

Fourth Sunday of Easter April 25, 2021

Acts 4:5-12, 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18, Psalm 23

The Nature of Privilege

A few months ago, a friend and I were discussing what it meant to have privilege. We both work in healthcare, and equity, freedom from bias, is of primary importance in the work we do. To understand how to provide equitable care, one needs to recognize what it looks like when people are not given the support they need or are mistreated. So our conversations often include reflections on the advantages and benefits some people have versus what others receive.

As we talked about privilege and what it is, we also talked about why the word privilege is so loaded and why tempers can flare if one says someone else has privilege.

Unearned privilege, having a privilege that you did not work to attain, is the most challenging type of privilege to discuss. It is a rare person who accepts that their privileges came with their birth alone.

We noted that some folks get caught in a spiral of guilt when they discover that they have a generational privilege. They focus on what they see as a shameful inheritance rather than using that benefit as a foundation for helping others.

We wondered, "Is there a way we can talk about privilege as part of our discussions about equity?" "Can we describe privilege in a way that encourages people to acknowledge it **and** then use it to make the lives of others better?"

How we describe privilege, we knew, could either promote discussion or shut it down. Then my friend said to me that she read an article in which someone said, "Privilege is never having to worry about..." This led us to a discussion about what does and does not cause us to worry.

Privilege is never having to worry about where you are going to sleep tonight. Privilege is never having to worry about how to feed your family. Privilege is never having to worry about how to pay for going to the doctor. Privilege is never having to worry about getting sick during a pandemic because you must go to work. Privilege is never having to worry about being accepted or treated fairly based on your gender identity, your age, your sexual orientation, your ability, or the color of your skin.

One of the interesting things about privilege is that we can experience it sometimes and not other times. Let me give you some examples: As a Christian, I am privileged in that most of my religious holidays are given deference in the work world. Christmas, for example, has been a federal holiday since 1885. I have never had to worry about either receiving time off or receiving compensation for working on Christmas when my work required that I do so. Nowadays, the work I do is primarily office work, and during the pandemic, I work remotely from home. I never have to worry about working among people who are potentially infected with COVID. And when I travel, I never have to worry about whether I can navigate a space based on my abilities.

On the other hand, I have had to worry about keeping my hands in plain sight when I am in a store (yes, I have been followed even recently as a few years ago). I had to worry about encounters with law enforcement in the past when I was stopped for speeding (thank God I finally learned how to use cruise control). Even having been a law enforcement chaplain for a few years, I could not relax because I knew that every situation depends solely on what the officer perceives. I knew I could not afford to make any assumptions about what an officer would see as a threat.

Today I worry about all of the young people in my family who, despite their kindness, generosity, goodness, and education, are perceived by many in society as dangerous because of the color of their skin. I think about the woman in Iowa who recently plead guilty to acts of hate when on two separate occasions, she deliberately drove onto sidewalks and aimed her car at children because she perceived them as belonging to a different race or ethnicity than hers.

“Privilege is never having to worry about....” Well, what could any of us put in that space? Is there a vision for a life with benefits and advantages that everyone can have? Today’s Psalm (23) reading provides us with a glimpse of what that life of privilege could be.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.” It is a privilege to be able to feed a family, clothe the naked, provide healthcare for the sick, and have the resources to offer hospitality to others.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.” It is a privilege to live in a part of town that has parks and nature trails for everyone. It is a privilege to be able to rest and feel safe wherever one is. It is a privilege to have clean drinking water.

“He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name’s sake.” It is a privilege to worship God without fear and to know that

one can worship with others who follow the traditions and covenants of our faith.

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.” It is a privilege not to be overwhelmed by all-consuming fear for your safety because people hate you based on your identity. It is a privilege to have peaceful havens amid chaos and calamity.

“You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.” It is a privilege to experience the gift of gratitude even as others attempt to steal one’s joy.

“Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” It is a privilege to know that our Redeemer has secured for us a life of hope despite the tribulations of this lifetime.

I did not earn any of these privileges. They were given to me when the Good Shepherd willingly laid down his life for me. Acknowledging privilege, especially unearned privilege, means recognizing the sacrifices made to secure them. It also means that I have a responsibility to seek those same benefits for others.

In today’s second lesson, we are asked to consider, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” We are encouraged to love through truth and action. So my siblings, let us not lament the privilege and benefits we are given. Let us not pretend they do not exist or hide from the responsibility to use those benefits wisely in the service of our Lord. If you have ever known what it is like to be in need, alone and afraid, without hope or felt forgotten, then you know what it feels like when someone reaches out to you in loving kindness and does what they can to be there for you and to help you. Let us use our privileges to ensure justice and equitable treatment for all. Because my friends, we are one flock, after all.