

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:17
Their Eyes Were Opened and They Knew
WRCoB 2.26.23

If you've grown up in a predominately white church
In a predominately white neighborhood
Far away from black neighborhoods

Most of what you've learn about African Americans
Is what you've read in history books
Or what you hear in the news.

Neither of which reflect accurately the total picture.

You know of racism only by what you read and hear
You don't have any personal experience
Nor do you have friends who've experienced it.

We who have lived this sheltered kind of life
Have been protected from the evils of racism
By what has been coined "white privilege".

A term I've only recently been familiar with.

But from as far back as 1988, Peggy McIntosh
Wrote an essay entitled

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

She writes that it is difficult for white folk
To see this privilege when living in it.

But for those who do not live this privilege it is very visible.

What I want to do in this sermon series
Is for us to engage in a conversation on racism

What I don't want to do in the sermon series
Is beat up white people, myself included.

Because I believe most of us do not see it that way.

We don't feel like we live a privileged life.

We feel like we live normal lives
Like everyone else in this country.

That in America, we all, Black, white, and brown
Have equal access to equal opportunities.

I believe we all claim to be against racism.

And I believe it.

What I hope to offer here
Over the course of the following weeks
Is to help us see

That racism is more than a one-on-one thing.

As Peggy McIntosh writes

*I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of
meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on
my group*

Again, I will tread softly.

Please walk with me as we explore the possibilities
That, whether it is through ignorance or innocence

Most of our white eyes have not been opened
To the struggles and suffering of people of color
Who are also made in the image of God.

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We will use *On Earth Peace Open Our Eyes, Lord*
And their suggestions for worship and preaching
As well as educational resources for SS.

We will begin at the beginning.

Our Scripture Lesson from Genesis
Is the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

The Lord created Paradise
And formed and breathed life into the first humans.

God created a Garden for them to care for
And to delight in all that God had created for them
With only one stipulation.

Genesis 2:16-17 NLT ^{16b} “You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden— ^{17a} except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

But human curiosity got the best of them
Following the tempting voice of the serpent.

Genesis 3:5 NLT

⁵ “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.”

The fruit of the tree was so ripe
And it was so inviting
And so seductive

That they did what they were told not to
And ate of the fruit
From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil

Genesis 3:7 NLT ^{7a} At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness

Their eyes were opened and they saw their sin
And they were ashamed of themselves.

Through innocence their eyes were closed

But the moment they disobeyed God
Their eyes were opened to the wrongs they committed.

And as a result, they experienced shame and guilt
And became aware of their nakedness.

With their eyes now open
They became aware of evil
And pain, and suffering.

Not only because of their own experiences
But the events in the world around them.

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From a state of innocence
We too, often become aware of the wrongs
In ourselves and in the world around us.

My dad, who grew up in Bedford County in the 30s and 40s
Says he remembers riding a bus to school.

They went in one direction to the white school house.

From the bus, he would see the black kids
Walking in the opposite direction
Towards the black school house.

As a young kid, in his age of innocence
My father said, something didn't feel right about that.

He couldn't quite understand his feelings..

Later on, when he went to college and seminary
When he learned a bit of history

It struck him that what he witnessed
Was the effects of racism.

From a perspective of innocence, his eyes were opened
And he became aware
He had grown up in the segregated south

My dad became conscious of the sin of racism.

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Our Lenten Series introduces the idea
That we white folk have a responsibility

To be more informed about the struggles and injustices
That people of color, continue to face.

To be informed and then to work on dismantling racism.

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The theme for this year's Lent is taken from
An incidence in the Gospel of John.

Jesus healed a blind man at the pool of Siloam.

The religious leaders scorned Jesus
Because he healed the man on the Sabbath

They failed to see the injustice they placed on the blind man
For NOT healing him on the sabbath.

Jesus said to them.

John 9:39 NLT

³⁹ “I entered this world to render judgment—to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.”

And the religious leaders respond

John 9:40 NLT

⁴⁰ “Are you saying we’re blind?”

Of course!

Jesus is saying exactly that!

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Mind you, this is not a political discussion

Nor is it a socio-economic conversation.

Yes, it has elements of both.

This is a faith issue.

And we as the church need to wrestle with

The implications placed on us

As followers of Christ

How indeed, are we to love our neighbors?

Whether it is through innocence or ignorance

Living in the bubble of white privilege

Has kept many of us blind to the realities

Facing our African American neighbors.

The goal of this Lenten Study

According to author Rosanna Eller McFadden

Is to develop greater capacity to see Jesus through the eyes of those we have perceived as the other and to see the other through the eyes of Jesus.

I don't think most of us feel our eyes intentionally closed.

Rather, most of us feel we are well informed.

But I do feel, and this Lenten Series proposes

The culture of 21st century America is different than that of 1st Century Palestine, but Jesus' answer to the question of our own blindness and what we assume we "see" is still relevant.

If our singular sightline is from a perspective of privilege, we may be missing the message of good news that Jesus had for the marginalized.

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In McIntosh's article from 1988

She wrote that she decided to identify

Some of the effects white privilege had on her life.

She lists twenty-six of them.

I will show you four.

- 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 want to live.
- When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
- Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.

- I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.

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I grew up in an elementary school
Which was quite diverse.

By best friends were Jimmy Spates
And Oscar Feliciano.

I was aware that their skin color was different than mine

I was not aware they were considered different races.

As far as I knew
We were all thrown together into this mix of humanity.

Nothing more.

After grade school
My family moved to a subdivision
On the outskirts of town

And I ended up in a predominately white junior high.

I was quickly labeled as the white kid
From the poorer neighborhood.

And due to my shoes, they considered greaser shoes
I had problems assimilating into new surroundings.

As a white kid
It was my first time I was labeled
As something other.

That I went to a grade school
From a poorer class neighborhood.

That I associated with people
Who thought greaser shoes were cool

That I hung out with black and Hispanic kids.

My first introduction to race.

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Does any of this speak to you?

Are these issues that have crossed your mind?

The George Floyd incident brought racism into the light
For many of us

It opened our eyes to things we had never experienced.

In 2020, our church developed a book study
On the theme of racism.

Many of our eyes were opened to how racism
Affected our dear brothers and sisters of color.

We became determined to do something about it.

And perhaps before our eyes close again
We might discover anew

That we might see with eyes wide open
The life we white folk have been privileged to live

And the plight of people of color
By continuing the work of Jesus
Peacefully, simply, and together.