

“Dismantling Racism” by Sandra Miller

April 28, 2013

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

I ask you all to hear my prayer, taken from Nan Merrill's *Psalms for Praying*, Psalm 19:12-14

But who can discern their own weaknesses?

Cleanse me, O Love, from all my hidden faults.*

With thanks to the Mission Support Group, I stand before you today as an act of accountability for my use of Growing Edge funds to attend the Anti-Racism Analysis Training in Philadelphia in February. I am not ready to deliver this word, and my gut tells me that I have no choice. I want to tell you everything in my heart from my too small understanding of racism to the insidiousness of the mass incarceration of people of color, and of course, I can't. I stand in fear and trembling simply because I am called more and more deeply to the work of dismantling racism, because the more deeply I am drawn into examining the effects of racism on the oppressed the more deeply I understand myself and my weaknesses, and because of how my words will be received by my beloved community.

Through my inner work in Philadelphia I have been able to start distilling some very, very deep feelings of racial victimness that I have been shoving down into some hard to reach dark place most of my life. When I moved here to DC those feelings started to kick and scream as the disparity between people of color and whites hit me squarely in the

solar plexus, but it was easy to transfer what was working in me to my outrage at that disparity in the city and at Potter's House. Now that I am somewhat in touch with my own feelings, it is both scary and a breath of fresh air to take them out into the light, especially the anger.

A question that has stuck with me from an exercise during a Milagros Phillips workshop on racism several years ago was, "have you ever gone into the store to shop for Band Aids and had trouble finding ones that matched your skin color?" I'll wager many of you are looking at me thinking "why would that question matter to Sandra, to a white woman?" So, I'll remind you that I am a Semite, and I remember that in a deeper place of my being more fully as the years go by. Growing up in Los Angeles I spent a lot of time in the sun and used to turn the dark olive color of many people in the Middle East. They didn't make Band Aids that color, or any color besides what was euphemistically called skin color in the 50's, and my yes answer to the question distanced me and recognizable people of color from the majority of people in the workshop. In that workshop and in Philadelphia I realized that in many instances I feel more akin to people of color than to the white race. I went to Philadelphia intentionally to sit with my whiteness and it was very hard.

In elementary school, as a Jew in a predominately working class Catholic population I got called a kike and worse too many times to remember. In junior high a friend and I got jumped on our way home, in a different neighborhood populated mostly by good white Christians. As a convert from Judaism to Christianity I am always aware, even in the Body of Christ, that I am still a minority in a white power structure, even though Jesus too was a Semite. Last Saturday evening, after two days at the Re-entry: Beyond the Bars and the Barriers conference where Maybelle, Trish and I heard the horror stories of formerly incarcerated people of color in this country, we went to a screening of [Traces of the Trade](#), a

documentary telling of the De Wolf family's discovery that they were descended from the most important slave trader in US history. In the discussion after the screening the issue of reparations came up. I had a visceral reaction about the impossibility of reparations for my people, my tribe, that didn't discount the issue for me of reparations for African Americans in this country, but told me how damaged I myself am.

I cannot in any good conscience equate my personal experience as a direct and generational victim of racist treatment to that of people of color who live a day in day out reality as second or third class citizens in the white power world of the United States, but I may have a slightly different perspective than some of us gathered here today. And, I have more than a taste of what it means to be the recipient of white privilege, especially since moving to DC. Here I am white, and more than that I am a member of an elite class of white Christian Americans. I am confused much of the time, confess that I sometimes take advantage of my white privilege, but more and more I feel called to be about the work of raising the issue of racism when I see it as the enormous white elephant in the room. My senses are sharpened and on high alert nearly everywhere I go, and let me tell you it is painful. I can't seem to turn off my awareness even when I want to. I go to bed and wake up thinking about small incidents that happened during the day and wondering how could I have acted differently, or worse yet is that I am standing in judgment of someone else who I think could have done something differently. Not every day, but too many days.

Last week in the sharing time after the sermon Billy described a conversation with an African American woman friend who believed that there was a conspiracy to eradicate the African American population of the US. He described consciously holding back his instinctive reaction of "here we go again," and getting to a place of loving listening. I am grateful for

the way that Billy often brings to our attention, by example, the possibility of bringing our best selves to the fore with an intentional effort. But what rose up for me is that I think Billy's initial reaction to African American claims of systematic efforts to rid our country of our black population is a typical white reaction, even in politically progressive circles. This is by no means a condemnation because I think that most people, including many people of color, are uninformed about issues of the mass incarceration of people of color, which isn't quite as insidious as wiping out an entire race in our country, but is a statistically proven reality. Many studies have shown that crime of every kind is perpetrated equally by people of color and whites. That is certainly true of non-violent drug offences which, in some cases with discretionary maximum sentences, and sometimes mandatory sentences, can get a 15 year sentence. It happens to blacks and Hispanics. It happens to black and Hispanic youths as young as 14 who are put in with the general adult population. It happens to black and Hispanic youths that are victims of abuse, have mental and physical health issues, sometimes serious. It happens to adult blacks and Hispanics who are victims of trauma and have mental and physical health issues. Not only do we put them in prison but they are often put in solitary confinement for days, weeks, years, or decades. Often.

