

This is a teaching that I offered to my own [Eighth Day Faith Community](#) in June of 2014. At the initiative of some of the African-Americans in our community, we have finally begun to look honestly at the issue of racism within our own community. As might be expected, this discussion has caused no little pain and some bitterness. This is my reflection on our current status.

Racism in Our Small Faith Community?

Texts:

Acts 10:28-35

Col 3:11-16

The inclusion of all people within the worshiping community is a recurring theme in the New Testament. “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” (Col 3:11) Jesus goes to Samaria; Peter baptizes the gentile Cornelius; slaves and nobles attend the same churches; and so on. Today, we say, “Well, of course, everyone is welcome.” We may forget that inclusion was a *huge* issue in the early church, and they faced it, actively and purposively. All divisions disappear in the New Creation of being one body in Jesus.

That remains our vision here at Eighth Day: living, loving and serving Jesus as one body in a world that—like the Roman Empire—acts on the basis of division, inequality and violence.

This morning I want to reflect upon how we in this community have been talking with each other about racism. Some of us have participated in the Damascus Road anti-racism training program, exploring the nature of prejudice, racism, white privilege and so on that are so firmly embedded in our American culture ... and within each of us individually. I’ve learned a lot. As most of you know, I worked for 25 years in the black community here in Washington, but in Damascus Road I listened for the first time to the profound pain and alienation that most African Americans feel just living in white America. It’s not just economically poor African Americans; it’s the experience of being black in a white culture. I learned to believe the stories that my African-American friends tell me about their experiences of racism instead of dismissing them as exaggerations. I’ve learned to identify myself as a “racist” but also as much more than a

racist. For me perhaps the greatest lesson has been how to work together with African-American friends against racism without paternalism or guilt.

Our debate within Eighth Day about racism has exposed some significant differences among us over the past months. For very good reason these differences have generated powerful emotions of anger, guilt, and even shame, so we must explore them, understand them and work with them ... *together*. I think, though, that the differences we *perceive* are much greater than they actually are and our perceptions have led to divisions that threaten our community. This morning I want to invite us to be more curious, more open to hearing each other's realities with the intent of establishing deeper and more authentic relationships with one another. I'll leave some time at the end for some responses and in three weeks we'll have a listening circle after church for each of us to be heard.

We do have real differences, but at least some of our division comes just from using different definitions ... without realizing it. The same word means different things to different people. We use different definitions, so I'm going to spend much of this teaching just looking at definitions.

Prejudice

Let's begin with the word "prejudice," which the dictionary defines as an unfavorable *conscious belief*

or

attitude

formed beforehand or without knowledge, thought, or reason. Notice that this definition includes both beliefs and

feelings

(or attitudes). But there's a big difference between beliefs and attitudes: I can change my belief by educating myself and then making a conscious, willed decision to change. On the other hand, I have very little control of my feelings, which my cultural upbringing and other forces have embedded deep within me. It's unfortunate that English uses the same word, prejudice, for both meanings.

If we're talking about opinions or conscious beliefs, I don't think I'm prejudiced against African Americans. I very much doubt that anyone else in our community is either. But if we're talking about *feelings* or *attitudes*, my powerful prejudices are obvious to me.

- When I first meet an African American, for example, I tend to assume that he or she is more likely to be less educated or competent than a white person I meet. I'm liable to use less sophisticated language and hold back on more complicated concepts.
- When I see a white and black couple holding hands, I *always* notice it and wonder what it's like; my sexual fantasies get all mixed up in it, too.
- When an African American begins to get upset and angry with something and raising his voice, my first emotional reaction is: "Oh, jeez, there he goes again!" His way of expressing his upset may feel almost primitive to me. "Why can't we just discuss this quietly and intellectually?"

None of those attitudes is based on belief. The feelings are just there, whether I like it or not. It's hardly possible to grow up as a white person in American culture without inheriting feelings of prejudice. You breathe them in with the culture. I do my best to work consciously *against* them and not to *act* upon those feelings, but I can't pretend they're not there.

White Privilege

Next: white privilege. The concept causes much misunderstanding among us. But it's simply the flipside of discrimination. If black people are the targets of discrimination—in housing, employment, the justice system, or wherever, then whites are receiving a benefit that blacks aren't. Whites are getting more opportunity *because* African Americans are getting less. [\[1\]](#)

I doubt that any of us disagrees that white privilege is real. We all know that:

- I can get a taxi at night more easily than Gerald can;
- I will never have to fight for a seat at a restaurant as Karen has.
- Statistically, a white man with a criminal record can get a job more easily than a black man with no record.

But it's just as important to understand what white privilege is not:

- It does not mean that every white person has had it easy and hasn't had to overcome major obstacles to get to where they are. Some of us whites at Eighth Day were born into very poor, sometimes single-parent families and worked very hard against major social impediments to move out of poverty.
- It does not mean that a white person has never been discriminated against on the basis of color.
- It does not mean that every accomplishment of a white person is tainted by white privilege.

I sometimes fear that some of us whites in the community are afraid to speak out because we fear being accused of being unaware of our white privilege.

