

12.28.14 Sermon: "Us and Them"

Presenter: Rev. David Weissbard

[differentiation]

Sociologists tell us that we come to an understanding of whom we are by deciding who we aren't - a process of differentiating. I tried to think of the categories that seem to apply:

Male or Female
Smart or ignorant
liberal or conservative
agnostic or believer
American or foreigner
flexible or rigid
popular or outsider
bigoted or open
tall or short
fat or thin
a success or a failure
thinker or feeler
white or Black
co-operative or hostile
industrious or lazy
straight or gay
smoker or non-smoker
vegetarian or meat-eater
Unitarian Universalist or Christian
extrovert or introvert
white-collar or blue-collar
able-bodied or disabled
techy or Luddite
caring or unsympathetic
attractive or unattractive
and most importantly, someone who divides people into two kinds - or not.

The reality, of course, is that there are some qualities about which we have no choice. Some would suggest that we actually have no choices. Between genetics and environment, we are dealt a hand of cards which we must play. We don't get to choose male or female, for instance, although there are instances of people who are convinced their genitalia do not match who they really are and can go through reassignment. We are finally recognizing the validity of that. In fact, most of those criteria are not either/or's, but a matter of how far along continua

[choices are value laden]

It is also true that some of those categories have more impact than others. Sociologists point out that cultures place more value on some identities than others. Zygmunt Bauman asserts that identities are set up as dichotomies. He points out that:

Woman is the other of man, animal is the other of human, stranger is the other of native, abnormality the other of norm, deviation the other of law-abiding, illness the other of health, insanity the other of reason, lay public the other of the expert, foreigner the other of state subject, enemy the other of friend.

He asserts that social order is based on the fact that in each pair, one side is considered the standard and the other is considered just that: The Other - an inferior - that is, "not like us." .

Simone de Beauvoir wrote:

Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself.

The One, the standard is considered superior and "The Other," inferior. Religions, the law, media, and education, generally reinforce those values.

[woman as "other"]

It is certainly clear that in our culture, males, as de Beauvoir points out, were considered the standard and women were secondary and therefore inferior. Thus the book of Genesis has the male created first and the female created to care for them. Judaism and Christianity have, for centuries, depicted the female as inferior: the Other. Women have had a circumscribed role, and it has not been the one with the most power. A woman who considered herself as equal or, heaven forbid, superior, to a male had to be restrained. The language has been clear: How has homo sapiens been referred to? "**Man**-kind." With rare exceptions, women have been denied leadership roles, have been considered intellectually inferior, and even to this day, commonly paid less than men for the same work. There have been some countries that have been ahead of the United States in recognizing the equality of women, but conservative forces in this country continue to insist that the world would be better if women knew and accepted their inferior place.

Change has come about slowly in this country, but it is happening – at last.

[skin color matters]

There is, of course, another "us-them," majority-minority, relationship which has been even more fraught with tons of superior-inferior baggage and has been even more resistant to change. It is, of course, the category which revolves around skin color. People were brought to this country from Africa to serve as slaves, to do the work no one else wanted to do, and certainly not so cheaply. It is hard to imagine placing human beings in such an inferior role, and treating them so inhumanely, and so it was decided that they, like the natives who lived here before the Europeans arrived, were not truly human.

A war was fought a hundred and fifty years ago to bring an end to slavery, but that war accomplished far less than some thought it should have. There were modest improvements in some parts of the country over the years, but the mind-set that people of color were less human than those with White skin has hung on for an appalling percentage of the American population. Major advances were finally made during the Civil Rights era, but that did not put an end to the pernicious racism. The election, twice, of a President with African ancestors certainly has not put an end to it, but, on the contrary has elicited racism for which they blame him! He is, in the eyes of millions, the ultimate "other" – an alien and a heathen.

One of the obstacles to change is the determination of those with White skin to believe that racism is behind us, which is to say to protect the privileges they still enjoy. We have great difficulty in accepting that the deck is still stacked and that racism is alive and well in America. I am not, for a moment, suggesting that there has been no progress – I am not a

fool. But I would suggest that the majority tends to be blind to many of the potent obstacles to fairness that are an everyday part of the lives of many, if not the majority, of African Americans. Change cannot take place when the need for change is denied.

