

## Jane's reflection on Whiteness - 01.09.2024

I wished to speak with you this morning about whiteness. As you know, the 8<sup>th</sup> Principle is about **racism and other forms of oppression**. I am a white woman. We are a predominantly white church, Newburyport and the greater Newburyport area are predominantly white. The 8<sup>th</sup> Principle will offer us the opportunity to elevate our commitment to actively dismantling systems of oppression. This is so important for us because racism is a problem that belongs to white people. In saying this I want to immediately acknowledge that of course it is people of color who have suffered so long, so unjustly for four hundred years under racist systems. When I say that racism is a problem that belongs to white people I mean that racism was intentionally created by white people, the racist systems are controlled by white people and white people benefit, not spiritually but economically by racism. The systems of oppression of which uphold racial hierarchies and economic inequality permeate all aspects of our lives. Despite variations in health, economic status, ability... as white people here in Newburyport, we are **living in a cloud** of white privilege. And most of the time I am.... and I think many of us are....oblivious to that privilege.

Which is understandable because it is the nature of privilege to be invisible. We are like the proverbial goldfish, oblivious of the waters in which we swim.

One of the forms of white privilege I have come to appreciate more in recent years is **freedom from racial fear**. Have you ever experienced racial fear? That is to say.... been afraid you would be harmed because you were white?

In 2018 I experienced racial fear. I experienced being afraid, very afraid that I could be physically harmed, even killed because I was a white woman. I was in South Africa, 6 hours north of Johannesburg in a remote wilderness area.

I was travelling with a South African friend who is also a white woman. We had been warned repeatedly to arrive at our destinations by sundown and to stay there and not go wondering off by ourselves. And to have a reliable car that would not break down.

I was standing in the parking lot of the hotel at which we were staying and struck up a casual conversation with a man parked next to me. I said something like... "This is a beautiful country you have." He said " Yes, except for one problem... the Blacks". He said that he and his family owned a farm nearby but it had become too dangerous for him as a white man to continue to stay there at night. He said there had been raiding parties of the radical wing of the ANC ( African National Congress?) who were raiding the white owned farms at night and killing the farmers and their wives. He said there had been a murder each night for each of the last five nights. He continued on saying that he and his family still worked the farm during the day, together with other farm help, but did not stay there at night.

Pointing up the road, he said do you smell that? I looked up the road and could see and smell smoke. I asked... what is going on? He replied ...'they are setting tires on fire and blocking the roads". I asked... 'why would they do that? ` To which he responded..."to make us afraid. "

That night I was very afraid. I was afraid that the hotel would be raided and that I could be murdered for being there and being a white woman. The thought kept coming back to me that I could be murdered by someone **who would not even know my name**...who would know nothing about me or my life.

And then it occurred to me... that this is what it was like to be black in America. Black people, especially young men, get murdered for being black by people who do not know their names or anything about their lives.

That night I actually moved the furniture in my room to block the door in case the hotel was raided. My companion in the morning said, why didn't you tell me you were so afraid? I asked her.... what would you have told me to do ? She told me she would have advised me to lock myself in the bathroom if they "shoot through the glass windows in the front of your room".

Somehow, I was not reassured by this advice.

This experience brought home to me racial fear in an **embodied** way. Racism moved from being a problem I cared about to being the visceral experience of being afraid for my life. I have never had that experience before in the USA, or in MA or in NBPT. That is white privilege. Sometimes it takes leaving a predominantly white environment to become aware of the fact that everything here in this country is set up for us white people. Most of us can arrange our lives, if we so choose, to only be in places where whites are a clear majority.

Of course, there are many more subtle forms of white privilege. I am not afraid to walk alone or with friends anywhere in NBPT. I am not afraid if stopped by the police. I am never questioned about what I am doing here or if I belong here. I am not worried that my grandchildren might be bullied because of their race or wonder if they will have teachers and role models of their own race.

I feel safe and secure here. And in this beloved sanctuary. And... I look around and think about who is here and who is not here. I see you and you are my beloved community. And I think about who is not here. I imagine what it would be like for persons of color to come and look around. I look around and see the names on tablets representing almost three hundred years of a proud history. I see images in the vestibule of beloved leaders from our proud history. All those images are of white people. In our services we have embedded many forms of cultural expression...from the ways we do or do not touch each other, or shout out during service...these are all from my own cultural traditions. They tell me I belong. But what of people of color?

We have made some strides in the last few years. I believe FRS is more credible now in the larger community as a first responder when there are incidents of race based hate or discrimination. The community counts on us to respond and we do. We show up. And I believe about 80 of us have taken advantage of the excellent antiracist programs offered by Julie and the ARI.

But let us be honest. Despite good intentions, we have not made much progress in becoming a more racially diverse congregation. As soon as I say that, I then immediately think about Newburyport and barriers to

multiculturalism here such as the price of housing. These barriers are real and formidable. And we have to ask... how welcoming is this community and this congregation? As we approach our 4<sup>th</sup> century we need to ask... are we willing to discern which of our traditions are important to continue and which may...unintentionally... be keeping us as white as we are?

Let me ask you .... on a scale from one to ten... how comfortable and/or confident are you talking about white privilege and/or white supremacy? If we are truly to dismantle racism and other forms of oppression in ourselves and in our institutions, we must develop the knowledge and the skills to become competent in this space. Audre Lord once said..." we cannot dismantle the master's house, using the master's tools". I say, **we cannot dismantle the systems that keep this city and this church so white without understanding those systems and our own privilege.** For without that understanding, how will we know what to change? It is white privilege that sustains the racial status quo and racial housing segregation.

I am advocating this morning that we commit to the 8th Principle, knowing that in so doing we are committing ourselves to a stepping up our to **new levels of proactivity and accountability.** The commitment to dismantling systems of inequity will put us on a long, hard path forward. Perhaps what is important is not getting to some utopian end state, but as white people owning this work to be ours, to being on the path, standing in solidarity with our BIPOC leaders, brothers and sisters.

I have been part of this congregation for ten years now. What I know about this congregation is this....when we commit to something, we honor those commitments. We are honorable, responsible, advocates for social justice.

Believing as we do in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, I believe that racism is sacrilegious. I do believe that there is in each of us a spark of the divine. Any action that denies the full humanity or diminishes the humanity of any person is therefore sacrilegious.

While it may seem painfully slow, the arc of history does bend towards justice. As a predominantly white religion, Unitarian history is full of moments that from a racial perspective are painful and some that are a

source of pride. This is a moment in history where there is a lot going on, much of which makes me feel powerless. But we are **not powerless** in the context of this fight for justice. As white people, we can choose to educate ourselves, to raise our voices, to change where we need to change and be on the right side as the arc of history makes that bend.

May it be so. May we make it so.