Internalized White Superiority and Internalized Black Inferiority

People in the anti-racism movement speak of white internalized racial superiority and black internalized racial inferiority. These are simply the cultural attitudes and beliefs that most of us have internalized without reflection. If racism ultimately comes from the cultural beliefs and attitudes that whites are superior to blacks and if almost every institution in the culture supports those attitudes and beliefs, then it would be very difficult for white people not to internalize—at some level—that sense of superiority to African Americans.

Internalized black inferiority is the other side of the coin. If virtually everything in her prior personal and cultural experience tells an African American that white is superior to black, it would be very surprising if she didn't internalize some of that sense of inferiority.

The impact of both these attitudes is more powerful than we generally recognize but it's widely ignored.

For a number of very good reasons, we don't speak much about internalized black inferiority at Eighth Day. And whites do need to be very careful. Perhaps we should discuss it only in groups with black leadership, but I hope there's enough trust within this community that we can at least begin the conversation together.

Racism

We also need to be clear about the definition of the word “racism.” A dictionary defines racism as the poor treatment of, or violence against, people out of the belief that some races of people are better than others. In common speech, the word is used to name flagrant prejudice based on beliefs of racial superiority, and it’s no wonder that some of us take offense at the charge of racism at Eighth Day.

Those of us who have been to anti-racism training, however, have learned a different, wider definition that *we* use. Racism is cultural prejudice that is supported by institutional power and authority. The impact of systemic institutional power to enforce the poor treatment of one race against another is far more important than how flagrant the racism is in any individual. It’s emblematic of our culture that we can get all upset around the private racist statements by the owner of a basketball team but ignore the structural racism that kills people.

The shorthand is: Racism equals *prejudice plus power*.

These are two very different meanings. According to the conventional meaning, I would argue that there is no racism within Eighth Day. But, on the basis of the wider definition, we need to look more closely. For example, the disciplines required for covenant membership—tithing, for instance—are policies held in place by the power of the white covenant membership. Are they also discriminatory toward African Americans? I tend to think they are, meaning there is racism within Eighth Day. But the opinion that there is no racism in Eighth Day needs to be presented, too. That opinion is not in itself racist. It’s a legitimate discussion.

We cannot, and must not, be afraid to discuss such issues openly.

Racist

Although I understand why we in the anti-racism movement use the word “racist,” I want to

suggest that—because of the powerful emotional baggage of the word—we in this community forego referring to another person as racist.

In its common meaning, the word racist is a powerful, personal, emotionally-laden *slur*; it means a person of flagrant, conscious prejudice who intentionally speaks and acts on the basis of that prejudice to the harm of others. We use the term to defame someone. Because each of us whites has grown up in this culture with this meaning, to be called a racist is deeply and emotionally hurtful.

Yes, African Americans can legitimately argue that turn-about is fair play; they've been called a lot worse. But my experience is that African Americans are unbelievably forgiving in the entire area of racism once we *acknowledge* the basic truths of racism and white privilege in the culture. Further, we're a community that professes love for one another. All of us are, in different ways, purposively working to create racial justice. If a word doesn't contribute to our mutual understanding, let's avoid it.

Of course, just because a word is provocative doesn't mean we shouldn't use it under the proper circumstances. Within the anti-racism movement, a racist is a person who has personal racial prejudices (which includes all of us, I think) and profits from the structures in our society that benefit whites to the detriment of blacks (which includes all of us whites, I think).

I, and most of us whites here, can agree that under that definition, we're racists. But, try as we might, that's not the emotional meaning we experience when someone calls us a racist.

Acknowledging publicly that we're racists is, I think important, but let's do within some context of anti-racism training where we can receive guidance and learn from the hurt we feel at being called a racist without believing we've been slurred. But outside that context, I believe that using the word racist generates far more heat than light, and we should be *very* careful about using it.

It may be spitting hairs, but I think that the word *racism* is very important in helping us understand the overwhelming impact of structures in oppressing African Americans. The word *racist* is not, and I hope we stop using

it.

Marja and others object to the term “anti-racist” because the prefix “anti” emphasizes what we’re against and not what we’re for, not what we seek to become. But the rationale behind the term within the anti-racist movement is that for most white people it’s not possible to choose not to be a racist. But one can choose to be an anti-racist, that is, to work to dismantle one’s own internal racism and the structural racism of the country. The *concept* is important.

Legitimate criticisms

There are important, legitimate critiques of this teaching. Within the long history of racism in our country, whites have used logical, dispassionate language—just like mine—to obscure the radical evil of racism. “We’re all the same. Why can’t we just love one another?” It’s certainly possible to hear this teaching in that light. But, I hope you will believe me: I feel passionately about the evil that’s been inflicted on so many of my friends. But I also feel passionately that this community can be a most powerful force against racism, if we choose not to create divisions where there are none.

Another critique of this teaching is that it could gloss over the powerful, important **actual** differences we have with each other.

Do our membership requirements function as a racist structure? Should we change our worship to be more inviting to African Americans? Should we become an explicitly anti-racist church? These and many others are crucial questions that reveal real, *acceptable* differences among us, and we shouldn’t hide from them.

I have much faith that our common vision to be a truly inclusive community of love is much stronger than our differences, and I hope we figure that out so we can work together to end this blight upon our culture.

[1] Tim Wise, “Frequently Asked Questions,” <http://www.timwise.org/f-a-q-s/> (retrieved Jun 2014)