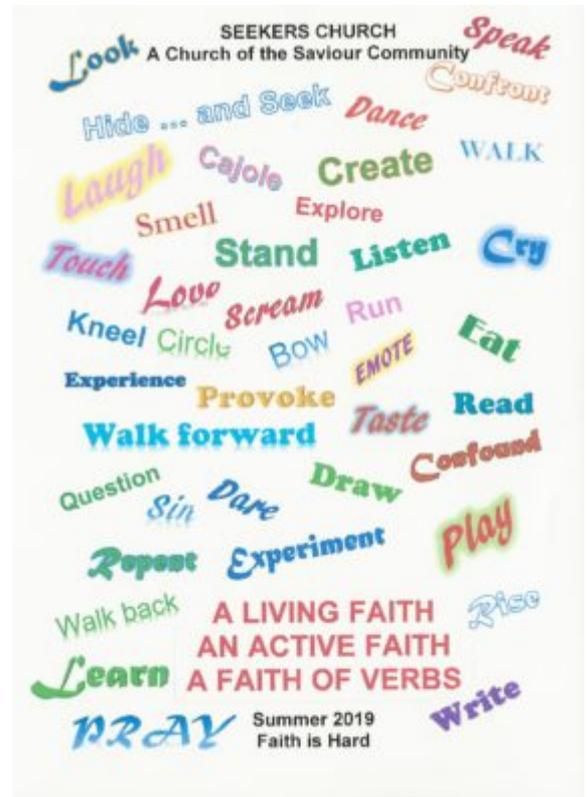


“Recognize Your Rank and Use it for All” by Ron Kraybill

August 4, 2019



The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

The Bible readings for today give us a compelling vision for what we could be:

- the Jewish prophet tells us that the Holy One is, ultimately, about compassion, warmth, and tenderness, and brings the people of Israel home, regardless to their sins.
- Jesus says that material prosperity and success are not the purpose of existence.
- Paul calls us to a new humanity where the old divisions fall away.

We long to be that new humanity. Yet we all know how fleeting are the moments when we experience oneness with others. So what

blocks us from being that which we long to be?

I want to reflect with you on the “isms” that fill our world – racism, sexism, economic and professional elitism – all the divisions, identities and worldviews that cause human beings to set aside the vision for creating a new humanity and to privilege ourselves in disregard to the realities of others. These are the modern form of what was once considered evil spirits that assail us and seek constantly to take possession of our attention and actions.

I will focus today on racism because we can't talk about everything at once. But pretty much everything that I will say about racism could be said, I believe, about all the other “isms” that touch our lives.

I took an important first step in coming to terms with racism in the 80s. I attended a workshop that helped me see my own racism and accept that it more or less came with the territory of being white in the world I grew up in. How could I not carry racism, having grown up in a society where blacks and whites were segregated, and where I enjoyed unquestioned access to security, material comforts and freedom of movement available only with difficulty to non-whites? Unconscious superiority infuses the air that “mainstream” people breathe in such circumstances.

It was freeing for me to recognize racism is not my fault and I didn't need to feel guilty that it resided in me. I am responsible, for sure, to act against my racism, expand my awareness of it, and actively work against it. But that doesn't mean I chose to be racist and need to feel paralyzed with guilt about it. “Guilt is the glue that sticks us to old behaviors,” our trainer Cherie Brown said over and over in that workshop.

That understanding took me a long way in coming to terms with the isms that reside in me. When I step away from guilt, it is

easier to see the shadows within, apply conscious, principled thought, and choose against them.

I don't think I could have survived 6 years in South Africa in the early 90s without those insights. I was a white, educated man, working daily with people in a struggle for liberation from severe oppression by people like me. There was no way I could be engaged without being accused of racism from time to time.

My earlier work didn't make it easy when those accusations came, but at least they saved me from constant anguish of the soul. I had already accepted that there was racism in me, so the thought that it might be rearing its head in new ways in my words or actions wasn't shocking. Accusations of racism became an occasion for further reflection and learning, not a personal crisis.

All that was my first phase.

Then came a second, more subtle, and more difficult phase, one that I am sure will occupy me for the rest of my life. In his book *Sitting in the Fire*, Arnold Mindell describes rank as a conscious or unconscious social or personal ability or power arising from culture, community support, personal psychology and/or spiritual power. Rank organizes much of our behavior in communicating with others, says Mindell, particularly in times of difficulty and uncertainty.