[how color matters]

There are more Black kids in all Black schools today than there were before Brown v. Board of Education. There is a phenomenon that education and civil rights groups have dubbed the "school-to-prison pipeline." There are big racial differences in how school discipline is meted out: students of color are much more likely to be suspended or expelled than White students, even when the infractions are the same.

A new government study on discipline in the nation's schools released this Spring found that Black children make up 18 percent of preschoolers, but make up nearly half of all out-of-school suspensions at that level. (We're talking mostly four-year-olds.) Across age groups, Black students are three times more likely than White students to be suspended. Black students make up about 16 percent of enrolled students, but make up more than a quarter of all students who are referred to the police.

There has been some improvement in income: Non-White families earned about half of what White families earned in 1989, In 2010, it increased to 65 percent. Today, however, White families claim about six times the net worth of non-White families, a gap that has changed little over the past generation. In 2010, the median primary residence for all non-White families, not just homeowners, had about half the value of the homes of White families.

Unemployment for Whites is at 4.9% while for African Americans it is 11.1%. A University of Chicago study found that when identical resumes were submitted for job applications, varying only by the names, those which had Black sounding names had 50% fewer callbacks. A Princeton University study showed that White men with criminal records were more likely to be hired than Black men with the same qualifications and no criminal record.

[Criminal Justice]

The criminal justice system has been severely skewed against African Americans for a long time. A USA Today analysis shows that Black people are arrested at a rate 10 times higher than people who are not Black, often for crimes for which Whites are sent home with a warning. For instance, Van Jones reported in the Huntington Post that although White and Black kids have been shown to be equally likely to carry a weapon, Black kids are arrested on weapon charges at twice the rate as White kids.

All of the foregoing is preface to the real crisis that many hope will finally get the attention of White America, or at least of those who are sympathetic to the conditions Black Americans face, even if they try to deny them. I am speaking of the killing of unarmed Black Americans by White police, and the refusal of the criminal justice system to hold the police accountable.

It's not that this is something new - it's been happening for a very long time – but it is finally getting the attention of the White media. Peter Rollins, an Irish author who lives in Los Angeles, in an internet essay, asks how we might understand the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson.

Can this be seen as a monstrous eruption of a repressed truth? What we see in Michael Brown's tragic death is the exposure of a reality that the political system has invested great energy in trying to forget: that racism is still prevalent.

Rollins concludes:

Most of us not directly affected by the racism in America, or those of us who have benefitted from it, don't want to face the difficult questions that the events in Ferguson bring up. But if we close our eyes, ears, and hearts to what is going on, we condemn ourselves. If we turn from the truth that is being glimpsed today in Ferguson we will continue to walk the path of damnation, but if we face it squarely and allow it to break us, the truth may set us free.

[New York and Cleveland]

Rollins wrote his essay before the Staten Island Grand Jury followed suit, even in the face of a clear and damning video that clearly showed officer Daniel Pantaleo using an illegal choke-hold to take down and cause the death of Eric Garner for the horrific crime of selling untaxed cigarettes. We have the transcript of the Ferguson Grand Jury, which clearly shows that the prosecutors asked it to judge the officer's guilt or innocence, which is clearly NOT the responsibility of a Grand Jury – their charge is only to determine if there is probable cause for a trial. The now infamous Witness #40 lied, and the DA's knew she wasn't even in Ferguson. The prosecutors directly lied to the jury about the content of the applicable statute. And this is what we call justice.

We do not have the details from the Staten Island Grand Jury, but it appears that there too, the jury was encouraged to act as if it were a trial jury.

And then there is the case of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland about which the police have lied repeatedly. A rookie officer who had resigned from a nearby department when he was going to be fired for incompetence, shot and killed Tamir within two seconds of arriving on the scene, clearly having failed to assess the situation. He says he thought the 12-year-old was 20. It has not yet been decided how that case will – or will not - proceed.

[Implicit Associations]

It is hard for White folks to fully grasp the degree to which many, possibly most, Black Americans, on the basis of their experience, view police as the enemy – another “us” and “them.” That is not to suggest that every police officer is a racist but, it is far beyond just a few bad apples in the barrel. In a **Mother Jones** article on “The Science of Why Cops Shoot Young Black Men,” Chris Mooney writes:

An impressive body of psychological research suggests that the men who killed [Michael] Brown and [Trayvon] Martin need not have been conscious, overt racists to do what they did (though they may have been.). . . The same goes for the crowds that flock to support the shooter each time these tragedies become public . . .”

