

UNIVERSITY CHURCH

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“WHITE PRIVILEGE: LET MY PEOPLE GO”

delivered by Johnny Kline

Good morning, church. In December, Pastor asked me if I would be interested in preaching on white privilege. I told him that was a sermon that was in me and I was deeply honored to be asked. Last week he gave a powerful sermon on racism that inspired me even further. He also stole about half the sermon I was still in the process of writing. It wasn't so troubling that I had to start over, but that he preached it so much better than I was going to. Hopefully, I have recovered and have some things to say that will be of some use.

Please let us begin by joining in prayer. Dearest God, creator of love itself, that which is our greatest desire, our most sought after treasure, and the best of what it means to be us, we ask your loving presence to spread among us this morning. We will be talking about one of the greatest challenges you have placed before us, our ability to use your gift of love to understand each other regardless of the differences between us. Please, oh Lord of Wonder, keep us in your tender grace as we search, diligently, for the paths you have cleared for us but which we still struggle to follow. And I ask you to place words in my mouth, Dear God, that may help someone here today to take steps along their path with you. In Jesus' name we pray, let the church say, Amen.

White Privilege. The term itself stirs emotion in pretty much everyone and upset in most. It is certainly a thankless topic for a sermon. I can't win, here, today. I'm going to say something that sounds wrong to somebody, guaranteed. If I really do my job right, all of you will hear something at some point in the sermon with which you disagree. But that is OK with me. I'm willing to take the heat. Above all else, I believe we need to have conversation around racism. And that conversation needs to include an honest assessment of white privilege in ourselves, in our community, and in our society. It needs to be transparent. We, as white people, are not helping ourselves or our sisters and brothers of color by not talking about it. So, please consider this sermon a volley. I am going to serve some things over the net and I invite all of us to keep the ball from dropping.

The reason this sermon is in me sources from a balmy June afternoon in Oberlin, Ohio, in 1965. On that day my oldest sister was graduating from Oberlin College and the commencement speaker, receiving an honorary degree, was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The seven of us in my family at the time

journeyed from our home in Yellow Springs, Ohio, excited to hear what this famous man had to say. It was a journey that changed all of our lives. Dr. King gave one of his famous speeches, "Remaining Awake Through a Revolution," or the Rip Van Winkle speech. Years later I wrote a poem to commemorate the event for myself:

Robe of honor worn with elegant ease
Flows serene in the Ohio breeze
Progress bold in each stride
Success ordained, undenied
Profound care in the air, moment seized

Public words speaking intimate pain
With no trace of accusing or blame
But demand spoken through
A command spoken to
Seas of white from one black man of fame

Sounds not heard, courage not seen before
Love manifest makes my young mind soar
Human mercy and worth
Forgiveness, goodness, mirth
Tender power sustained ever more

Me and my family never looked back from that day. We joined the Civil Rights Movement and the cause of eliminating racism became my life's work. I was nine years old. Here is what Dr King said: ...all [hu]mankind is tied together; all life is interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be - this is the interrelated structure of reality.

He talked about all the social changes occurring at that time, especially around racism, and exhorted us, as white people, not to sleep through a revolution, as Rip Van Winkle had done.

Dr. King's message was being heard all over the world at that time, and his words were being put into action right here at University Church. We are all blessed, me especially as an intern, to be part of a congregation with an historic legacy around race and an active and successful commitment to social justice. This church has done amazing things to push progress in the world and this sermon could easily be nothing but a congratulatory celebration of UChurch's accomplishments in making change happen.

To illustrate, let me tell another story from the same year, 1965. There was a young couple with a two-year-old daughter who had recently moved nearby here. The mother wanted a church home for herself and her family. She decided to visit University Church. Most couples would expect a warm welcome in any new church, but this mother approached the entrance with trepidation. She was white and her husband was black and their daughter was mixed-race. They had battled with her family and so many others and she was ready to be scorned or even turned away.

Instead, they were greeted at the door with a huge warm smile from a long-term member of the church. She made certain they felt welcome and comfortable, she escorted them to the nursery, ensuring their child was in good hands, and then showed them into the sanctuary making sure they had good seats in the pew. 1965. That was a revolutionary act. That couple was Karen and Bobby Fields. Imagine how this church might be different today if they had not been greeted in that way and moved elsewhere.

