

## ME AND MY SHADOW

I chose the title for this sermon weeks ago. The staff was planning ahead for services, and Paul pointed out that the Monday following my next sermon was Groundhog Day. So I went with the catchy title “Me and my Shadow.” Catchy, right? Right...

Anyway, you know all about Groundhog day. Tomorrow, a very old and wise woodchuck named Punxsutawney Phil will come out of his den and take a look at the sports section. If it says the Cardinals won the Super Bowl, he'll slump back into his den for another six weeks of gloom. But, if it says the Steelers won, spring is here!

Or maybe it the other way around? I can't remember...

Alright, I know, the real groundhog Day is about weather forecasting. If it's a bright sunny day, and Punxatawny Phil sees his shadow, he goes back into hibernation and we have 6 more weeks of winter ahead. If it's cloudy and he doesn't see his shadow, winter is supposed to be over.

Anyway, whether the meteorological theories and consequences hold up or not, the fact still remains that the timid and careful groundhog seems to be afraid of his own shadow.

**And this got me thinking.**

Another calendar event falls at the beginning of February – its the beginning of Black History month. A time to celebrate the lives of African Americans, and the contributions they have made to our culture in so many areas. So I'm thinking about Black History, and I realize that it's really hard to look at *Black* History without reflecting on how intimately connected it is to my own history as a “*white* person.” And what a powerful hold that connection still has on the lives of both Black African Americans and White European Americans.

**And that got me thinking, again.** I remembered an interview with James Cone on the PBS show Bill Moyers Journal. Maybe some of you know his work? James Cone is a black theologian and professor, who's taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York for almost 40 years. He's one of the main advocates of black liberation theology in the United States. Liberation theology looks at religious faith, particularly Christianity, in the context of poverty, oppression, inequality, war. It asks us to look at history and theology from the point of view of those at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid. Those who have been victimized by it.

Professor Cone was talking about our history of slavery and racism in the United States, and something he said left a big impression on me. He was talking about denial. About how, as a culture, we have always seen ourselves as the ‘good guys,’ the guardians of human rights, “one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” And how hard it is for us to come to grips with – or to even talk out *loud* about – about the dark side of our history; the dark side of our behavior as a nation. We don't want to face up to that

part of our identity. “America likes to be innocent” professor Cone said. “It likes to be the exception....” But, nobody – no human being, no institution, no nation – is innocent. No one is an “exception.” We all have good *and* bad, “all mixed up together.” As a nation and culture, he told Moyers, “America can't be what America ought to be until-- America can look at itself - the good, the bad - so that we can work on making ourselves what we oughta be.”

The evil in our history of racism still infects our society, but “You can't overcome something if you never acknowledge its presence.”

“if America could understand itself as *not* being innocent,” he said, “it might be able to play a more creative role in the world today... The core of it is, is helping America get over its innocence. Helping America to see itself through the eyes of people from the bottom.

**So that got me thinking again.** I'm seeing all kinds of connections between things.

James Cone was talking about denying the dark side of our history of racial relations in this country, and I'm still thinking about the groundhog being afraid of his *shadow*.

And I remembered something from the work of the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. One of the five principle elements that contribute to a human being's psyche he called “the *Shadow*. Jung talks a lot about *denial* in relation to the shadow, and his ideas seemed to have a lot to do with what James Cone was talking about. The Shadow, said Jung, is “the opposite of the ego image, often containing qualities that the ego does not identify with but possesses nonetheless.” In popular lingo, when we talk about our “shadow

side” we are talking about those qualities in us that we don’t like – the sides of us that we don’t want to admit are there. And we can easily fall into a habit of denying their very existence in us.

Jung goes even further. He says we often *project* our shadow side – our dark qualities – onto another person, or another group, and claim the higher moral ground for ourselves in *contrast* to them. It helps us to deny the negative tendencies in our own characters by projecting them onto some other person’s or group’s behavior, and then taking strong stand against them. We are “innocent,” to use Cone’s words. We are the exception. It’s the others who are the “bad guys.” Think of how many powerful nations claim to be champions of Human Rights. Then think of the Gaza Strip, Guantanamo, Abu Garib, Chechnya, Serbia. Which powerful nation claim to be the guardian of human rights?

My intention here isn’t to point a finger at any particular person or group or nation as “*the* evil empire.” Only to ask if the claim of “innocence” on the part of *any* powerful nation, or group, or individual doesn’t look a lot like a symptom of denial. And, Carl Jung comes up with the same prognosis that James Cone does: “Repressing or denying our shadow can lead us into experiences where we are *overwhelmed* by it and it can *take us over*.” In Cone’s words, “You can’t overcome something if you never acknowledge its presence.”

Well, after making all these connections, it dawned on me that each of these things has a lot to do with the Anti-Racism/Anti Oppression training that the Social Justice Caucuses identified as something we, as a congregation, ought to engage in. And, I agree with them. For me - and for all people of privilege in our society – trying to get a clear and honest picture of how subtly, almost unconsciously, the shadow of racism and oppression runs through our lives is a critical step in learning how to overcome them. And I think looking at the way privilege works in society is a good place to begin. So, I thought I'd approach this sermon as a way of introducing the topic, and of encouraging us all to take part in this training once we've organized a program.