It was Mooney's article that reminded me of the discomforting “*Implicit Association Test*” [<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/research/>] I had encountered on the internet a couple of years ago and had put out of my mind.

[certainly not me]

As many of you know, I was raised in a very liberal home by parents who were emphatically opposed to racism. While we lived in virtually all-White neighborhoods, they occasionally entertained Black friends. We were active in this almost all-White Unitarian Universalist Church – there was the Cunningham family (he was a doctor) who ultimately left the church because our minister, James Madison Barr, a Libertarian, opposed fair housing legislation that would tell him to whom he could sell his home. When Jim moved, he did sell his

home in a White neighborhood to a Black family – no one was going to tell him to whom he could sell his property. My grade school was all White, reflecting the neighborhood. We did finally have one Black girl from the Albany Home for Children in my class, and we became friends. Hackett Junior high and Albany High had significant numbers of Black students, but only a very few of them were in my “college entrance” classes. And then I attended St. Lawrence University which had not one African American student – there was one African: Ben Jambga. I was active on a committee to push the administration to bring Black students to the campus. The Dean told us that students of color were accepted, but declined to attend when his office suggested that they might not feel welcome. “And,” he told us, “it is too cold in Canton for them.” When I pointed out that there were Black students at what is now SUNY Canton which was then located across the driveway, he had no response.

My strong commitment to racial justice, with which I was raised, has continued throughout my ministry and I have been frustrated by the token number of people of color in almost all of our congregations.

[a “moderate automatic preference”?]

I share all this not to pat myself on the back but to explain why I have always chafed at the suggestion that White folks need to acknowledge the impact of their subconscious racism. Certainly not me!???

And then I encountered the IAT online. I put it out of my mind because it obviously was flawed when it judged me to have “a moderate automatic preference for European Americans compared to African Americans.” “Not possible,” I told myself after I searched my conscious heart and soul.

When I encountered the test again in Mooney’s Mother Jones article on the police, I decided I needed to take it once more. And then I took it two more times, and each time the outcome was the same. Mooney describes the test:

The test asks you to rapidly categorize images of faces as either ‘African American’ or ‘European American’ while you also categorize words (like “evil,” “happy,” “awful,” and “peace”) as either “good” or “bad.” Faces and words flash on the screen and you tap a key, as fast as you can, to indicate which category is appropriate.

Sometimes you are asked to sort African American faces and “good” words to one side of the screen. Other times Black faces are to be sorted with “bad” words. As words and faces keep flashing by, you struggle not to make too many sorting mistakes.

And then suddenly, you have a horrible realization. When Black faces and “bad” words are paired together, you feel yourself becoming faster in your categorizing – an indication that the two are more easily linked in your mind. . . [I actually was never conscious of that linking.]

You think of yourself as a person who strives to be unprejudiced, [yes, indeed] but you can’t control these split-second reactions. As the milliseconds are being tallied up, you know the tale they’ll tell. When negative words and Black faces are paired together, you’re a better, faster categorizer. Which suggests that racially biased messages from the culture around you have shaped the very wiring of your brain.

The results page of the IAT points out:

The test often reveals associations that are different than one’s conscious beliefs. For example, even people who have no conscious preference between Black and White may still have implicit associations that White is better than Black . . .

Depending on the magnitude of your result, your automatic associations may be described as “slight,” “moderate,” “strong,” or “little to no preference.” How implicit associations affect our judgments and behaviors is not well understood and may be

influenced by a number of variables. As such, the score should serve as an opportunity for self-reflection, not as a definitive assessment of your implicit thoughts or feelings. [A Black woman in the Central Square congregation was delighted to find that she still had a “strong preference” for Black folk. She was afraid that her White husband and and associations might have white-washed her brain.]

[less unbiased then we think?]

