

A couple weeks ago I had a long, complicated conversation with my daughter, in which we agreed that seeking solutions and an absence of suffering was misguided. I won't bore you with the whole run-up to this conclusion, except to say that we were talking both about the struggles of the very elderly *and* the experience of teaching 4<sup>th</sup>-graders in a less-than-ideal environment. To focus on finding solutions, or on eliminating suffering, does not tend toward edification there. She said, finally, that I would like an article she was going to send me about white supremacy culture<sup>i</sup>, which she was finding helpful in her teaching.

So she did, and indeed it is very interesting. Culture is powerful partly because we're all so immersed in it that we're often not conscious of it. The idea is that white supremacy culture uses norms and standards that advantage dominant people, and they get used without being intentionally named or chosen. These norms and standards include perfectionism, a sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, the idea that there's one right way to do things, either/or thinking, and a few others. This article suggests antidotes to each of these norms, so that for instance, instead of perfectionism, you develop a culture of appreciation in your organization, you expect mistakes and think of them as opportunities for learning, you ask people to offer suggestions for doing things differently when they critique what's been done.

School is kind of a hard place to fight back against perfectionism, because we have to give grades. Being graded becomes a paradigm for life for some people, I think, with God as the ultimate evaluator. But even just in the classroom, students don't want to make mistakes, and I can hardly blame them, because if I ask them to interpret a saying of Confucius and they do so in an incorrect way, a way that shows they don't understand his concept of "the gentleman" or

filial piety, I have to point out the misunderstanding rather than appreciate their interpretation, or they'll do poorly on the midterm. At the same time, I want them not to be afraid of making mistakes, which is a little crazy since I will then give them bad grades for their mistakes.

All this is to say that I have sympathy for the man who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Kudos to him for asking the important questions, right? And further kudos to him when he reveals that he's been keeping the commandments, knows them inside out and is conscientious about following them. Is Jesus saying that to gain eternal life the man must now do *three* things: keep the commandments, sell his goods, giving the proceeds to the poor, and thirdly follow Jesus? If that were so, then Jesus was rather unfair telling him at first that the way to eternal life was just to keep the commandments.

The commandments that Jesus lists, though, are not the ones about our relationship with God, like "you shall have no other gods before me." They're the ones about how we live with each other in community. Don't murder, don't lie, and so forth. And maybe Jesus' challenge to the man to sell possessions, give to the poor and follow him, was a way of exposing a flaw in the man's keeping of the commandments. Although he may have kept the commandments perfectly, he had missed the *point*, or the spirit, of the commandments. Maybe he had failed to develop the sense of community where *everyone* belongs that lies behind those commandments. It is possible to go through life avoiding mistakes, and still not be generous or kind-hearted.

If this man needs to ask "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" then he must not feel that he *has* inherited it. But when Peter points out that he and the other disciples *have* left everything and followed Jesus, what Jesus said the man needed to do, Jesus assures him that

yes indeed, Peter and the other disciples *are* in line for eternal life. They *have* given up what they had and invested in the beloved community where everyone has a place. I read that as saying that the community to which you're called now, Peter, is the beginning of the community in the coming age—right now there's persecution, which is difficult, but when God's rule is fully realized, the world will be the way the community is. Imperfect as your situation is, the inclusive community is your assurance that you are already inheriting eternal life.

In our time, racism is a huge barrier to community and thus eternal life. It's not the overt racism of a generation ago, but a more subtle and insidious form. We white people often fail to see it, despite our best intentions and being just as good as we know how to be. Here, to refresh your memories, are a few ways in which we find ourselves complicit in racism:

Most whites live, grow, play, learn, love, work and die primarily in social and geographic racial segregation. But our society does not teach us to see this as a loss. Consider the magnitude of this message: We and our children lose nothing of value by having no cross-racial relationships. In fact, the whiter our schools and neighborhoods are, the more likely they are to be seen as "good." The implicit message is that there is no inherent value in the presence or perspectives of people of Color.

***Individualism:*** Whites are taught to see themselves as individuals, rather than as part of a racial group. This ignores our history and hides the way in which wealth has accumulated over generations and benefits us, *as a group*, today. It also allows us to distance ourselves from the history and actions of our group. For People of Color, the internalized messages are that you are a member of a group, not an individual, that you can either act white or act out, neither of which is a great option, and that your possibilities are limited but you'll never know if it's

because of you or because of racism.

**Racial Belonging:** White people enjoy a deeply internalized, largely unconscious sense of racial belonging in U.S. society. In virtually any situation or image deemed valuable in dominant society, whites belong.

**Psychic freedom:** Because race is constructed as residing in people of color, whites don't bear the social burden of race. We move easily through our society without a sense of ourselves as racialized. Race is for people of color to think about. This allows whites much more psychological energy to devote to other issues and prevents us from developing the stamina to sustain attention on an issue as charged and uncomfortable as race. People of Color, on the other hand, know that any position of power they may achieve is tenuous because their race renders them peculiarly vulnerable. They may avoid taking risks and making mistakes because risk-taking is seen as reckless or irresponsible.

These privileges and the white fragility that results prevent us from listening to or taking seriously the perspectives of people of color. The antidote to white fragility, and the way to move toward the beloved community is life-long, and requires humility and education. We can begin by taking steps to educate ourselves about white supremacy culture, and tolerating the discomfort it brings. We can recognize the ways in which our cultural defaults exclude others and prevent community.

This is difficult. "Getting it" when it comes to race and racism challenges our very identities as good white people. After all, I have kept all the commandments since my youth; doesn't that make me good? Well, sure, but since I don't live in a vacuum, I have to address the obstacles to community that exist, even if I didn't intend them to be there. It's not in being perfect, but in

caring about our neighbors, that eternal life breaks in. It's not in teaching others the one right way, but in learning and appreciating other ways, that our hearts begin to expand. The first can go last, and have it be okay. It may seem impossible, but for God all things are possible.

Lord of abundant riches, when asked to give up his privilege to follow Jesus, a rich man faltered. Give us the courage to give everything that we have to you, knowing that what you offer is more valuable than all the privilege in the world. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.dismantlingracism.org/white-supremacy-culture.html>