I got my first big lesson in the complexities of rank in a workshop on group dynamics in Port Elizabeth in 1992. I was assigned to a small group of six, where I was the only white person and the only member educated beyond high school. Aware that white men held vast power and tended to take charge wherever they went in South Africa, attending as a participant and not the leader, I determined to avoid dominating in my group. Over the course of the two day workshop, I bit my tongue as we struggled with issues I had frequently worked

with as a professional facilitator – building trust, defining our task, making decisions, sorting out differences. I spoke only occasionally and usually last.

Only in the end, in the debriefing, did I disclose that I worked professionally in group facilitation. To my great surprise, they were not at all pleased with my modesty. “It wasn’t honest to withhold that from us,” one challenged me. “It doesn’t help others if you have abilities that are needed but then privately make a decision to keep them to yourself,” said another. “You should have given us this information, and then we could have together decided how to use your abilities on behalf of us all.”

But, but, but. ... My background and experience are not so important. I am first a human being, and I want to participate as a human being, not as a professional facilitator and trainer. I expected to be appreciated for my efforts to hold back the power I possessed in order to make space for others. Instead, they saw me as covert, less than honest, and lacking in accountability.

The tendency to overlook, minimize, deny, or hide the significance of our own power relative to others with less power is normal, but it blocks us from constructive use of the power we hold. Most of us are aware only of the rank or power we do not have and we fail to notice that which we do have.

I was in a meeting once when the chief executive officer of an organization with hundreds of employees and a budget of \$10 million responded to complaints from staff that he wielded power capriciously. “Oh, people put too much emphasis on my power,” he said. “There are a lot of strong personalities in this room. I feel intimidated by some of you. I’m an ordinary person like everyone else!”

The CEO’s sincerity was obvious – I harbored no doubt that he intended to encourage his staff by being humble and bringing

himself to a common level with them. But people were even more discouraged and angry after his response. By seeing only the powers of persuasion and charisma he thought others had and he lacked, and by refusing to recognize the vast institutional power that he in fact wielded, this CEO dismissed important feedback and made himself unaccountable to others.

Responsible use of rank and power begins with recognizing what we in fact hold and how our rank alters dynamics between ourselves and others. Often we are the last to know it.

Rank and power have many sources. This makes it is easy to be blind to rank we hold even as we immediately see the rank held by others. Mindell lists the following as the most common sources of rank: Skin color, economic class, gender, sexual orientation, education, religion, age, expertise, profession, health, psychology, spirituality.

It had never occurred to me that, for example, good health is a form of rank. Mindell says, "If you normally wake up feeling energetic and ready to move into the tasks of your day, you enjoy high rank in the area of health." Anybody whose body no longer works well for them knows the complex ways in which lack of energy or mobility reduces our ability to claim space and recognition in the social sphere. Few people have any inkling of that reality until they've lost the advantages of good health they once took for granted.

The notion that rank comes only from privilege blocks us from recognizing some valuable forms of rank in ourselves or others. For example, Mindell points out that dire social circumstances instill unusual psychological insight and flexibility in some people. Surviving any kind of suffering, he says, often increases spiritual rank. A hard life destroys some people, but for others it leads to insight, confidence and a psychological radiance apparent to all who meet them.

I know a woman who experienced multiple forms of abuse as a

child and early adult and who remains on the outskirts of her community in mid-life. At a deep level she views herself as disadvantaged and victimized. What others see and she does not is that she actually holds considerable rank of certain kinds. Her ability to survive the grim circumstances of her life gives her a gritty optimism that makes her one of the most hopeful people I know. She has the strength to stand up and say things in groups that few people have the courage to even think. Her years of coping with an abusive parent and a pedophile school principal give her exquisite antennae to read the emotions of others, and a way with words to charm even angry people when she chooses to.

Yet like the rank-unconscious CEO, my friend's lack of awareness of her rank limits her effectiveness and frustrates people around her. On one hand, her skill with words makes her a powerful presence in meetings. She circulates broadly and talks with many people, so she often speaks with knowledge about her social networks that few can match. The wit and wisdom acquired from surviving on the margins for many years enable her to speak with freshness and authority in ways that often make her contributions stand out among others. Her passion and her way with words sometimes shift the course of an entire meeting.

But she does not recognize the forms of rank she holds. She thinks that only people with good education, good jobs and incomes, recognized positions, and male gender have power. Since she has none of these, my friend is not conscious of her own different but quite significant sources of power. She often dominates conversations, relentlessly advocating her ideas and opinions, unaware of how much space she is claiming at the expense of others. When things don't go her way, she accuses others of being oppressive or manipulative. She is always the victim, never, it seems, in any way responsible for difficulties that arise. Because she doesn't see her power, she's not accountable to anyone for how she uses it and it

wastes away in the drama that follows her.

