we walk by faith in the one who is already making these things possible.

Amen.