

Sermon
“The Sins of Privilege”
October 28, 2007

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart support us in extending our hearts to build right relationships. ASHE’.

Privilege! Privilege! Privilege! What a powerful word. Saying the word privilege creates unsettling rumblings in the core of my belly and images of my beloved grandmother loom large in my heart. I can close my eyes and clearly see and feel her loving and sometimes disapproving eyes borrowing into my soul.

My grandmother had a doctoral degree in the discipline of “**lookism**”. There was a look that she could lovingly serve up that would call me back from behaviors that were unworthy of who she knew me to be. This exact same look **ignited** the fire that warmed

my loving, generous and spiritual self. As is the nature of most children, I often was not conscience of how my being able bodied, enrolled in Catholic school, deeply loved and respected by my grandmother and born to two parents who had steady jobs; afforded me advantages that my cousins did not have. Today, those childhood advantages have translated into privileges that I enjoy as an adult and often take for granted.

I have been groomed, seduced and informed by books and higher education. I have allowed myself the privilege and comfort of owning a middle class home where I took relatively clean water for granted and bragged about the beauty and safety of my neighborhood. Yes, I have experienced privilege and know what it means to use my privilege as currency in this culture. If you could speak to my grandmother she would add that I have **wallowed in the sins of privilege**. She would say that there have been times in her granddaughter's life where I sinned...missed the mark in being my best self...an instrument of love. My sin was failing to

recognize that I had certain advantages that others did not have. It was my grandmother who would boldly and unapologetically remind me that when I interacted with my cousins, the playing field was inherently uneven and it was my **moral and spiritual responsibility to do everything within my power to right this inherent inequality**. Because of the sage guidance of my grandmother, part of my daily spiritual praxis is to rise each morning and express my gratitude for my life and to intentionally ask the universe, **“How am I to serve today?”** Given all my emotional, physical, psychological, economic and spiritual privilege, **“How am I uniquely called to bless the world?”**

How are you privileged? How are you called to bless the world?

This morning I would like us to prayerfully cruise through our lives and examine our personal privilege score card. Reverently ask ourselves, **“Where do I stand on the score card of power and privilege in our society?”** How might gender, age, race, and the likes of education, and wealth, and maybe sexual orientation,

able bodied ness, and faith tradition impact our level of opportunities, comfort and safety? How do these dimensions of our identities impact the score on our score card and enhance our power and control in the world? How do we respond when we come in contact with someone who we perceive has a lower privilege score?

To offer my first sermon on the sins of privilege is a mega project...it is scary. **My fear is that you will turn your holy faces away from me!** As I stand in this religiously privileged place called the pulpit I invite you to accompany me as we examine how privilege may stifle our capacity to become our best selves Please hear me say that each of you are **marvelous**...there are **“No Bad People”** here. Please hear me say that we **all** miss the mark. My sin and your sin is that our privilege allows each of us to think and behave in ways where we ignore the **unearned advantages that we have**. Whenever we use our power to only benefit ourselves, or to sit in judgment of others or to obscure the

principles of fairness, right relationship and justice for all peoples, we are missing the mark to which the Holy beckons each of us.

Consider this...privilege may narrow our capacity to see our beloved neighbors and frequently renders us blind to the diverse intricacies of our interconnected existence. Paul Kivel, author of Uprooting Racism, notes that our homes are our most intimate sacred spaces and they reflect who we are and what we value.

Today, when you arrive home, I invite you to look around your sacred space and take careful note... what does your home tell you about who you are and what you value? Look at the pictures on your walls, the books and magazines lying about, or the absence of. Ease drop on your family conversations, take stock of what you watch on television, what kind of music you listen to, who visits and what kind of social activities you regularly participate in. Does your home support and reinforce the privilege that you have become accustomed to? Does it reflect the vast beauty, diversity and complexity of this our holy creation?

As the poem states, “It is all so easy and joyful if you think about it, being overfed and free in America. You get rid of all the tacky furniture and buy new.” Does such comfort, such privilege allow you windows and doors through which you can freely engage your neighbor; or does your lifestyle separate and allow you uninterrupted time to wallow in your untested notions about **“the so called other, the them over there?”**

Privilege allows us to give a little money, volunteer for some things and stay in our gardens washed by the rain, filled with sunshine watching the pepper plants bloom. I offer that to stay in your garden is to miss an opportunity to employ your privilege in the service of another; to stay in your garden robs you of the gift of being transformed by the experience of another, you miss an opportunity to see the diverse faces of God. And is this not truly a sin, against yourself and humanity?

I also intern at Amicus, a non-profit agency in the heart of downtown Minneapolis. To enter the office building where I work, I must walk pass a clinic that provides family planning and options counseling. Most mornings there are a couple of individuals standing outside exercising their freedom of dissent. Initially when I passed “**them**” I averted my gaze to avoid eye contact. I did not want to give energy or legitimacy to “**them**” or their cause. In my righteousness I knew that my liberal viewpoint was absolutely “**Right**” and what ever theirs was, it was absolutely “**Wrong**”. I ignored their humanity and their right to be; and in doing so, subconsciously attempted to erase their existence and their very real impact in the world. Five months went by, “**Them**”...the protesters, were still there. I extended my hand and stepped out on my Unitarian Universalist belief that there are many truths. My name is Jacqueline, I said and yours....? We now greet each other by name. I have met their children and know that one of the persons who faithful stands in front of this public building recently lost a job of 10 years. Now when I approach, my new

acquaintances turn their signs away from my gaze so that their offensive pictures do not assault me. We are now connected to each other...we bare witness to the right of diverse opinions and the common sharing of mutual worth and value. I am redeemed by my Unitarian Universalist heritage that we are each imbued with the holy spark of the divine and I am called to affirm justice, equity and compassion in all my relationships.

