

“A Call: The Racial Justice Center”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 10/11/2020

There is little doubt among us and those who know us --that we sincerely strive to be a *contemplative* community. But what does “contemplation” mean? Is it uniquely Christian? No. It is in fact born out of our earth-born selves, our human reaction to a busy life in order to center us back into harmony with all of creation, and for those of us who believe it, with the Creator itself. Contemplation is as old as humanity and carries with it a connotation of reflexivity, of honest reflection, digression from the ego, an emptying of oneself in expectancy, purging oneself of disorder so as to find order, harmonizing our cells with the building blocks of the rest of creation, and in so doing being transformed, changed. This is the encounter with the Divine that many of us crave, and as contemplatives it is in this practice that we seek to find it. Our spiritual community uses silence as its vessel of contemplation, but as a short study of the matter would easily show us, contemplation does not require silence alone or is limited as such. It in fact requires intentionality. There are various vessels born out from the ancients, whether silence, drums, chants, or dance (etc.); all are effective tools used to harmonize with the same intention of contemplation; that is, connecting with a Divine harmony that leads to internally transformational experiences. Barbra Holmes’ describes it as “These practices beckon earthbound bodies toward an expanded receptivity to holiness... [but] the holiness that Jesus describes has less to do with pious character traits and more to do with the hosting of God’s abiding presence. It is not effort but invitation that opens the human spirit to the possibility that God may sojourn with us.” (from *Unspeakable Joy*). Just as Jesus describes it to us in John 15, we are to abide in him as he abides in God’s presence; in this way we are linked, by invitation to one another: A holy communion, a shared presence between the Creator and Creation. And equally challenging is Jesus’ promise of what comes out from that union: Love. And not just any love, not some sort of fleeting love, but instead a self-sacrificing love.

I am convinced now more than ever, born out of my own contemplative journey these past years, is an unshakable conviction that I must do all that I can to eradicate a cancerous sickness that permeates deep within our cultural psyche and continues to rob our communities of true joy: Racism. This sickness is seated at the base of our peoples. It was brought to this continent hundreds of years ago, born out of greed and lust (as Colson Whitehead calls it “Stolen people working a stolen land”), and this racism must be rooted out from our social structures and cultural hierarchies. But this work is fraught with complexities and obvious dangers, so much so that many of us simply settle with it or even ignore it, but it is my experience that the targeted and victimized within this cultural sin are UNABLE to do the same—because their very skin confines them to its painfully disadvantaging effects. So, I stand at this intersection with you where many of us have been paralyzed seeking an opportunity to break the chains of privilege and racism in one fell swoop. And even more complicated for some of us is, *How* do with do it as contemplatives? I say to us today, there is a way.

This is from Rev. Romal Tune’s 2016 interview with the Franciscan Contemplative leader himself, Richard Rohr.

“RT: What does White privilege mean to you? How do you define it?”

White privilege is largely hidden from our eyes if we are white. Why? Because it is structural instead of psychological, and we tend to interpret most things in personal, individual, and psychological ways. Since we do not consciously have racist attitudes or overt racist behavior, we kindly judge ourselves to be open minded, egalitarian, “liberal,” and therefore surely not racist. Because we have never been on the other side, we largely do not recognize the structural access, the trust we think we deserve, the assumption that we always belong and do not have to earn our belonging, the “we set the tone” mood that we white folks live inside of — and take totally for granted and even naturally deserved. Only the

outsider can spot all these attitudes in us. It is especially hidden in countries and all groupings where white people are the majority.

RT: *Do you think you have benefited from white privilege? If so, how?*

I would have never seen it if I had not been forced outside of my dominant white culture by travel, by working in the jail, by hearing stories from counselees, and frankly by making a complete fool of myself in so many social settings — most of which I had the freedom to avoid! And so recognition was slow in coming. I am not only white, but I am male, overeducated, clergy, a Catholic celibate, healthy, and American! I profited from white privilege on so many fronts that I had to misread the situation many, many times before I began to feel what others feel and see what others could clearly see. Many must have just rolled their eyes and hopefully forgiven me!

RT: *I've observed that some white people working toward justice and the dismantling of white privilege are nonetheless biased and prone to making racial assumptions. We also see it in organizations with little to no cultural diversity on their staff or in senior leadership positions, but proclaim a message of inclusion and fairness. What actions can people take to address and overcome their personal and organizational biases while working to dismantle the very privilege from which they benefit daily?*

One problem here is the legitimate fear of tokenism. If and when you hire or invite someone who is not really qualified, does not have the ability to adjust to the culture of any group (whatever it is!), you are actually setting them up for disappointment, anger, communication issues, and possible failure and firing. Unless a group is clearly and patently committed to asking change of both sides (the dominant culture and the newly invited member), I have seen supposedly magnanimous hires and invitations almost totally backfire.

In other words, we must name the tensions, the unconscious assumptions, the possible needed changes in attitudes, behaviors, and we must help a group recognize both the necessity and the real work of change for the common good of society — up front.

People must be taught to see this as a matter of justice and truth and not just a matter of me being generous and charitable. Or whiteness and superiority is back in charge again, and the person in the minority position will surely feel patronized and not taken seriously as someone of dignity.

