Mennonite privilege

It’s a form of white privilege but with a twist; it’s believing we don’t have it

by Ben Goossen

My home was tied to a sense of Mennonite identity. As I understood it, there was something special about Mennonites, something that set us apart from other people, something that made Anabaptism homelike. Being Mennonite came with a history: We originated in Europe in the 16th-century Reformation. Our ancestors believed in pacifism, discipleship, salvation by faith, and adult baptism. Neither Protestants nor Catholics liked these ideas, so they outlawed the faith and dispatched bounty hunters to find its practitioners. Thousands were slaughtered—hung, drowned, beheaded, burned at the stake. But a few escaped. They and their descendants eventually settled in Poland, Russia, Canada, Brazil, Paraguay and Topeka, Kan.
So as a child, I imagined I was a member of a persecuted minority.
It wasn’t until college that I realized I was neither persecuted nor a minority.
During my first semester at Swarthmore, a small, historically Quaker liberal arts college just outside Philadelphia, I took a week-long diversity-awareness course and learned about sexism and racism and homophobia and transphobia. And I learned about “white privilege.”

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This refers to the special, often unspoken rights white people enjoy in the United States and around the world. Theoretically, all races and ethnicities are equal in our country. We’ve passed amendments, outlawed Jim Crow and elected a black man to the presidency. Yet equality has remained elusive. Our schools and our churches remain segregated. Black men are shockingly under-enrolled at elite universities. And our criminal justice system disproportionately targets, convicts and incarcerates people of color.

The underprivilege of brown and black people in this country is clear. Individuals face lower education, incomes and civil liberties. The under-privilege of women—especially women of color—is also clear, as is the under-privilege of gays, lesbians, queer, bisexual, and transgender people, all of whom face unconscionable rates of harassment, discrimination and physical violence.

White privilege is the tinted glass that makes us oblivious to the under-privilege all around us. It teaches us that everyone starts off with the same opportunities and that our success depends on how hard we work. White privilege makes us look the other way when a homeless woman asks for change or when we get pulled over for speeding and get off with just a warning. It is believing in trickle-down economics. It is a predominantly white Mennonite church in a predominantly black neighborhood. It is believing we don’t have it.

I use “we” and “us” to refer to the white straight men who so often stand in for terms like “majority,” “common sense” and the American people.” This “us” also furnishes the protagonists for most of the homecoming stories our culture likes to tell. Journeys of self-discovery too often reflect the prerogative of white, straight men.

I have white privilege. In fact, I have about as much white privilege as you can get. Even at a place as diversity-conscious as Swarthmore College, I saw how people treated me. Professors, administrators and fellow students took me seriously, just because of how I looked. I walked into a classroom or an office, and people registered my presence. They said hello and nodded earnestly when I talked—even when what I had said wasn’t nod-worthy. In contrast, many of my fellow students had to struggle for attention—especially women, visibly queer students and people of color.

The way I learned to see myself—as someone with immense, unearned social privilege—was a far cry from the Anabaptist persecuted-minority identity I had developed as a child.

My idea is this: Mennonite identity—at least as many of us in Mennonite Church USA conceive it—is a form of white privilege. Not all Mennonites are white, of course. Yet for so many of us here in North America, Anabaptism is a kind of “us” community.

If the primary characteristic of white privilege is to obscure its own existence, then depictions of Anabaptists as a persecuted minority function in the same way. When we tell ourselves we are a “separate people” and that our ancestors were killed for their faith, we place the focus on our-
selves—on our suffering and our uniqueness—while ignoring the more important reality that we are part of a dominant white culture.

We might call this “Mennonite privilege.” It’s a form of white privilege, but with a twist. Mennonite privilege is talking about Anabaptist martyrs who died 500 years ago, when in the 21st century, millions of people die every year from violence, natural disasters and communicable diseases. Mennonite privilege is talking about how we are all pacifists, when military recruiters predominantly target low-income communities of color. Mennonite privilege is joking with someone who just joined the church that they’re not really Mennonite because they don’t know how to make zwieback, a roll made by Mennonites of Russian descent. Mennonite privilege is thinking denominational unity is more important than the physical and emotional well-being of our LGBTQ members. Mennonite privilege is believing we don’t have it.

The thing about homecoming tales is that sooner or later the 40 days in the wilderness come to an end. The homes our protagonists come back to aren’t the same places they left. Moses discovered that when he came off Mount Sinai. He was so surprised to find the Israelites worshiping a golden calf that he dropped the stone tablets he had lugged all the way down.

But the homes didn’t change. The journeys saw them with different eyes. Moses had read the Ten Commandments. If the voice of God tells you idols are wrong, golden calves take on new meanings.

Learning about white privilege has taught me to see the Mennonite church in a different light. I see that even when we talk about peace and justice and righteousness, we can still be implicated in systems of oppression. Take the story of the Good Samaritan. Which character do we identify with? The beaten man? The Samaritan? I’ve probably heard this passage 100 times, and I doubt I’ve ever identified with either the Levite or the Priest. Who wants to be the person who walks by and leaves the needy on the roadside?

But this is exactly how white privilege works. White privilege tells us we are the beaten man. Mennonite privilege tells us we are the Samaritan. Yet we are the Levite; we are the priest.

Paul writes: “The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law” (Romans 3:21). If Paul has one message to the church, it is this: The advent of Jesus Christ, our redeemer, has made a new moral order. No longer are we justified by performing works of the Law, we are justified by faith in God alone.

What might Paul tell us about white privilege?

If we were interpreting the story of the Good Samaritan, Paul might suggest it was adherence to the letter of the Law that allowed the Levite and the priest to pass the beaten man by. Secure in the knowledge that they had already performed sufficient works of Law, neither Levite nor priest was able to see the plight of their fellow human. He was, to quote Ralph Ellison, an invisible man.

White privilege, Paul might say, is the law of our time. It convinces us we have already done all that needs to be done, blinding us to the ongoing injustices in our schools and churches and workplaces. While we focus on maintaining personal purity, we fail to see the greater sins unfolding all around us: housing inequality, police brutality, the deportation of undocumented immigrants.

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Paul’s injunction is to look beyond the letter of the Law, to see our white privilege for what it is. Several lines further in Romans, he writes: “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). For Paul, justification by faith is not merely a matter of believing. In contrast to the static, unchanging Law, he envisions a dynamic, interpretive process. Just as the world changes around us, Paul believes, so does the will of God. Recognizing the ways we are privileged by our whiteness or by our Anabaptist background will remain an open-ended task. There is no easy answer, only a path of discernment and faith. Let us be transformed by the renewal of our minds.

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