

“Systemic/Institutional Racism”

Jack Stiefel – UUFVB - 20 January 2019

Scott just urged us, you and me, all of us, to examine our unconscious biases, our racial conditioning. And, wow, as a youth, did I ever need to revise my racial conditioning.

As a teen, I had attitudes and behaviors that were blatantly racist. Thankfully there were many influences that led me to change. Am I now a paragon of racial virtue? Hardly! But I have changed. And for that I am grateful...grateful for my liberal arts college professors and experiences that liberalized me to the point that I even participated in voter registration efforts in Mississippi during 1965. I am grateful for UU racial justice workshops and for our Coalition for Racial Justice. I am grateful for Scott who on numerous occasions has raised our consciousness about race. Each of us is on his or her own journey to rid ourselves of racism, but the good news is...we **can** change. We **can** improve our racial attitudes. We **can** reduce our personal **prejudices**, unconscious or otherwise. So, let's do it!

Dealing with our own **personal prejudice** is critically necessary, BUT...it is **not sufficient**. In addition to examining our **prejudice**, we need to become **aware of** and **do something about** the vast **disparity of economic, social, and political power** between **blacks and whites**. That disparity is a result of deeply embedded racism in our society's basic institutions. I'll repeat. ******* The **deficit of economic, social, and political power for black people compared to white is not just** the result of our **individual prejudices** but comes substantially from the **institutions** that make up the fabric of our society. *******

One of society's basic institutions is government. What other institutions come to mind? Let me hear from you.

[responses are likely to include: education, finance, housing, criminal justice, health services, etc.]

Now think for a minute and answer this question. ******* Which of these major institutions are controlled by other than white people, mostly male? What institutions are even represented proportionately by people of color? (pause)

Sociologist Robert Blauner, ******* in a book titled *Racist Oppression in America* says: “if we analyze race problems accurately, we must conclude that racism is institutionalized – the processes that maintain domination of whites over blacks are built into our social institutions. These institutions either exclude or restrict the participation of racial groups by procedures that have become conventional, part of the bureaucratic systems of rules and regulations.” *******

Another term for Dr. Blauner's description of institutional racism is **“systemic racism.”**

Okay, back to the question of why a focus on personal prejudice is **important** but **not sufficient**. I quote ******* Dr. Crystal Fleming in her excellent article in the most recent issue of *UU World*, our denomination's quarterly publication:

“as long as the **systemic** nature of white supremacy is successfully minimized or denied, as long as ‘conversations about race’ are mainly about individual attitudes, prejudice, or the actions of a few extremists, then attention is drawn away from the structure and patterns of inequality hiding in plain sight.” ***

Now, let’s explore an example of systemic racism so we can see what it looks like. I’ll start with a couple of facts: In 2016, *** the median income of whites was \$65,000 while for blacks the median income was \$40,000, just 60% of that for whites.

That doesn’t look good but wait! ***

The **median wealth**, the net assets, in 2016 for **white people** was \$171,000. For **blacks**, it was \$17,000. The net **median financial wealth for blacks** was a mere **10%** of that for the **white** population. Okay, now some of you may be saying to yourself, “wait a minute, Jack. The **ultimate criterion for success** is **not** how much wealth we have accumulated.” And I agree it’s **not** the **ultimate** criterion, but is **wealth** important?

*** Well, let’s see. This is a \$20 bill. [tears it in half]. Now I suspect that many of us took in a small breath when I tore up that money. So money, wealth, is important to almost all of us. By the way, that was only a \$1 bill. I put the other \$19 in the offering plate!

But back to this well-documented **wealth disparity**: how can we account for that? Are black people in general less capable, do they not work as hard, do they not place value on saving and investing wisely? There’s a very different analysis that I think accurately accounts for this disparity. *** The most significant factor in most people’s wealth is **home ownership**. Home ownership depends on the availability of a **mortgage**. But U.S. mortgage lending practices in the middle of the last century built a problem we’re still living with today. ***

In 1935, the Federal Home Loan Bank Board created a set of maps to guide investment opportunities for housing in the coming years. The maps that emerged separated 239 American cities into 4 types of areas, ranked from most to least desirable for development opportunities. The least desirable of those areas were outlined in ... red! *** And they were overwhelmingly the sites of historically black neighborhoods.

