

Thoughts on Racism as Ecclesial Vice

Kelly Johnson

I'm honored to be asked to do this talk, but let me tell you how I got this gig: once upon a time, the board was meeting to talk about this gathering, and someone asked, "What does the Ekklesia Project bring particularly to this topic?" And without particularly thinking about it, I said, "We should talk about racism as an ecclesial vice." Oh, the dangers of the word "we." So here I am, trying to explain that comment.

My mandate today is pretty straightforward: in maybe 25 minutes, I'm to provide you with some ways of thinking about racism as an ecclesial vice so that you can then have discussions yourselves about the specific ways in which racism has become "second nature" in Christian congregations—and to think about what metanoia would look like in those congregations.

Earlier plenaries have given us lots of material to think about. So I'm going to start with some comments on vice and virtue, to be sure we're all on the same page in using those terms. Then I'll talk just a bit about what I want to be saying when I talk about "ecclesial" vice; then I'm going to get more specific about two particular vices I think are constitutive of versions of racism and the virtues that correct them.

I. A quick lesson on "virtue/ vice" and its relation to stories and institutions.

Virtues, as you may know, are habits that assist us in achieving certain ends, ends that we only come really to understand as we get more adept. Here's an analogy: as we learn to drive, we have develop the ability to keep aware of the road, glancing into different mirrors without losing

sight of what's ahead, and keeping all those views in mind in a kind of internal moving map, an awareness of the trajectories of cars around us. You can tell a new driver that it's essential to be attentive to traffic, but she may not understand what you mean or why it is important, and she certainly won't know how to do it. She'll have to practice to get the hang of it and to understand the role keeping that awareness plays in being a good driver. It takes practice to learn to do it and it takes practice even to understand that 'doing it' means. That's an analogy what we mean by saying a virtue is a habit— you can't simply say to a new driver "Be attentive." The new driver has to learn what "being attentive" means and why it matters by practicing until that awareness of other drivers becomes second nature.

And it's possible to develop bad habits. You can develop the skill of eating breakfast, fixing hair, doing makeup, tying a tie, making phone calls, checking the day's schedule, jotting down notes, even reading memos... while driving. This is also a kind of habituated skill that requires practice, and a person might enjoy getting 'better' at it. But in this case the end, the purpose is out of whack, or in the lingo of moral theology, disordered. Wanting to shorten a commute is one thing, but wanting to get to work on time by endangering one's own and other's safety— because you stayed up til 2 am surfing youtube -- means you've gotten your goods out of order. A habit that serves a disordered end is a vice. Like a virtue, it is developed through practice, and once inculcated, it becomes part of who we are, how we see the world, how we reason. And it becomes 'second nature' so that we hardly notice it.

It's important to know, though, that vices and virtues aren't just individual matters, because we aren't just individuals. We come into being, we learn who we are, we speak and laugh and work and make families together and in a social world we inherit from our predecessors. To return to the analogy, the shape of our cities—urban sprawl, lack of public transportation—has a lot to do with how we learn to drive. So do the types of technology companies produce and market to us; the fast food industry; transportation of goods via 18 wheelers; and our relations with police and the law---- and yes, even race. Thinking about those structures is essential to thinking about virtues and vices.

All of that is held together by the stories we tell each other, which provide us with a way to talk about our lives' directions. We tell each other how characters move through plots—and in doing so, we learn and reinforce ways that we move through our own plotlines. Driving like a superhero or a cop on a crusade or the blues brothers is precisely that—driving like a character from one of our stories. It may be that the story of our lives is so action-packed and achievement-driven that time commuting is dead-time, wasted, empty, deadspace in the story—and it has to be filled with something else or raced through to get to the part that matters. The point is that we don't just tell stories. We live in them. But what stories do we live, and what habits do we cultivate in order to live them?

We're here to talk about race and the church, and this little discourse on driving is a trivial analogy. But just as we learn to be certain kinds of drivers in order to serve certain purposes that we grow to understand and participate in through inhabiting stories, so we learn and grow into

being members of the one body of Christ through habits that allow us to participate in stories—or we don't grow into that body, because of habits that hold us back from being what grace is making us.

