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By Glenn Jordan

Introduction

Recently I was chatting to an African American woman who was mother to two daughters. We got to discussing “The Talk” that parents have to have eventually with their children, you know the one I mean, the one some of us cover with all sorts of euphemisms, like “the birds and the bees.” What startled me was the fact that The Talk is different for black parents. For them The Talk is first of all about how to behave if a police officer stops you; or how you can never play with nerf guns, particularly if it’s getting dark; about how to reach for your driving licence in the glove compartment without scaring the one who asked you to retrieve it.

I was shocked and I realised that I lived with a form of privilege I never really had to think about.

On another occasion I was leading a workshop on the story Moses and the Burning Bush. I asked the group to consider two questions. What is burning in you that is consuming you? And, what is burning in you that is sustaining you? A black man in the audience pushed back against the frame of the questions arguing that some people must carry unfair and unsustainable burdens in the struggle for justice and inclusion while others get choices on whether to be involved or not.

I was shocked and realised that even the way I had shaped these questions revealed the privilege I enjoy. I had the power to choose to remain silent in the face of injustice.

Where do you see unearned privilege at work in your world today?

Are you aware of any privilege you benefit from but didn’t work for?

Who or what created and sustains this situation?

Text

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place", and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

He said also to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

Comment

In the struggle for justice some people have to do a disproportionate amount of heavy-lifting while others get a choice. Some people get to choose when and where to take a stand, and can weigh the need for confrontation against the discomfort and inconvenience of speaking out. Others don't have that privilege.

Peggy McIntosh described privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious."* As a white, heterosexual male I benefit every day from this package of unearned assets, most of the time unconsciously.

This week's lectionary text can be read through the lens of privilege, demonstrating Jesus' awareness of privilege, and how the Gospel demands of us that we awaken to the unconscious bias in our lives and act accordingly.

It is a story full of careful observers, but as Henry Thoreau is reported to have said "The question is not what you look at but what you see." The religious leaders are watching Jesus closely to examine his orthodoxy (Luk 14:1). Jesus on the other hand is watching the competitive behaviours of the guests (Luk 14:7) which draws a story from him.

The story Jesus tells is a strange one which seems to advise people to be devious, even hypocritical, about their advancement in the world. How are we meant to react to this advice? Jesus here shows himself to be aware of how things work. He is not naïve about the games people play, the false humility, the humble brag designed to draw attention to ourselves and move us up the social or professional ladder.

Everyone at the party knows that they are there to play their part in a system of mutual back scratching. Every guest is chosen for how they can serve the advancement of the host, even Jesus, the edgy rabbi, is there to play a part. It's all a

game that is played out within a closed and exclusive circle but breaking in to that circle is incredibly difficult. If you're a guest here, you're already on the ladder.

So after offering some free advice on how to climb the social ladder, Jesus then dismantles it by exposing the underlying social structures which maintain these ladders of power and privilege.

Next time there's a party to throw, says Jesus, don't invite those who are within your circle, don't invite those who can serve your advancement. Instead, send invitations to those who cannot return the favour in any way. Invite the unclean, the poor, the marginalised. Find a way of leveraging your privilege and power in ways that benefit everyone, especially those who have no access to the parties that matter.

Sometimes we are tempted to confuse privilege with blessing. This is especially dangerous if we name our privilege as a blessing from God. One way of understanding the Gospel however, is to see it as a call to transform our privilege into blessing for others who ordinarily are denied either privilege or blessing.

Jesus is saying something infinitely more revolutionary here than simply asking us to build bigger tables to make room for those who would otherwise not be invited. Jesus is calling on us to become aware of our unearned privilege, to deny ourselves its solely personal utility, and instead to use it in favour of those who have none.

* <https://nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack>

Response

The conversation around privilege, particularly white privilege, is perhaps much more acute in the United States than here in Ireland or the United Kingdom. And of course there are different elements to the debate on this side of the Atlantic to that happening in the US. Nevertheless there are things to learn from the contours of the debate there.

The phrase "check your privilege" is sometimes used to remind people that the body and the life they are born with comes with some specific privileges which do not apply to all arguments or situations. It also suggests that in order to get a better understanding of the plight of another, one should acknowledge one's own inherent privilege.

With an awareness of systems of advantage can come a moral responsibility to act for those who do not benefit from these systems.

I can have these unearned advantages because of gender, race or sexual orientation for instance. These are not things I have chosen. What matters is what I do with my privilege and whether or not I use my privilege for those who are marginalised and less privileged.

Acknowledging my privilege and using it to benefit those who are not so privileged is also a way of reminding myself and others that these systemic hierarchies are not

necessarily a permanent feature of the cultural, economic or social landscape but that they can be changed.

As an exercise you could do an internet search for one of the many online 'tools' that enable you to 'check your privilege.' There's nothing scientific about them but they will help you recognise some of the advantages you may have, which could then empower you to think about ways of using privilege for others.

Prayer

Have mercy on us O Lord, have mercy.

Have mercy on me O Lord, have mercy.

For all those times I have been blind to injustice
For all those times I have taken for granted
The privilege that is mine by virtue of
This body of mine,
This place where I find myself,
This economic wealth I can claim,
And all the other ways, earned and unearned,
That advantage me over others.

For the times I have chosen to look the other way,
Or to occupy myself with other things;
Or to rest from the struggle.

Have mercy on me O Lord, have mercy.

And grant me the courage not just to enlarge the table
But to build a whole new Table of generosity and hospitality

Amen