That is one story among many and, in fact, I believe there is a book in it, if anyone wanted to write it. And it begs the question, what would be an equivalent act today? Given everything that has happened in the past 48 years, how can this remarkable congregation ensure that we are not sleeping through a revolution. How does a caring, progressive, powerful church respond to the insidious insanity of the suggestion that we are living in a post-racial society. How can the white people in the church do even better to set up our lives and actions as a contradiction to the racism that only we can end. Let's turn to scripture.

The Lord said to Moses, 'See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his land. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt. When Pharaoh does not listen to you, I will lay my hand upon Egypt and bring my people the Israelites, company by company, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. The

Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them.' Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as the Lord commanded them. The word of God for the people of God.

Let's look at this story, perhaps the greatest liberation story ever told, from a different vantage point this morning, OK? We, as white folk, tend to identify with the Jews in this story as we well should, but today we are talking about taking ownership of a different part of our legacy. Today we are looking at our identity as the oppressors. Today we are taking responsibility as agents of racism. Today, in this story, we are not the Jews, but we are who? We are Pharaoh. It is our hearts that God has hardened. Now let us mix it up just a little further and consider that the plagues represent hardships of racism.

1. There is the plague of unequal income (white families: \$63,000 and families of color: \$34,000), and our hearts were hardened
2. The plague of inequitable net worth (white families: \$629,000 and black families: \$98,000), and our hearts were hardened
3. The plague of retirement account gaps (white families: \$109,000 and families of color: \$17,000), and our hearts were hardened
4. The plague of incarceration (there are more African American males under the control of the criminal justice system now than were enslaved in 1850), and our hearts were hardened
5. The plague of immigration and customs enforcement (the United States deported more than 400,000 illegal immigrants in 2012, the most of any year in the nation's history), and our hearts were hardened
6. The plague of imbalanced education (more than 1 in 3 black students do not graduate from high school while more than 4 in 5 white students do), and our hearts were hardened
7. The plague of uneven health care (black families suffer an infant mortality rate that is 2 1/2 times greater than white families), and our hearts were hardened
8. The plague of housing value inequality (white families: \$132,000 and families of color: \$71,000), and our hearts were hardened
9. The plague of the grand larceny of slavery (it is estimated that the value of unpaid work would amount to over \$500,000 for every African American in this country, which would instantly equalize the financial well-being of whites and blacks. This means that every economic advantage that white people have today is on the backs of slave labor), and our hearts were hardened

10. The tenth plague is violence (over 500 murders in the city of Chicago last year, up nearly 15%, well over 2000 shootings, and overwhelmingly the victims are young people of color). I said from this pulpit on Christmas Eve that these gunshots can be heard from this church, but last week they could be heard right in this sanctuary as one of our beloved, precious daughters of color told us in no uncertain terms through her prayer to God that this is not her problem, it is our problem, yet she and her peers are made to pay for it.

Post-racial society? How dare they?

I have worked to eliminate racism for 47 years. I have led hundreds of support groups, organized state-wide campaigns, built my life around my relationships of color professionally, personally, romantically, and spiritually; I have spent thousands of hours listening to people of color talk about the effects of racism in their lives and white people talking about their desire to live an anti-racist life, and I stand here after all that and acknowledge to you that I am a racist. I believe all white people are. It's not our fault (we have been pummeled with misinformation our entire lives) and there is no blame for anyone in Jesus' family, but our hearts are hardened and we are sleeping in denial. For direction, let me turn to scripture one more time. Ephesians 2:14-22.

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

The separation of racism must end. It is ordained. Its costs burden the lives of all people of color and it also costs us dearly as white folks. As our hearts soften and our awareness becomes ever more clear, we recover the distance from ourselves, each other, our beloved sisters and brothers of color, and God herself. Let's renew our commitment to this and let's do it together, OK? Let's risk talking about race. Let's risk examining what we have, our homes, our jobs, our health, our safety, and acknowledge how that came to be. Let's risk an even deeper involvement in correcting the inequities that surround us.

Let's soften our hearts and open our eyes and embrace a world that equates difference with equality.
Amen.

In these few moments of silence perhaps we can pray and reflect on any where we feel lulled to sleep rather than roused to action.