II. Ecclesial Vice

So this all started with my saying we should talk about racism as an ecclesial vice, and I hope you've got a sense now of what I meant by calling it vice. That can help us understand why it's not enough to say "I know racism is bad, and you should too." It's not enough to say "stop being and thinking racist." It's not even enough, as Victor pointed out, to say, I'm perfectly fine with having people different from me live in my neighborhood and attend my church. The principle that racism is bad is not enough—we have to look into the habits that keep us bound to it. We're talking about deeply habituated and socially constituted second-nature parts of ourselves that serve the disordered end of upholding white privilege.

But what I said, that fateful morning, was that we should think about "racism as an *ecclesial* vice." I did NOT mean, when I said that, and I hope you will not mean this by it, that racism is a vice somehow intrinsic to the body God has called together. Far from it: in addition to the reminders Victor offered of US history, we should recall that Christianity was at home in Ethiopia, Tunisia, Egypt long before Germany or Poland. The Christian tradition in China dates back to the 7th century. The story of the church is one of the stories that we have to learn to tell rightly—God's been working at reconciling all peoples to peace for a long time. It's not a white

church that has to figure out now how to change-- it's a catholic church, a body of many members, given by God's grace.

What I did mean when I said "ecclesial vice" was two things: first, racism isn't just individual—recall Victor's terrific presentation on this. And second, while racism in the church is about white privilege, it isn't just a question of equal access to political power or economic resources. It isn't about recognizing that all of us have an inalienable right to property and choice. What is at stake ultimately is our existence as the body of Christ, as members of one another joined by our Christ who is the head.

III. But *What* Vices?

Now for the hard part. It's all easy until we try to get specific. What are the vices-- socially constituted, institutionalized, 'second nature' habits that are part of our participating in certain stories—that leave our churches so captive still to racism, so alienated? That's a hard question. I was awfully worried about it, but then I realized I could just ask that question of you all, so get ready: that's the question coming to you. But to get you started, I'll make some observations first.

For one thing, racism isn't actually "*an ecclesial vice*"; it's more like a whole bunch of vices that work rather differently in different places. We've heard, I think, some great suggestions: sentimentality and an excessive privileging of individual choice (within a narrative that gives

those theological credibility). Those are the kind of concrete observations I hope we can work on. To get you started, though, I'll make a few observations about a couple of particular vices.

The obvious vice for us to start with is pride: I know that word is used these days sometimes to refer to a sense of self-respect, and what I'm talking about here is not that but the vice by which one attempts to be one's own source, one's own creator—self-sufficient in the most pernicious sense. So to avoid that confusion, we can call it presumption rather than pride.

Presumption means never having to say you're sorry—or at least thinking and acting like you don't have to; it also means never having to say that you don't know or that you need help. Of course, people do need help, but this vice is marked by habits of getting that help by force or purchase, so that I remain still the source of all I have. Any assistance someone gives me is due to my own ability. If people disagree with me, it must be that they've misunderstood or are ignorant, not that I need to hear from them.

It's not just attitude: it is about habits. I don't look for what others have to offer, to say. I forge ahead with consultation. I don't ask for help and when I offer it, I offer it on my own terms. Even when I know I probably should apologize, I don't know how to do it.

And that's why presumption is always closely related to fear, both in its source and its results. Individuals and communities may become proud because they lack confidence in God as their source. Feeling fragile or hurt, they react badly and pick up habits that try to create a false

security, to deny the hurt, to avenge themselves. But it doesn't work: the attempt to be one's own creator, one's own source of security always fails and therefore those who adopt these habits have a profound insecurity, that feeds back into their habits to dig them in deeper into the attempt to ensure their own safety.

We meet up with two versions of pride when it comes to matters of race. Obviously there is white supremacy, in both its confrontational and patronizing moods. We'll call this "presumption of superiority". White people neither need nor share anything with blacks, or native Americans, or Latinos or Asians -- nor do they need the kind of God who would intend such people to be full, active members of the body of Christ and sharers at the eternal banquet. It's a comforting idea for people who feel fragile, until something, anything, threatens it and it has to be re-asserted, bolstered against that lingering anxiety.