RT: *Do you think the Bible has been used to perpetuate white privilege? If so, how?*

As someone who has tried to teach the Scriptures for 45 years now, and in many countries and denominations, I am deeply aware of how the Bible has been almost entirely absorbed by cultural assumptions and agendas — wherever I go! (Not just in the U.S.A.). Is it Peter Drucker who says something to this effect "Culture eats ideology for lunch!" Christianity is merely an ideology except among genuinely transformed/converted people.

Jesus himself, who eschewed all power games (all three temptations in the desert are temptations to the misuse of power) — was made into Christ the King by Catholics, into a blond haired blue eyed capitalist by Protestants, into a teacher of obedience much more than love by all patriarchal groups; he is a banker in Switzerland, a policeman in Germany, and a businessman in the USA. The feminine side of God was almost not talked about. Just look at the evolution of Christian art, and how already by the Byzantine era we have made the humble crucified one into a "Pantocrator" — punitive and judging from the rotunda and the very entranceway of many cathedrals.

In my opinion, "whiteness" loves order above all else (not love), and has used the Scriptures to enforce its version of order: Christendom itself, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the genocide of the Americas, slavery, apartheid, unjust voting rights and voting privileges, the non education of woman and blacks were all justified by the Bible, and most especially by Bible thumpers! Forgive me, but we Catholics eventually justified our non study of the Bible (which was terrible!) by pointing out what Protestants had done with it. The supposed medicine seemed to be a major part of the problem itself.

Let's be fair here too, because when minorities are in fact the majority in a country, they tend to take on the same imposition of order, obedience, and patriarchal attitudes of control that whiteness does. The problem is always the misuse of power, and it is just that the whites have historically appropriated the most power, but I have seen every other ethnic group abuse power too.

RT: *How can the Bible be used to address and dismantle white privileges?*

By being historically honest about the cultural, historical, and anthropological settings of every single biblical story. Then it is again and again a revolutionary message and often counter cultural to our own assumptions. Frankly, it is dangerous to put the Bible into the hands of people who still worship their own group, their own country, their own denomination, or any other idolatry. They will always abuse it. The Dutch Masters painted all events in the life of Jesus inside of Holland's dress, furniture, and atmosphere. Now we make Jesus into a Texas Republican or a moralistic Calvinist or Catholic. Poor Jesus.

RT: *How can clergy teach and preach from the Bible to dismantle white privilege?*

In short, we have to recognize that from Moses, to the prophets, to Job, to Jesus, the Biblical message is on the side of the powerless, whereas we have been reading it since Constantine in the 4th century to shore up power, money, and war. That distorted our message at the core.

RT: *Is it possible to dismantle white privilege?*

Evil is always incapable of critiquing itself. Evil depends upon disguise and tries to look like virtue. We have to fully cooperate in God's constant work, spoken so clearly in Mary's prayer (Luke 1:52) which is always "bringing down the mighty from their thrones and exalting the lowly." It is the de facto story of history, art, and drama. And we have to get in on the story.

RT: *How can the contemplative tradition and meditation serve as tools to help people overcome White privilege?*

Some form of contemplative practice is the only way (apart from great love and great suffering) to rewire people's minds and hearts. It is the only form of prayer that dips into the unconscious and changes people at deep levels — where all of the wounds, angers, and recognitions lie hidden. Prayer that is too verbal, too social, too external, too heady never changes people at the level where they really need to change. Only some form of prayer of quiet changes people for good and for others in any long term way. It sustains and deepens the short term wisdom we learn in great love and great suffering. Forgive me for making that an absolute statement, but I believe it from years of working with people....

RT: *Do you have any closing thoughts you want readers to reflect on?*

I think I have already said too much to make people hate me, and I so want to be loved! But it is that very white need to be liked, that white need to be proper and avoid conflict, that white need to advance at all costs, that strange need for entitlement that all egos love and seek, that is isolating us, separating us from love, from healing, and from community.

I had naively thought racism was behind us when I was educated in the 1960s, but now I think much clearer and more honest. Education about white privilege is the best doorway to help those of us who think we are not racists — to recognize that structurally and often unconsciously we still are. Our easy advancement was too often at the cost of other's not advancing at all."

As Richard Rohr so eloquently reminds us, the racism we face is perpetuated on our side of the racial coin. Racism is in effect a dominant culture problem, not a problem conceived nor harbored by communities of Color and therefore must be rooted out by our own labor.

With the support of our Covenant Members, today I am issuing a call for those who will join with me into a new mission group being formed in our church. This mission group will work to eradicate racism from our societal systems and cultural hierarchies by helping build a vehicle to do so: [A racial justice](#)

center. We will not be doing this alone. This will be a joint effort to include my good friend Leslie King and others from the community. And this unique vehicle, a first of its kind in the region, will specifically endeavor to do the long-haul work, all in hopes of:

- 1) Educating dominant culture regarding their own privilege, and subsequently excising it
- 2) Advocating equality and equity in all aspects of our communities
- 3) Elevating communities of Color through critical partnerships and development
- 4) Creating space and opportunity for contemplative healing and conciliatory work that leads to personal and inter-communal transformation

This effort, though, will only come from deep conviction, heartfelt contemplation, and a sincere commitment to journey together to seek God's help in this matter. It will not be easy. It will be uncomfortable, but I think for many of us –it is time. It is necessary. If you feel God's calling you to this work, please reach out to me. We will be gathering to meet sometime in the next week so as to see what our next steps of journeying together might look like. Shalom.