The point of this test is that it demonstrates that many White Americans are less than fully objective when it comes to matters of race, and particularly “White privilege,” than we think we are because of our experiences – or lack thereof. This could impact the actions of all of us, including police officers who often are faced with making split-second decisions. As a matter of fact, studies specifically designed to measure the likelihood that police officers will think they see guns in the hands of unarmed Black people than unarmed White people, and fail to see guns in the hands of armed White people while clearly seeing the guns of armed Black people. The upside of those studies is that it appears that training can reduce those “errors.” It seems likely that the reduction of this bias is more likely in those whose racial distortions are subconscious than in those who are consciously convinced of the greater likelihood that Black people will be armed and dangerous.

[Einstein]

Back in 1946, Albert Einstein wrote a letter to America in which he reported that he was concerned, as a new American, that it appeared to him that:

There is a somber point in the social outlook of Americans. Their sense of equality and human dignity is mainly limited to [those] of White skins. . . . The more I feel American, the more this situation pains me. . . . Many a sincere person will answer, “Our attitude towards Negroes is the result of unfavorable experiences which we have had by living side by side with Negroes in this country. They are not our equals in intelligence, sense of responsibility, reliability.”

I am firmly convinced that whoever believes this suffers from a fatal misconception. Your ancestors dragged these Black people from their homes by force, and in the White man’s quest for wealth and an easy life, they have been ruthlessly suppressed and exploited, degraded into slavery. The modern prejudice against Negroes is the result of the desire to maintain this unworthy condition.

I do not believe there is a way in which this deeply entrenched evil can be quickly healed. But until this goal is reached there is no greater satisfaction for a just and well-meaning person than the knowledge that he [or she] has devoted [their] best energies to the service of the good cause.

[not post-racial]

One of the worst fictions to which the White majority in America clings is that we are living in a post-racial society. Many are utterly convinced that we have gone too far and that there are too many preferences for people of color. That belief requires some incredible mental gymnastics, but many are equal to that challenge: their blinders are not penetrable by the hard cold facts.

The wonderful thing about the internet is that you can have access to ideas that challenge your comfortable ignorance. On a website called “The Theology of Ferguson,”

[<https://medium.com/theology-of-ferguson>] I found a posting by Jelani Greenidge on “This Is What We Mean When We Say It’s About Race.(To the white person who just doesn’t see it.)” in which the author pointed out:

In most cases, when impassioned people of color are saying that a particular event or issue is about race, what we’re aiming to both uncover and dismantle is the racialized system of interlocking societal institutions that perpetuate these kinds of outcomes. . . . It didn’t surprise me at all to find that many of the White citizens and public servants in Ferguson had no idea that there was any kind of racial division in the city, because that’s one of the chief aspects of White privilege – the benefit of not having to deal with it if you don’t want to . . .

So when we say that this or any other issue is about race, part of what we’re asking is for you to go beyond the scope of your experiences when choosing whether or not to validate another person’s perspective, because your experiences may not shed enough light on the problem. Just as fish don’t understand the concept of water until they’re out of it, White people don’t usually understand White privilege until they’re forced to confront its effects, usually by people of color who are sick of getting the short end of the privilege equation . . .

And consider this. When a person of color, however gently or urgently, tells you that perhaps this is about race, that statement probably wasn’t their very first reaction. Their first reaction probably looked like this: Wake the hell up already!

[ducking the conflict]

I suggested earlier that there was some optimism that the recent demonstrations in response to Ferguson and then Staten Island that have swept the country might be the precursor of some real change. And then, last weekend, an apparently deranged man with a history of violence and psychiatric hospitalizations assassinated two New York City policemen, and suddenly this was interpreted as a sign that the exercise of first amendment rights by those seeking improvements to our justice system had caused the murders. We were told the focus on injustice had to stop because it might have motivated him. [I don’t recall similar demands when two Las Vegas officers were killed last summer by a tea couple who declared they were trying to start a revolution.

We are told that the lives of police officers are constantly in jeopardy and that explains their overreactions. In fact, if you check the internet, there are several lists of the deadliest jobs in America - in 2013, law enforcement did not make the top 10 - actually, in one list it was #10. For logging workers there were 91.3 fatalities per 100,000, fishers and related workers 75 per 100,000, for roofers it was 38.7, tenth on the list were construction laborers. For law enforcement, it was 10 deaths per 100,000.