But there is a more subtle type of racist pride, more interesting to me because it's the one I meet far more often, the one I find in myself and my family. This is the type that does not so much deny the dignity of black people, as it refuses to acknowledge the creatureliness of white people. This is the presumption of neutrality. OK, many well-educated whites, my peoples, myself — tell ourselves the story that we have transcended that ugly history of imperialism and slavery by becoming rational individuals-- and so we have moved beyond that history. I say this is particularly characteristic of whites because you have to be in a position to deny that the construct of race still matters, to opt out of situations that would draw attention to it, to be able to carry this off. That's the social context in which this vice can flourish. The age of injustice, we

think, is gone—except among people with southern accents... oh, yes, and those blacks who claim that there is still injustice.

Let me give you an example: the documentary “Traces of the Trade” follows well-meaning and well-educated white descendents of the DeWolf clan as they confront the fact that their ancestors were the leading slave traders of New England and that the cultured family they love is indebted to the fortune amassed by those traders. The documentary follows the ones who are willing to face that history, who are appalled at the stories. They know racism is bad.

I haven’t been able yet to see the whole thing, but here’s the moment that so caught my attention: the family has traveled to Ghana, where they have visited the dungeons that held Africans about to be loaded onto ships and take to slavery; they have learned about the middle passage, they have watched Africans lamenting this loss of their own people. Then they go to a school to talk with some natives of Ghana, just to open dialogue. One man faces a group of nervous, giggling children. At last one of them blurts out what evidently many had been thinking: “Aren’t you ashamed to be here?” The white man answers, “Yes, I am. It is very shaming.” And then the documentary moves on.

What else could we do with such a moment? This man who was safe in his presumption of neutrality is being repeatedly faced with the reality that while he is not a slave trader, hates what they did, would not tolerate a racist joke even, still he has not escaped that history. Race is NOT over. He has inherited from those traders. He is being confronted with habits he did not know he

had—his free disposal of his wealth as innocent, his confident striding through the halls of social and cultural power, pity for those backwards people still caught up in the struggle. But now he has to face the way in which his possessions, education, social status, his very broad-mindedness are derived from this history. He has profited from the slave trade, and he has not renounced that profit. He has never entertained the idea. And so he is ashamed. As Faulkner said, “the past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past.”

The real pain of that moment, beyond the man’s shame, is that he does not know what to do with shame. I think he’d have been relieved to weep, to fast. Those of you who know “The Mission” can think about the work of penance done by the former slave trader as a contrast. But this nice, educated New Englander has no habit of penance, and so does not know how to move toward a difficult reconciliation. (What’s that going to help, after all? If I am my own source of security, then I notice I made a mistake and try to learn from it, and penance would just be self-destructive. But if I am a member of a body, a creature of God bought at a price, then penance might make sense.)

But I don’t think presumption is even our deepest problem. The more pervasive and more dangerous vice is despair. Where presumption attempts to deny weakness, error, sin, despair resigns itself to them. I’m afraid that this is rampant, when we try to see what vices stop the church from dealing with race. Myself, I think this is again a vicious defense against fear and hurt: faced with the difficulty of speaking about race, of working out some kind of shared

worship life, the scale of the institutional problems-- people stop thinking about it, stop acting. They decide to stop working.

Again, there are two ways we practice despair. The first is sloth (*acedia*), which is vicious escapism. This can be a kind of self-indulgent laziness, but I want to mention how it appears particularly under the guise of spirituality. For example, students of mine objected to the clips they'd heard of Rev. Wright's sermons not because they thought he was wrong to say that God hates and will punish institutionalized racism, but because they thought the church was not the place for controversy; it is where we go for peace, reflection, comfort.