Those within the “red lined” areas found it difficult if not impossible to secure loans or mortgages for housing and development. And remember the GI Bill following WWII? The mortgage industry was encouraged by the government to use that same red-lining policy. As a result, most blacks were financially prevented from acquiring homes that **were** made affordable for whites. *** The Fair Housing Act of 1968 was intended as a correction, but that legislation fell far short of solving the problem.

More recently, leading up to the 2007 recession, blacks were targets of **predatory** home loans, receiving **subprime mortgages** at nearly **double** the rate of whites. And today? Many banks are simply writing off communities of color and denying them loans altogether. By denying black families mortgage credit, the financial industry denies them the opportunity to accumulate household wealth. Sounds like systemic racism to me.

If time allowed, we could explore the details of many other instances of systemic racism, but I want you to see this video clip featuring Laci Green which will give you a quick overview. Fasten your seat belts. Here we go. ***

(At end of video clip) ***

That **was** fast-paced, and you may want to view it again at home, so we've printed the URL at the bottom of your order of service. (pause) If Martin Luther King were with us today, I think he would urge us to drop any pretense of being color blind and to clearly see the systemic racism before us. But once we **see** systemic racism, how do we **respond** to it? One constructive way to respond is to **celebrate progress** – *** like the restoration of voting rights for felons here in Florida who have completed their sentences.

And what about the passage of the First Step Act...a real step in the right direction. It reforms some of the most onerous features of the federal criminal justice system which have negatively affected our black population disproportionately. Yes, progress **is** possible! So let's celebrate the **good!** ***

Another constructive response to our social institutions is to **resist and transform the bad.**

Let's quickly explore some ways we can do that, how we can resist and transform unjust racist systems.

When you get home, *** Google "how to end institutional racism" for lots of great suggestions on policy changes needed in several institutions. To **effect** those changes, to bring about a racism-free society, we will need to **influence others**, especially **decision-makers** who have the power to change policies.

How do we do **that**?

*** **Communicate:** with letters, email, letters to the editor, personal conversations ... share your insights with other people.

- *** **Support progressive organizations working for institutional change:** like UUSC, the NAACP, the Southern Poverty Law Center, Gifford Community Cultural & Resource Center, and the Gifford Historical Museum.
- *** **Get involved:** join a political campaign, vote in elections, vote on corporate proposals, attend and speak out at meetings of the school board, the city, and the county government. Join the Coalition for Racial Justice here at the Fellowship.
- And when our Fellowship hires staff, let's be sure we are color **conscious**, not color **blind**.

And lastly, *** consider this definition of **reparation**: "the making of **amends** for a **wrong** that has been done by paying money or otherwise helping those who have been wronged." **500 years** of "wrong having been done" seems adequate justification to me for reparations being paid to those who identify as black. ***

Well, I suspect we can all come up with additional ways to resist and transform systemic racism, but it's time to wrap up. My wife, Nancy, has a sweatshirt with a message on the front. *** It says, "The Big Questions" and listed are

1. Who am I?
2. Why am I here?
3. What is my fate? And (pause) ***
4. Where are the cookies?

Yes, it is past time to head to Fellowship Hall for some cookies, but before we do, let's all consider placing high on our list of "The Big Questions" the question of "What am I going to **do** about systemic racism?"

This morning we have explored racism on two levels... the **MICRO LEVEL** of our personal imperfect perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors and on the **MACRO LEVEL** that exposes the inequality and suffering caused by our society's institutions.

As we leave this morning, let us commit to **not** being **color blind**, to not being **blind** to the ways that people are treated **based on the color of their skin**. **Instead**, let us strive to be color-**conscious**, to be color **sensitive** and **understanding**. So, yes, let's all make **personal** changes, but let's go **beyond that** to use the **influence and power** that we have to **change institutions**, to move toward a **racism-free America** with liberty and justice, with **freedom** and **equality** for **ALL**. May it soon be so.