The two New York policemen who died in the line of duty last weekend were the first to be killed there in three years. Nationally, in 2013 police deaths in the line of duty totalled 100 out of an estimated million officers. Any are too many, but the current response is way out of proportion to the reality. It is an attempt to dodge the issue.

Members of the police unions, who are an intense “Us” as opposed to the “them” of the civilian population, and the prosecutors who work with the police, take the position that their brothers and sisters in blue must automatically be supported. There are no limits. It is disloyal, too risky, to admit that some in blue uniforms commit reprehensible acts which are, in fact, deserving of prosecution.

No reputable civil rights activist or demonstrator has suggested that all police officers are racist, but the dominant culture in some departments is. When police officers in uniform turn their backs on a duly elected chief executive, “Houston, we have a problem”!

[the challenge]

I will in no way suggest to you that changing the institutional racism that demonstrably permeates our nation is an easy task - if it were, we would not be facing the challenges we do. Those who came before us, Black and White, have risked and often given their lives to bring about change - change that matters. But the struggle is not over. There is work to be done – uncomfortable work.

Last weekend I stumbled upon the 1996 film of John Grisham's "A Time to Kill." If you don't recall, it is about a young white southern lawyer, Jake, played by Matthew McConaughey, who defends a black man, Carl Lee, played by Samuel L. Jackson, who killed two white men who raped his 10 year old daughter. [The plot bears more than a passing resemblance to "To Kill A Mockingbird."] In a critical scene, Jake refers to himself as Carl Lee's friend. Carl Lee quickly disabuses him of that fantasy. He points out that Jake doesn't even know where he lives, and their daughters have never played together. He tells Jake he has chosen him as his lawyer because he, as a White man, is part of the enemy, and as such, he is able to communicate with the White jury better than a Black man could. Jake, of course, wins an innocent verdict.

At the end of the film, Jake pulls up to Carl Lee's home where the Black community has gathered for a celebratory feast. Of course, Jake's family is welcomed and their daughters go off to play.

This reminded me of the recent powerful internet appeal by a woman who calls herself "Spectra," who appealed to "**Dear White Allies: Stop Unfriending Other White People Over Ferguson.**" She writes:

This is the time to remember that the outrage you feel can in no way match my own and therefore you have way more emotional capacity than I do to talk some sense into the "other side."

It may not feel like much – your empathy may temporarily make you forget that you're not like [Michael] Brown, you're not "one of us" and that in fact you are still one of "them" – but please try and remember how USEFUL you could be should you decide to be brave enough to speak up to the folks more likely to hear YOU than me.

I'm seeing one too many White people bragging about defriending other White people. I don't need your condolences. I don't need rash actions that absolve you of the responsibility of facilitating hard conversations with folks I will never be able to reach.

I need you to step up in a major way, and leverage the connections you DO have to address ignorance with conversation and interrogate White privilege with compassion. Because I will not do this. I cannot do this. . . .

*You're a socially conscious White person? You don't share *their* views? It's disappointing to hear your friends say racist things? You don't wanna talk to them? I hear you. I really do. But if you don't speak to "them" who will? Who will? (Hint: Not me.) . . .*

What would a good... actually, forget good... What would a useful, valuable, effective ally do?

We need you to be brave, now more than ever. Stop with the Unfriending. Speak up.

[cancel the dividing line]

Our old hymnal, Hymns for the Celebration of Life, contained a hymn with words by Lesley Pinckney Hill, a Black poet and educator, born in 1890, the son of a former slave, and

a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Harvard. It was not included in the current hymnals because of the unfortunate use of the noun “man” in a context that was, when he wrote it, deemed inclusive. It went:

This is the charge I take as mine
The goal of every hope and plan
To cancel the dividing line
Between me and my fellow man.
That so for me all fear shall end
Save this – that I may fail to see
My neighbor as a needed friend
Or sense my neighbor’s need for me.
Though parliaments may rise and fall,
I hold to this eternal good,
This deathless truth – that men are all
One earth encircling brotherhood.

There are differences among people, and I would hate for us all to be blandly the same (how boring!), but it is our charge, all of us, White and Black, male and female, rich and poor, to work to remove the lines that keep us from recognizing our shared humanity. At the most important level, there is no “Us” and “them” – there is only “Us”!

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