

White Spaces

By Tobin Miller Shearer



“If we would build a beloved community across racial lines, we must confront the ways that racism shapes and wounds not only persons of color, but also those who are white.”

For most of my adult life, I have been involved in work to overcome racism. For me as a white male, this has meant confronting not only the effects of racism on people of color, but also the ways racism and white privilege have shaped my own life and spirituality.

As I consider racism’s effect on my life, I often think of the unnamed scribe in Mark’s Gospel who asks Jesus which commandment is the greatest.

White people are the privileged ones in a stratified society that oppresses the poor and defines many as unclean.

Jesus surprises the scribe with a twofold response: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.* After the scribe affirms Jesus by adding that love of God and neighbor is “much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices,” Jesus tells him: “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (12:28-34).

These words of Jesus ring in my ears, for I think that this scribe’s situation parallels the identity of white people who struggle with racism today. Like the scribes of Jesus’ time, we are the beneficiaries, the privileged ones in a stratified society that oppresses the poor and defines many as unclean. We are the ones who get “greeted with respect in the marketplace” and have “the best seats in synagogues and places of honor at banquets.” By the virtue of our skin color, we end up profiting at the expense of the poor and oppressed.

It is difficult to honestly acknowledge the power and privilege we receive because of our whiteness. Once we do, we may wonder if that is not enough: “Are we really that far from the kingdom?” we ask. “Is something keeping us from entering in?”

We would do well to listen to Jesus’ words to

the scribe. Even though this exchange is mostly positive—in fact it’s the only place in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus’ interactions with a scribe are not entirely negative—Jesus still does not invite the scribe into the kingdom. He is near, but he is not yet in.

Jesus knows what holds us back from the kingdom. He invites us to enter in.

To be healthy, all of us need to know who we are. For white people, part of that knowledge comes from recognizing how our whiteness hurts us, how it holds us back. In considering how we might enter the kingdom, I believe there are four “white spaces” we must confront.

The first of these spaces is *isolation*. Most white people have a difficult time understanding themselves as part of a group. Our first—almost instinctual—response is to think of ourselves as individuals. While this heightened sense of individualism is true of all members of Western society, I believe this impulse tends to be amplified and warped among white people. Many of us have lost any sense of our group identity as white persons.

As I consider the way this dynamic shapes my own life, I see that I sometimes isolate myself from other whites by conveying the impression that I am a well-read, irreproachable antiracist expert. I rationalize that the amount of energy I’ve devoted to antiracism efforts has earned me the right to no longer acknowledge the effects and reality of racism in my life. I function as if my efforts have somehow separated me from any collective white identity.

Having recognized this tendency, I’ve begun to try to identify more with the resistance I sometimes experience from other whites in discussions of racism. When I say, “Racism makes all white people into racists,” I try to put myself in the place of someone who might be hearing those words for the first time. I remember the resistance I felt when I first heard those words.

It is the same resistance I feel when a colleague of color challenges me about something

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I have said. It is the same resistance I feel when I realize that I respond differently to the young Latino man who walks past me than I did to the young white man who passed me on the same sidewalk a block earlier.

Long-time antiracism organizer and author Dody Matthias once reminded me, “We have to remember the pain and discomfort we all go through as white people when we first become aware of racism’s effects on us. It is like remembering the pain of coming out of the birth canal to look around at a new world.”

When I am able to connect with how difficult it is for all of us who are white to name our racism, how difficult it is for each of us to come through that birth canal, I am better able to respond to the resistance I might encounter in a workshop or conversation. I am better able to talk without shame about working against racism in my majority white congregation. And I am ready to stop protecting white people—including myself—from the pain of facing our complicity in this racist system.

In the space of isolation, the task for us is connecting. We who are white are not autonomous individuals. We must learn to understand together that we are a group of people who have all been shaped into being white.

A second white space is *control*. For many of us, this may be the most difficult space to visit. We do not want to acknowledge how accustomed we are to being in control. Even when dealing with racism, we want to define the problem and then find the solution, the correct response, to this social evil. We are reluctant to acknowledge the spiritual effects of racism on our lives and our inability to free ourselves completely from its influence.

In institutional settings, the desire for control sometimes takes the form of maintaining and promoting programs that benefit white people at the expense of people of color. Many of the short-term service ventures prevalent in church mission agencies are a prime example of the unspoken desire of white-led institutions to remain in control.

Typically, such programs take privileged and resourced people (most of them white) into improv-

erished settings for short-term service. In the September 1995 issue of *A Common Place*, James Logan spoke of his experience as a young African American recipient of such short-term service: “I call them ‘get-to-know-the-ghetto tours.’” Logan points out that such projects contribute to the community’s destabilization, rather than increasing its health. “Short-term service is, I think, very much like crack cocaine and alcoholism; it gives a false sense of security. But it does not build a coherent, intergenerational community that empowers its members.”

Even in the face of such concerns, short-term service endeavors remain popular. While the effects of such projects are admittedly complex and amorphous, the vast amounts of funding and

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participation that allow such programs to continue with such vigor seem to indicate that something else is going on. The fact that such service continues to be so prevalent, when that service may in fact be harmful, speaks powerfully of the need for the sponsoring institutions to set the agenda, rather than taking their lead from those in the communities that they seek to serve.

The principal task I’ve identified in this white space of control is that of letting go. One concrete expression of this is an emphasis on accountability to communities of color. Such accountability can put us in a place of not being able to rely on white privilege.

In our work as an antiracism training team, my colleagues and I try to ensure that people of color get veto power. For example, if one of our workshops includes an uncooperative participant, and we cannot agree whether to confront this person directly or let the behavior go for the time being, we give the people of color the final say. In disagreements over training in potentially volatile settings, again the final word goes to people of color.