I don't think it will be *comfortable* work. To tell you the truth, I've had a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach the whole time I've been researching material for this sermon. It's too close for comfort. I'm guilty of wanting to deny this part of my life just as James Cone and Carl Jung described. And I'm sure this work will stir up all kinds of *new* vulnerabilities in *me*.

I grew up in Jacksonville Florida in the 1950s, where racism wasn't even glossed over. I learned not to drink out of a "coloreds only" water fountains, not to use "coloreds only" restrooms. I ate chili dogs with my mother at the "whites only" lunch counter at Sears. My own family taught me that everyone was equal, and that everyone deserved respect, but the way things worked in that society made it perfectly clear to my child's brain that that just wasn't true. Segregation was open, and unquestioned. It was just the way things were. "Normal." So, my "wonder years" were spent participating *daily* in

an unapologetically racist way of life. *I* didn't treat black people badly. But, remember what Peggy McIntosh said in Robin's reading? **"I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group."**

It's the invisible systems of privilege that we need to make ourselves aware of. As McIntosh puts it, there is a "pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a pattern of assumptions passed on to me as a white person."

"A pattern of assumptions." Like the assumption that my way of seeing and being in the world is the *Normative* way of seeing and being in the world. That my value system is the *Normative* value system. That my ideas about success are the *Normative* ideas about success. And, that if I work hard to help everyone who is not as privileged as I am to be more like me, have more of what I have, know what I know, then they and society will be better off. This kind of assumption, Peggy McIntosh tells us, leads some White people to not even recognize "whiteness" as a racial identity. I'm a person and everyone else is an African American person, or a Hispanic person or an Asian person.

Another assumption that we hear a lot about is the concept of the "level playing field." Well, Ruth did a good job of exposing that one. From children's television to talk radio, we are told that anyone can be anything they want, if they want it badly enough and work hard enough to get it. Well, that simply isn't so, is it? Our social system privileges some groups and under-privileges others, regardless of how hard they work. Peggy McIntosh talks about this as the difference between "earned strength and

unearned power.” I am a white heterosexual male, and I am permitted to assume my position of privilege in this society simply because of that fact. I didn’t have to do anything to earn it. It is not based on any kind of *merit*. It is merely based on my skin color, my sexual orientation and my gender. I have unearned power.

If we let this pattern of assumptions go unquestioned, or unexamined, then we allow the system of privilege to remain “invisible,” as Peggy McIntosh refers to it. We can just keep on denying that the invisible knapsack of unearned privilege exists. It’s too uncomfortable to talk about. I don’t want to talk about my unearned privileges. You tell me they perpetuate systemic racism, and I don’t want to see myself as racist. I’m a good person. I’m innocent. Yes, I have a lot of privileges, but I’m not racist. I’m an exception.

Me and my shadow.

The invisible knapsack of privilege is my “shadow.” And like Punxatawny Phil, I’m afraid of it. When it’s revealed in the bright light of day, I want to crawl back into my “knapsack” and stay there for another 6 weeks. Or years. Or, 6 decades.

*But*, if it’s *concealed* under a layer of thick clouds, then I can pretend it doesn’t exist and go on about my business as usual.

But, I know in my heart that just going about my business as usual, taking *advantage* of my position of dominance “while denying that systems of dominance exist,” isn’t really going to deceive anyone, least of all myself. And it isn’t going to do anything to help me participate in healing our society – our world – that’s being torn apart by our refusal to see how that society really works. And how our *part* in it affects the whole.

Anti-Racism/Anti-oppression training is not about ‘good guys and bad guys.’ It is not about guilt and blame. Because all that isn’t going to help us overcome the systemic inequity and oppression that hurts some and benefits others. The work is about *unpacking* the “invisible knapsack” to see what is really in there. It’s about accepting our *shadow* and addressing it face to face. Because “You can’t overcome something if you never acknowledge its presence.”

And finally, the work’s about increasing our self-knowledge, so we can make choices in our lives with some sense of clarity instead of just muddling along in the shadow of habit. Self-knowledge isn’t always comfortable. But self-deception can lead to all kinds of moral problems.

“The shadow is a moral problem,” said Carl Jung, “that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge.

Me and my shadow. The shadow of “privilege. I don’t have any answers yet, but I know that I need to be asking the questions. That’s why I think this kind of training is important. I know it’s not going to be a picnic in the park, but I know it’s the right thing to do. And, I’m hoping I will have many of you along side me to share the experience.

At the end of Bill Moyers’ interview, James Cone said “You have to connect with people who have hope...and organize... organize to make the world the way it oughta be.”

“You don’t have to be angels to do that?” Moyers asked.

“No you don’t have to be – no we’re not angels. But where there are two or three gathered, there is hope. There is possibility. And you don’t want to lose that. That’s why I keep teaching.

May it be so.