Mass incarceration is often described as the single greatest issue in this country in the 21st century. I've heard that at least 4 times in the last week from 4 different people. It is the most heinous way that institutional racism plays out in a country that claims to be democratic. There is no democracy when all citizens do not have an equal seat at the table, when all citizens are not treated equally under the law. The U.S. claims to hold up the moral standard for our whole world. We represent only 5% of the world's population but have 25% of the world's incarcerated people, a much higher percentage per capita than any politically oppressive country.

Most of the following statistics come from the Center for American Progress. While people of color make up about 30% of the United States' population, they account for 60% of those imprisoned. The prison population grew by 700% from 1970 to 2005 thanks to the War on Drugs which was declared at a time when drug use in the U.S. was declining, and is a rate that is outpacing crime and population rates. Let me repeat that. The rate of incarceration is outpacing the rate of crime. The single most obvious reason for that is the prison industrial complex which blends capitalism with racism in the worst possible way, and which I do not have the time or energy to address here. The incarceration rates disproportionately impact men of color: 1 in every 15 African American men and 1 in every 36 Hispanic men are incarcerated in comparison to 1 in every 106 white men. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, one in three black men can expect to go to prison in their lifetime, and in some places, like Chicago, it's even worse.

As the number of women incarcerated has increased by 800% over the last three decades, women of color have been disproportionately represented. While the number of women incarcerated is relatively low, the racial and ethnic disparities are startling. African American women are three times more likely than white women to be incarcerated, while Hispanic women are 69 percent more likely than white women to be incarcerated. Women are incarcerated when they are pregnant, and are getting pregnant behind bars and I leave you to infer how that happens. Babies, the most vulnerable and innocent among us are being born behind bars and nursed behind bars with bells ringing and doors clanging. What do we think is going to happen to those children?

And incarceration is not the end of how racism is playing out. Trish, Maybelle, Carmen and I attended the two day conference last weekend on the issues facing returning citizens that I referred to earlier. Co-sponsored by Wesley Seminary, the

National Cathedral, and Howard School of Divinity it was challenging, inspirational, and meaningful to me beyond words. And it was absolutely faith based. Of 28 panelists, 17 were returning citizens who spoke of the dehumanizing experiences of their incarceration and the virtually insurmountable obstacles they had to overcome upon their release. I could speak for hours on this subject alone. I see firsthand in the clients at Community Vision what happens when you come back to your community without the support of family and friends, without work, without food stamps, without mental health services, without, without, without. One of the presenters was Bill Mefford, Director of Civil and Human Rights, Department of Advocacy and United Nations of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society. He teared up when he spoke of the Obama administration's recent allocation of \$3-6 billion for increased border patrol, and only \$119 million for re-entry citizens' services. Despite the re-emergence of the tug of call to art, and my excitement of around issues of food justice through the Montgomery County Council's Food Recovery Work Group during Marjory's call class last semester, something deeper, something undeniable and as yet undefined emerged when I heard Bill.

If we look at the state of youth in our country the statistics for the school to prison pipeline are equally disheartening – they break my heart. I'll read a little from the article ["Punishing Students For Who They Are, Not What They Do"](#) by Chloe Angyal that appeared in The Nation on April 17, 2013:

"If you're a white middle or high school student, and you don't have a disability, your odds of being suspended from school are one in fourteen. If you're a black middle or high school student without a disability, your odds are one in four. According to a new study by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, a quarter of black students were suspended in the 2009-2010 school year. A quarter. For students with disabilities, the odds are one in five. And for black girls,

the numbers are a stark demonstration of what happens when two forms of discrimination intersect: black girls are more likely to be suspended than black boys or white girls. And, to the surprise of absolutely no one, when you add a third axis—disability—the figures get even worse. Black girls with disabilities are suspended at a rate sixteen percent higher than white girls with disabilities.

Schools, under-funded and over-populated, are suspending students for minor infractions like cell phone use or loitering (or for violating dress codes, which are problematic for a host of reasons), and being suspended dramatically increases your chance of dropping out altogether. One Florida study found that a single suspension in ninth grade doubled dropout rates, from sixteen percent to thirty-two percent. And though suspension rates are unnecessarily high, they're disproportionately high for those students who are already marginalized."

In a recent Washington Post Express issue was a small blurb with the headline Report: Segregation in Md. Schools Increasing. "More than half of black students in Maryland attend schools where the vast majority of students are non-white and poor, according to a report released Thursday that documents intensifying segregation patterns in public schools over two decades." It goes on to pack a wallop of disturbing statistics in a few short paragraphs in the bottom middle of not hardly the front page.

Aren't all of our children supposed to be the promise of our future?

On Friday I attended the Capital Area Food Bank's 2013 Hunger Conference which was centered on food justice for highly vulnerable populations – homeless, working poor, seniors, children, and chronically ill persons. Over the course of the day I attended 3 different workshops, which you can guess were about homeless and working poor people. In the first workshop

on "Homelessness & Health: What's the Connection?" there was not a single mention of people returning from incarceration as a factor of homelessness and health issues in either the printed material or oral presentation, so I raised it up, but I was not brave enough to raise the issue of the disproportionate number of people of color experiencing homelessness.

