



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Conversation We Need To Have

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

December 7, 2014

In 1995 I took part in an anti-racism training program put on by the national church. It was my first experience with the concept of white privilege. The program was well constructed, and we were all allowed to come to our own conclusions about race and privilege. Some small examples that I had never considered...I can go to any hair dresser and will never be told that they don't know how to cut my hair. My hair has white privilege. I have never been followed through a store or stopped and asked why I am in a particular neighborhood. I have never had anyone be surprised that I speak English articulately, or that I went to college.

But I really know that I am the recipient of unmerited privilege because I never had to have "the talk" with my son, the way my friend Claudette has had to with her son Alex. I always worried when the kids were out, particularly as they were new drivers. But I didn't have to coach Brady on what to do if he were stopped by the police. I never had to tell him that he should move slowly, keeping his hands visible. Claudette has had to have the talk with Alex over and over again. And now I cannot imagine all of the things that have been added to the list. Don't wear a hoodie; don't walk down the street with your hands in your pockets, don't run down the street. Don't pick up a toy gun in a Walmart. The privilege that I have every day of my life is that I have to work hard to imagine what that would be like. White mothers don't live with it. We live in the confident privilege that if our kids do something stupid in public, they'll get a warning, a slap on the wrist, or probation. If Alex does something stupid he's much more likely to end up dead, like too many other young black men.

This week is a test for us. We have seen two grand juries refuse to indict white police officers who killed young black men. There was complete video of one incident in which Eric Garner could be heard to say "I can't breathe", as he was forced to the ground in a choke hold, one that eventually killed him. The consensus within the black community is that their lives are perceived to be of little value. There is no consensus within the white community. I would love for this week to be a tipping point that we will finally begin to talk and train and hold people accountable; that we will risk engaging in this.

We lit the peace candle on the Advent wreath. Can we do that with authenticity if we won't talk about injustice as the greatest threat to peace in our nation right now? There is a growing chorus of voices--white voices--that are beginning to wake up to the responsibility that accompanies privilege. Thankfully, some of those voices are already Episcopalian. An article on an Episcopal website reported on the protests in NYC, at which the Bishop of New York and many Episcopal clergy were present. Other new voices too--members of the Southern Baptist

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Convention, an historically conservative denomination, are also coming forward with calls to take the gospel seriously, "not only by learning and listening to one another but also by standing up and speaking out for one another."

Here's yet another voice we should listen to. Tim Wise is a professor at Smith College and a prolific writer dedicated to ending racism wrote something important for us to hear.

"Nice is the enemy of justice because to raise one's voice against oppression is to be instantly pegged as not nice, as disruptive, as unruly, as dangerous. To block traffic, or interfere with the all-important Christmas tree lighting in Rockefeller Center is not nice. To interrupt the symphony orchestra in St. Louis, or the drunken revelry of nice white baseball fans at a Cardinals game, is not nice. To signify sympathy for a murdered young man in Ferguson, with even a gesture as simple as raising one's hands as you come out of the tunnel before the football game, is not nice. It is, to some—who would rather just watch black men entertain them with a few nice interceptions—worthy of punishment, or professional discipline. How dare they, say the nice white people who paid good money to see black men play gladiator for the glory of the hometown team."

"Nice people change nothing. They never have and they never will. Those who are nice are so invested in their niceness, in their sense of propriety and civility that they rarely raise their voices above a whisper, even in the face of sweltering oppression. Nice white people were the ones who didn't own black folks during the period of enslavement but also didn't raise their voices against the ones who did. Nice white people are the ones who didn't spit on sit-in demonstrators but also had no problem spending money with businesses that had remained segregated all those years."

John the Baptist was not nice. He called people out for being nice rather than righteous. He called them out for being comfortable while people suffered. Righteousness is like peace--it's about being in right relationship. In the time and language of John and Jesus, peace is referred to as *shalom*. *Shalom* is deep peace, it is complete well-being for a person or a community. In *shalom*, all relationships are healed. *Shalom* calls us to leave our comfortable places and enter into the lives of those who have no *shalom*.

Black people in the US do not have peace. The Rev. Owen Thompson, son of one of the first black Episcopal bishops "describes how every African-American is "bipolar" in that, as he says "You're yourself and then you're your black self, your stereotyped self." He knows when he goes to the grocery store, he is always perceived as a potential threat. He has had the talk with his 8 year old son.

I posted a new Advent song to my Facebook page . I don't know who wrote it and sings it on the You Tube video, but whoever he is he wrote it for his people.

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*We wait for your coming
we wait for new life
we wait in our despairing
we wait through the strife
But how long? how long? how much longer must we wait?
lord we've been forsaken
we need to be free
Sam said change is gonna come
but right now we can't breathe
how long... how long
how much longer must we wait?*

How much longer, indeed? In the weeks ahead, I ask you to ponder what it means to be white in America. I ask you to consider the things, the freedoms and other privileges that you take for granted. I ask you to imagine what it like to the parents of a black boy. My hope is that we will come together in the New Year and have some courageous conversations about race. If you feel that it doesn't have anything to do with you, then I ask you to think again. If you feel that you don't want to be a part of such conversations, then I ask you to think about why that is.

Our black brothers and sisters need us. They need us now. They need us if there is to be peace.