I resist strongly being put in situations where I

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cannot depend on my white control and privilege. Yet I know how powerfully God can act when I allow myself to be grounded in the space of letting go.

Racism also situates whites in a place of loss. Yet we who are white seldom recognize what we have lost because of racism, nor are we given permission to grieve this loss.

In the process of becoming white, European Americans lost much of their culture and history. We disowned an intimate understanding of where we came from and how we came to be. We lost our own stories. Just as the people of the Hebrew Scriptures had to remind themselves again and again how they came to be the children of Israel, so do we as white people need to recover our own stories of foundation.

As we begin to confront our own racism, we may be tempted to keep our exploration of these issues on an intellectual level. Confronting issues of race on an emotional and spiritual level can be painful. But if we are open to grieving, we may be able to hear what we have previously ignored.

Author Lillian Roybal Rose has pointed out the need for whites to move beyond a purely intellectual struggling with racism. Yet she recognizes

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how difficult it will be for most of us: "The movement to a global, ethnic point of view requires tremendous grieving. I encourage white people not to shrink from the emotional content of this process. . . . When the process is emotional as well as cognitive, the state of being an ally becomes a matter of reclaiming one's own humanity."

I suspect that beneath much of our hesitancy to grieve is an emotional response that begs to be expressed—perhaps at first in anger or denial, possibly even in weeping. All these are expres-

sions of grieving the loss of critical, life-giving parts of our humanity. Such grieving takes great courage and commitment. And the importance of a caring and nurturing community to surround us as we grieve cannot be overstated.

I once witnessed a video of a worldwide gathering of Christian indigenous people. It was filled with images of worship, but it was worship unlike any I had ever experienced. Group after group sang, danced, walked, chanted, and moved in their indigenous dress, language, and style of worship. I saw Maori, Choctaw, Filipino, Finn, and Zulu worship styles explode with Christ-centered jubilation.

In one scene a middle-aged Indonesian man danced slowly across the screen with a power and grace I have rarely witnessed. As I watched him act out a battle with Satan, his face filled with dignity and strength, I began to cry.

I cried for joy that this fully human, profoundly fleshy experience of worship was still with us. But I also cried out of grief that somewhere in the history of becoming white my own indigenous roots and identity had been left behind. I cried that my mother had been taught that dancing was profound sin. I cried that in my own church congregation we seem to barely register that we even have bodies. And I cried because I knew that as we have called ourselves white and declared ourselves superior, we have also become poorer.

If we are willing to be honest with our grief, to confront what we have lost, we can move forward into reclaiming who we are. We can begin to confront our own personal journeys in "becoming white," as well as our family and collective histories. When these tasks of reclamation are undertaken with full knowledge of how the dominant society tries constantly to shape white people into racists, the journey of reclamation can be joyful and life-giving. It can also become a profound act of resistance to racism.

Finally, one of the most curious spaces that racism creates for white people is a space of *loathing*: both a self-loathing and an active distaste for and mistrust of other white people. I have known some ardently antiracist whites who seem unable to sit down and simply enjoy the company of other white

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people. It does us no good if, in the midst of working to dismantle racism, we end up hating one another.

Sometimes white people who work to end racism try to express their deep commitment to this cause by lashing out at other white people—or even at themselves. Such attacks are not healthy for us, nor do they help to confront racism. This final white space of loathing must be countered with the difficult task of learning to love ourselves and others.

I was confronted with the difficulty of this at a family reunion one summer. Two of my relatives presented a skit that was introduced as an encounter between a pastor and a “colored” man. The skit proceeded to show a racist stereotype of a confused, illiterate “colored man,” complete with Southern drawl.

After getting over our initial shock, my wife Cheryl and I left the room. Amid tears and embarrassment, we talked about how we should respond. We decided that we had to return and say something. Although it was a moment of utter dread and sheer terror, we both felt we could not live with integrity if we did not speak up.

So we went back into that gathering of about one hundred relatives, and spoke about the pain the skit had caused us. I told them how much I want to be proud of my family and described how disappointed and hurt I’d been by our collective silence in the face of the skit. I spoke about how saddened I was by the messages this skit might have taught my young sons. Yet I felt glad that my sons were there to see at least one small way in which we were trying to love each other in spite of this racism.

After we spoke, all I wanted to do was leave. Yet several relatives came up and told me how much they appreciated what Cheryl and I had done. Their presence and support gave me the courage to stay in the room and to continue to be with folks whom I didn’t even want to see in those moments.

It may seem strange to conclude a systemic analysis of the effects of racism on whites by focusing on the interpersonal principle of loving one

another. Yet the systemic and the personal are not, in fact, contradictory.

The work of dismantling systemic racism and building new institutions that are not based on white power and privilege needs to be infused with a deep love for and among all of us who are working together. Antiracism work can quickly become warped if it involves white people who fundamentally do not love themselves.

Underlying each of these white spaces — isolation, control, loss, and loathing — is the pattern of internalized superiority that racism has taught all white persons. We have believed that we have the answers. It can shake our very foundations to discover that these lessons of superiority and our ensuing dependence on privilege may inhibit our complete and unlimited entrance to the kingdom.

I believe that our inability to confront and pass through these four white spaces may keep us from completely entering the kingdom. It is my hope that a deeper focus on connection, grounding, reclaiming, and loving might help remove those barriers to living out God’s reign that are particular struggles for white people.

Jesus words to the unnamed scribe serve as both a caution and an invitation. “You are not there yet,” he seems to say to us, “but keep working together, so that one day you might all enter the kingdom rejoicing.”

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