I was itching to say something about racism in the second workshop on working poor hunger issues but it felt inappropriate so I bided my time. I had a sense that the presenter from D.C. Hunger Solutions was open to some after workshop conversation, and I was right. While she was not working on issues of racism and returning citizens in relation to hunger in DC, these are areas that D.C. hunger Solutions is at least starting to look at in more depth. It helps just a little to know that in some places awareness is inching up the scale to possible action.

Returning to the main hall for lunch and the plenary session I was jumping out of my skin. I looked around the room and saw that at least 75% of the participants were black, maybe 15% Latino, and just 10% white, or what passes for white. I can't tell you how many women in their 70's and 80's were present because they were running these pantries, coming to the Capital Area Food Bank and lifting the same 50# bags of potatoes and carrots that I lift in order to feed hungry people in their own neighborhoods. A majority of the people are running very small to medium size food pantries in neighborhoods of color and no one was talking about the damn elephant in the room – racism. I spoke about it at some length at my small table which was very interesting, but... really, if we can't confront one of the foundational reasons for the problems to which we are applying "flesh" colored band aids we are not going to get very far.

What Billy said after his sharing to a few of us in conversation is that we need to be ready with open hearts to

hear what others say on the issue of racism whatever it may be. We don't have to agree, we don't have to change their minds, but listening and truly hearing is a first step, especially if it is to hear from a person of color. The case of Billy's friend who believes that ridding the U.S. of African Americans is a conspiracy is an extreme end of the spectrum of perception and reality. Crimes of every nature are committed by all races at an equal rate. When one looks at the issue of the mass incarceration of people of color, when one looks at mandatory sentencing of up to 15 years and solitary confinement, even for children, as legitimate punishment for possession of an illegal substance for personal use, then it is pretty easy to understand why some people, not all of color, believe in a conspiracy theory against people of color. But we don't have to look at such a big picture to see racism, we have only to look to the wider C of S community, and up front and center some of the issues at Potter's House to see institutional racism playing out right here and now. White people in leadership roles, black workers being underpaid was a recurring theme 12 years ago and remains the same today. I'm sure that's not a popular viewpoint, but I experienced it first hand as an employee of Potter's House and being in close proximity to the Columbia Road C of S programs.

There are statistics about how racism affects those of us enjoying white privilege. It costs \$40-\$70 thousand dollars a year to keep someone behind bars, but we spend only about \$14,000 per year to educate a child in Montgomery County, and mere pennies by comparison to feed a hungry child. We are all hurt by racism, and we are all captives until we are all truly free. There are 127 references from Genesis through Revelation about prisoners and incarceration. This doesn't just mean people behind the bars of our prisons but each and every one of us. And what those of us at the Re-entry: Beyond the Bars and the Barriers conference heard last weekend from speaker after speaker doesn't just apply to returning citizens – setting the captives free is the work of all people of faith.

It is what we are called to do if we consider ourselves to be part of the Body of Christ.

I am on a journey, hopefully down a river of life giving water. On my journey I am navigating the sand bars and rapids of my personal racism with what have become dear friends through the Sacred Conversation on Race & Diversity which marks its 5 year anniversary in a few weeks. In the passage from Acts we heard earlier one line stands out for me: "The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us." That's where I hope the river takes me and all of us – to a time when the media and our own minds don't use the color of a person's skin as an adjective for who they are. In God's Joyful Surprise, Sue Monk Kidd writes: "Have you ever tried looking at another person and seeing your own self within him or her? I don't mean projecting onto another person all our miserable traits. I am speaking of recognizing the hidden truth that we are one with all people. We are part of them and they are part of us... Finding this sense of oneness is a natural part of the intimate journey with God. The more we are one with God, the more we are united with one another. We begin to feel a new and deeper identification with people. We come to see that we are all truly related, that what happens to them happens to us."

At every gathering and conference the ending is the call to action. What can you do? What will you do? I invite you to join the Sacred Conversation on Race and Diversity and/or the New Jim Crow Group 4 Change. Talk to Maybelle, Trish, Carmen or I about some of the possibilities. The Sacred Conversation will be bringing you opportunities to support this work from small to large engagement. In the meantime, pray for justice like you've never prayed before and send your love out into the world because Jesus charges us with "Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

I'm not sure how the following piece I'm going to read you came to me. It feels to me like a love letter, and so I read it to you, my beloved and loving community, and I send it out to every person with the afflictions of poverty and racism. In the words of Gabrielle Worley, who serves as a Global Mission Intern in Armenia, "A poem for my Syrian friends"

If it were stones that you carried in your hands,
I promise I would take them from you...**

**the full text of this and other psalms by Nan Merrill may be found at <http://tinyurl.com/merrillpsalm19>*

***the full text of "A Poem for my Syrian Friends" may be found at <http://globalministries.org/news/mee/these-hands.html>*