But sloth can and often does appear in a fast version, as busy-ness, workaholism, fascination with entertainment or the new. The fast version of sloth avoids seeing or feeling or thinking about what is wrong and what might be needed to address it by keeping distracted. I can't think about racism—I've got to get VBS together! We are so busy with our projects that we don't have time to face pain, especially unresolved and long-term hurts. ("moving forward")

Despair doesn't have to lead to sloth, though. It's other face is wrath, which can be self-destructive or destructive of others. I'm not talking about righteous outrage, but a mere lashing out as a way of stopping oneself from needing to do any constructive work or to feel any pain. Many of our communities may not have the energy to do this, but we should remember that wrath and sloth are very closely related, as children of despair, and indifference and escapism may turn on a dime into mindless destruction.

IV. The Virtues God Gives Us

But lest I fall into or lead you all into despair, a few words about what's to be done. The antidote to both presumption and despair is hope, the virtue of the 'arduous good.' See, both presumption and despair respond to pain, fear, frustration by trying to resolve it prematurely. Presumption seizes control and remakes the world with my own will at the center, denying the existence of what does not fit its program; despair abandons attempts to change. Hope, by contrast, is the virtue of pilgrims, it's the virtue of the way of the cross. It faces uncertainty, incompleteness, a loss of control, and without denying them, it works toward the good. Hope is about work—knowing that we have to work and knowing that there is reason to think our work will bear fruit, through God's mercy. We're not guaranteed that we can "fix" racism, that I can reconcile all whites and blacks. But we don't resign ourselves to silence, misunderstanding, mutual alienation either. Hope depends on stories of hard, long work that achieve some good. What build up the habit of hope?

- Tell the stories of hope: God's church has been calling all people to the mountain of peace all along.
- And ponder the stories of faithfulness as the stories of the church—where was the church during slavery, Jim Crow, lynchings, the racially-marked mortgage crisis? Instead of assuming that "the church" refers to white communities that were complicit or leaders in such offenses, pay attention to where God's spirit moved people to be faithful. As a white woman, I still benefit from this country's long-standing favoritism toward people

like me, even if most of my ancestors were Irish laborers whose credentials as ‘whites’ was not always certain. But as a Christian, I benefit from the faithfulness of my forbearers in Christianity who cultivated hope through centuries of rape and murder.

Learning to identify with, enter into those stories as my own, recognizing that if I do that I have to give up my freedom to walk away from these problems, that’s a big effort for me.

- Pay attention to things you don’t think you can fix.
- Persist in prayer for justice, and start working to make that a prayer truly made by the body of Christ, the church in union with its head. .

And once we’ve got a little fight back in us from building up some hope, we can work on practicing humility. Humility’s gotten a really bad rap: It’s not self-destruction or denial of ability. Humility refers to habits related to confidence in God as our source and savior, so that we can obey God’s call to do what we don’t altogether understand; we can be dependent, uncertain, in need of forgiveness and change, and we can do that without resorting to violence against self or others. Humility is about taking yourself seriously enough to know that you are called to give up all your security, all your control. Cultivating humility as a group, telling the stories, strengthening the structures that support it—this won’t make us all doormats. It will make us able to focus on and rely on our faithfulness to God, the gift of Christ’s grace in our being called together, to discover in each other why we are called together.

So here's your charge: we have an extraordinary group of people here to work together on this. I want to ask you to work together to name the specific vices, the habits and stories and the structures, that uphold racism in its various forms in our ecclesial communities. What we want to do is act as a collective soul-doctor for the church, to name, as clearly as we can, the stories, habits, and structures that build up racialized theology and alienation among Christians. And think about the virtues too—it's bad for the soul to spend too long pondering vices. Think about the habits to be cultivated, the stories that will make sense of those habits, the structures to be built up. We are a people of hope and hope is about work —so let's get to it.

Discussion questions:

- How does it help to think about racism as a matter of habits, vices? Is that different from the way you usually think about it?
- How is it different to think about *the church* as a site of racism instead of the nation or a workplace or a neighborhood? Is that more or less disturbing, and why?
- How are the answers to those questions different in different communities, particularly between black and white communities? In rich and poor communities?
- What stories does your congregation or community tell that build up pride or despair?
- What stories do they/ could they tell to build up hope and humility?
- Where do you see habits of pride or despair among Christians, particularly in yourself and your community? What specific kinds of actions reinforce those habits?
- What would you add to the list of practices for building up hope and humility?