

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, January 17, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Seeing and Understanding

Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech on August 28, 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s messages, his actions, and his vision had a deep impact on my life and my ministry. I deeply valued his vision of racial integration through non-violent means. I even participated in the “Poor People’s Campaign March on Washington” on May 12, 1968, which he had planned but was unable to attend due to his assassination. I have sought to recognize the racism that resides in me while also being aware of the prejudices that I may not see in myself. I have sought to be an advocate for racial justice because I believe that God loves all of God’s children equally.

As I re-read King’s “I Have a Dream” speech for this sermon, it is evident to me that his vision is still needed and can still inspire us today. Hear these words from that speech that I believe apply to our current time as fully as they applied in 1963. *“We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation (or maybe today we would insert ‘the desolate valley of persistent racism’) to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood (or maybe we could use the inclusive language term “the solid rock of beloved community’). Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God’s children.”*¹

In the midst of today’s realities of the lived experiences of persons of color, and of racial tensions in America, what messages of hope are there to be offered on this Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday? Is the “Black Lives Matter” a movement of hope? I know that I have been concerned about the tactics employed by this movement, but I believe that dismissing the movement because of disagreement over tactics, will not address the legitimate concerns that are being raised. It is my hope that we can listen and learn from one another. It is my hope that this faith community along side the leadership of our United Church of Christ might discover new ways to support the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Please look now at the cover of your bulletin and read the quote I placed at the top of the page from Rev. John Dorhauer, who is the United Church of Christ (UCC) President and General Minister. The quote is: *“The journey to seeing and understanding the pernicious consequences of privilege includes the harder work of seeing what isn’t there to be seen.”*²

¹ <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.html>

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-dr-john-c-dorhauer/an-open-letter-to-white-m_b_7857790.html

I share this quote with you as well as some other wisdom and insight that Rev. Dorhauer wrote last summer soon after he was installed at the UCC President and General Minister. Two significant messages are contained in this quote. The first is for all of us to understand that there are “pernicious consequences” to ourselves, to people of color and to our country of the reality of white privilege. My online dictionary defines “pernicious” as “causing serious harm”. The reality of white privilege causes serious harm to ourselves, to people of color and to our country. The second significant message in this one-line quote is that it is hard work to see what isn’t there to be seen. I will share more about this message from Rev. Dorhauer of how white privilege is very difficult for white men, in particular, to see. I find Dorhauer’s message to be a message of hope rather than a message of judgment.

Frederick Clarkson wrote these words about Rev. Dorhauer in an online post for religiondispatches.org. *“If John Dorhauer is successful in implementing his vision as the new General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ he may be a transformational figure—not only in this historic denomination, but in the history of Protestantism itself.”*³ I enjoy hearing the UCC referred to as a “historic denomination” and I am interested in getting to know Rev. Dorhauer better when he is referred to as a potential transformational figure in “the history of Protestantism itself”.

“An Open Letter to White Men in America”, written by Rev. John Dorhauer, was published on July 24, 2015, by the Huffington Post. I apologize to the women for the sexist nature of his title. Dorhauer explains that he is writing to “white men” primarily because he is one. It is also true, I affirm, that men have been more privileged in our culture than women. However, I believe that his words have deep insight for men and women. His letter reads, in part:

“Dear White Men, You are persons of privilege. You didn't earn it. More than likely aren't yet prepared to either admit to it or lose it. This letter, written by one of you, is offered to invite you on a journey of insight, honesty, hard truth and just living.

Privilege can be hard to see, mostly because of what doesn't happen to us when we have it... We aren't getting arrested at four times our population rate. We aren't being followed when walking through a department store wearing a sweatshirt with a hood. Real estate agencies didn't write codes, rules and laws that kept us out of the high rent districts and middle class neighborhoods. Property values don't go down when more than 10 percent of our neighborhood is saturated with people of our race. Our children aren't sitting in classrooms with teachers who are likely not to have even a minor degree in the courses they are teaching. Young white men are not being gunned down by black police officers in epidemic numbers. Our churches aren't being burned to the ground, nor are our church members in danger of being gunned down in prayer meetings. I find these insights from Dorhauer empower me and give me more hope than many of the messages and training I have experienced about learning how to eliminate racism.

³ <http://religiondispatches.org/racial-justice-will-be-top-priority-for-new-prez-of-the-united-church-of-christ/>

In the letter Dorhauer lists a few more examples before culminating with the quote I placed in the bulletin: *“The journey to seeing and understanding the pernicious consequences of privilege includes the harder work of seeing what isn't there to be seen.”* He then proceeds to invite his readers to a new discipline of observation – of observing normal reactions of people to you and then ascribing their reaction to the fact that you are white. Near his conclusion he says, *“I invite the white men (and may I add, women) of America with me on this journey of discovery. Ask those who don't share your privilege to tell you what they see. It may not have escaped your attention that whether we are talking about Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, what whites see and what blacks see are not the same thing. There is a reason for that. Privilege comes at a price -- and the price is the loss of a vision that admits facts that make accepting the privilege uncomfortable.”*⁴

I pray that each of us can improve our vision while on this journey together.

I, obviously, do not have time to address the two scripture texts for today. Their messages of a “new identity” of being in relationship with God as in a loving marriage; their messages of God rejoicing in us; their messages of a joyful wedding party at Cana when wine is made plentiful by Jesus and the best wine is served last; and their messages that God’s glory is revealed through Jesus; simply will need to stand alone today. Their messages do provide us strength for our journeys through this Interim Ministry Time; our journeys toward a revitalized faith community under new pastoral leadership; and our journeys toward realizing God’s dreams of justice and equality for God’s beloved community. May we support and strengthen one another as we journey together. Amen.

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-dr-john-c-dorhauer/an-open-letter-to-white-m_b_7857790.html