Our privilege isolates us from the struggles and suffering of our neighbors and restricts our emotional capacity to empathize with those who we decide are not like us. Here I want to tell you a true story about a project that is thriving here in the Twin Cities, known as Marnita's Table, Dish It Up.

Marnita's Table is an opportunity to build social capital through **food, fellowship and cross-cultural communication**. It is an opportunity for people to transgress cultural and politically drawn boundaries to come together in Holy Communion... to break bread

together...to deeply listen to each other. This project is grounded in the notion that social networking is foundational to social change. It gives testimony to the premise that who we know shapes everything from who we hire, to who we vote for, to who we choose to live next door to and what religious /spiritual community we choose to affiliate with.

Martina's biological father was of African American and Latin descent, her mother a Danish Jew. Adopted as a toddler by a white skinned couple; she grew up the only black skinned person in a rural town in Washington. She states and I quote "My family life was great but it was not a very happy childhood in terms of community acceptance. My family brought me home when I was two and the town had a meeting, where they discussed that we **don't want those people in our town.** As a young teenager she moved to Portland, Oregon and tried to integrate herself into the black community, only to find that the Black teens saw her as **too white.** As a teenager Marnita never had a feeling of "**us**" with

fellow teens. She was always in the colored box labeled “**them**”. Knowing first hand the hurt, humiliation and suffering that rises from the ugliness of not being welcomed she swore that there would always be room at her table for whoever knocked at her door.

Years later, Marnita co-founded Marnita’s Table, with her partner Carl Goldstein. On any given night these two boldly open their home to the Jews and the Gentiles, rich and poor, the powerful and the weak, to all people. The hosts provides a sacred forum for the discussion of local and world issues, like the Iraq War, immigration, and the prison industrial complex. Individuals share how the evening topic intersects with their lives. You can feast on a variety of ethnic dishes like steaming bowls of Asian hot pot, savory plates of Mexican mole, Argentine mixed grill or thick Irish stew. Here in a humble three- bedroom home; lawn furniture is placed in the living room to extend the hospitality to all who may want to share the joys, struggles and suffering of their neighbors. It

is here that common ground is sought and found and each breathes in the radiant beauty of the other. In this setting the sins of privilege are transformed by hearing and seeing, smelling and tasting and being with each other in the messiness of this experience we call life.

It is these experiences that save us and it is these kinds of experiences that will save our children. By relinquishing the paralyzing fears that support privilege, **each person can experience a sense of belonging and risk loving their neighbor as they love themselves.** Here there exists the real possibility to transcend the barriers of **class, race and condition.** We place ourselves squarely on the path of turning our **whole being outward to see the beauty in our holy creation. We extend ourselves in the fellowship that liberates us all.**

It is my belief that over time, it is these face to face, spirit filled encounters where we may come to loosen our death grip on our

privileges. Here we welcome the spark of the divine that ebbs and flows through us, around us, above us and beneath us. We become allies and collaborate on projects that heal us **individually**, and **collectively**, and ultimately will save our planet.

My final comments are about white privilege specifically. Some of you may be of the mind that I have no business speaking about white privilege for I have no personal ground to stand on. My ground is that I am affected by the privilege of white skinned people everyday of my life and I believe that each minister is called to minister to the harsh realities of their times.

The worship associate, Sarah Pradt, quoted an excerpt from the article *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* where the writer defines white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets. This article provides European Americans with insights that maybe useful in understanding how they are privileged by their white skin. Some of these unearned assets

allow some and not others the ability to arrange to protect their children most of the time from people who may not like them, These assets extends to some and not others the right of not being asked to speak on behalf of all people who have white skin. And these assets bless some and not others with knowing that if you found yourself in a court of law, your white skin color would not count against you. In the spirit of holy justice this morning I call you to develop a daily practice of what Karin Case calls

“Emancipatory praxis” a process of action, critical reflection and learning.

Karin Case holds a Ph.D. in Christian Social Ethics from Union Theological Seminary in New York and is a minister in the United Church of Christ. She sees emancipatory praxis as a tool that could enable white skinned people to break the silence on issues of race and racism. This tool may open white skinned people up to be changed and to realize the impact that their white skin privilege has on their neighbors. These are just two of the possible benefits

that white skinned people could receive from a dedicated
emancipatory praxis

I am college educated, I currently earn a living wage, I am of
sound body and mind, English is my first language and I hear that
my social skills are descent. I grew up knowing I was loved and
cherished by my grandmother. I claim all of these privileges and
many others. I am keenly aware that there is a never-ending cost
and danger to such riches. Sometimes when I least expect it, the
privileges that I carry around like **jewels around my neck** blind
me to the beauty that is inherent in all of god's creation, all the
time. In the privacy and comfort of my home I sometimes choose
to forget the wisdom of my grandmother and the legacy of the Rev.
Dr. Martin Luther King, that we are all caught in an inescapable
network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny; my
suffering is linked to your suffering, your joy is linked to my joy
and my liberation and freedom is bound to your liberation and

freedom. As long as one human being is in prison we are all imprisoned.

It is a privilege to share together the spirit of worship, let us leave this holy place refreshed, inspired, and ready to use our power in the best interest of fairness, right relationships and justice for **ALL** peoples. Let us step out on our Unitarian Universalist heritage and dare to ask the stranger their name. Let us not miss our mark to be a blessing to the world.

AMEN