

“Black History Month Reflection”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, February 16, 2020

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Today’s worship liturgy, written for Black History Month by Alydia Smith, helps us to become familiar with the stories and accomplishments of Black people in Canada. But Black History Month also asks of me to become more intentional about my discernment and response to racism in the world I live in, and also to identify the ways in which my white privilege shapes how and who I see, and decisions I make about who I will be in relationship with, as the letter from James emphasizes.

In 1988, Peggy McIntosh wrote her definitive paper about her ‘racial awakening’ to the unearned advantages of white identity. Known as “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” she provided a 50-point list of the “daily effects of white privilege.” Here are some examples: No. 5: “I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.” No. 15: “I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.” No. 20: “I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.” No. 41: “I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.”

Rev. Paul Walfall is the United Church ministry personnel in the Fort Saskatchewan Pastoral Charge in the Northern Spirit Regional Council. In an article on the United Church of Canada website, he shares one particular encounter with racism within our church. He writes, “In July 2017 I received the then latest issue of The Journal of the Historical Society of the Alberta and Northwest Conference of The United Church of Canada. In that issue I was particularly interested in the article “The KKK and the Church,” written by Rev. Lloyd Lovatt. It was interesting reading and yet it was also difficult at points to absorb. I read that the Ku Klux Klan came to Alberta in the 1920s through the work of a Methodist, and then United Church, minister.

Equally difficult was to read that clergymen of the United Church were Klansmen and to note that at the time the United Church had the unsavory reputation, according to the writer of the book “The Ku Klux Klan in Central Alberta,” of being a church that “refused to condemn the Klan’s activities.” The article also noted that in 1927 a resolution came to the Saskatchewan Conference “not to support the Ku Klux Klan in any way.” The Conference ultimately accepted the recommendation “that Conference refrain from making any deliverance on the question.” This was particularly difficult to hear, and I wondered what was happening to the church at that time. Indeed, the silence of the church then seemed to have been a betrayal of many things I hold most dear. Yet, I will not condemn the Conference or the church for its silence then, but I will wonder when there is silence by the church on the issues of racism in our contemporary society.”

Rev. Walfall continues, “The United Church of Canada has come a long way since the 1920s and 1930s ... But let us not deceive ourselves into believing that racism is behind us. Racism still exists in our society and it also exists within the church. The continued presence of racism offers to us one of many reasons why the observance of Black History month is

native of St. Vincent in the Caribbean and currently residing in Gormley, has a firm approach to priorities related to her position.”

My heart sank as I read this. Did the detail of being a ‘native of St. Vincent in the Caribbean’ really have any bearing on her ability to do her professional duties as high school principal? No. But the reporter included it as a signal to the community that this was a black person.

It’s these small indicators that keep reminding me that racism is a systemic issue in our culture.