Inability to recognize our own unique form of rank blocks us from effective use of that which we have.

Towards Constructive Use of Rank

The problem with rank, Mindell says, is not in having it, but in using it unconsciously. Spirituality, for example, is rarely recognized as a source of power, but in fact, he says, people with spiritual rank develop a sense of independence from life and death, the social order and history, which confers on them freedom from worry and a certain fearlessness. If they are unaware of this freedom as a source of power, they use it unconsciously and thus are likely to experience repeated difficulty in relationships, giving the impression they are "above it all" or superior.

I once had a series of confusing disagreements with a black South African colleague with whom I did regular co-training. The more we talked the angrier she got, and her anger seemed to me to far exceed the significance of the issues themselves. Why such intensity? I wondered.

Eager to salvage our ability to work together, and sensing that she thought me arrogant, I divulged to her with some embarrassment that I was experiencing conflict in another relationship as well and was puzzled by the appearance of it now with her. Was there something in me causing this, I asked? She responded with great appreciation, saying how much it meant to her that I had divulged this. Now she knew, she said, that I was not trying to make her out to be the cause of our difficulties.

Greater awareness of the dynamics of rank helps me understand this exchange today. My personal style of psychological functioning when I am in disagreement with others, an inheritance from my family of upbringing, is to remain "cool and calm". Mindell says that in most Western cultures, higher

rank is associated with people who are non-emotional and “well-balanced”.

Thus when I persistently responded to our difficulties with a “calm” response in what I considered an appropriate style, it issued a message to my colleague: “Ron claims a position of high rank.” That is not the message I intended to send, and my colleague may have been only vaguely aware of it, for the message was surely subtle. Yet she would have known at an unconscious level, in a country ruled by a “eurocultured” elite, that “staying cool” is a mark of rank. In appearing to claim higher rank than her I would have seemed to be mounting an assault on her human worth relative to mine. Who wouldn’t be angry! My confession of difficulties in another relationship sent the message that I sought equal footing and removed the issue of rank as a divider. Our differences were far easier to discuss after that.

We can’t get rid of rank, Mindell says, so we might as well put it to good use. If we use rank consciously, to benefit others, he says, it’s medicine. Otherwise, it’s poison. Mindell prefers an extremely open approach to issues of rank:

“Whether or not you embrace your ethnicity and cultural background, other people identify you with them. Make your beliefs and rank clear. Bring your rank-based smugness, superiority or self-confidence into the open. If your power is clear, you can use it wisely, put it aside, or debate it with others. If you are of low rank, make that clear too, regardless of the cause. Perhaps you were hurt as a child, socially marginalized by the mainstream or spiritually impoverished. If you can show your fear, unhappiness or despair at being undervalued, you will stop thinking something is wrong with you and realize that you are doing something for all of us.”

Used indiscriminately, Mindell’s open approach may be unrealistic. Not everyone handles well the transparency he

advocates, in the giving or the receiving. But in well-chosen relationships, moments and venues, such conversation can be transformative. In all settings, if we are at least conscious within ourselves of the realities of rank, we make better choices about complex relationships.

Conclusion

Mindell calls people who have learned to use rank well “elders”. These are people of any age or position who see rank in its many dimensions and know themselves to be both advantaged and disadvantaged in relation to others. They accept with gratitude the rank that life has brought them, recognizing that much rank is inherited, not earned. They are neither awed nor obsessively angered by the rank of others, for they recognize that even apparently privileged people are limited, even handicapped in certain areas.

Aware of and at peace with the realities of rank, elders respond with great flexibility to human diversity. In one moment they are mischievous in exposing and challenging destructive use of rank; in another they relax and bask in the joy of rank honored and called upon in the service of all.

In life we interact with all kinds of people. In the nitty gritty of these interactions we seek to build a new humanity where divisions no longer separate us. Rank enters every exchange – we can’t avoid it. Our goal should not be to remove rank as a factor in human relationships, for rank is inescapable, indeed valuable. As we see and make conscious choices about rank and make it a part of conversation, we begin to use rank on behalf of all rather than something hoarded to ourselves. One of the greatest obstacles to progress becomes an asset for all in becoming the new humanity.

Notes for further reflection or discussion on rank.

1. Raise your awareness about your own rank. Reflecting on the following questions will help you to explore the realities of rank¹.

Identity. What ethnic group do you belong to? Nationality? Gender? Profession? Religion? Educational level? Economic class? Relationship status? Age? Physical condition?

¹ Adapted from Mindell, *Sitting in the Fire*, 71-73