

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.

31 March 2019

Hebrew Scripture: Psalm 32:1-7

Christian Scripture: Luke 15:11b-32

“Grace as Privilege, Undeserved”



My son, Micah, gave me permission to read you a message I sent to him last Friday afternoon before he had his emergency appendectomy. My message read: “Micah, thank God that you have access to the best medical care money can provide”. I did not say ‘thank God’ in a blasphemous nor even in a light-hearted manner. I wanted my boy to ponder, contemplate, and appreciate how blessed he was to have access to the best medical care in the world. Micah knew this already, but I wanted to remind him. If he was born in another circumstance, as were most of the world’s desperately poor, he might very well have died. I provide my son world class education and health care. My son is well-behaved, ethical, and hardworking. Yet, most of that which my son has, he has because it was passed-on to

him through me. My son is privileged, blessed, fortunate, lucky - call it what you will.

My son is privileged because I am privileged.



I also had an emergency appendectomy when I was his age. From my father, I received the best health care and education that money could buy. I consider myself (and hopefully you do too) well-behaved, ethical and hardworking. Yet, most of what I have, I have because it was passed-on to me. I am privileged, blessed, fortunate, lucky - call it what you will.

My father, Frank, was an officer in the Coast Guard.



He attended Dartmouth College, an elite Ivy League school just up the road. My father received from his father the best education and medical care money can buy. My father was well-behaved, ethical, and hardworking. Yet, most of what he had was also passed-on to him. My father was privileged, blessed, fortunate, lucky - call it what you will.

My grandfather, Dean, also attended Dartmouth College.



My grandfather inherited the family farm in Littleton, Massachusetts from his father. My grandfather had the best education and medical care money could buy. My grandfather was well-behaved, ethical and hardworking. Yet, most of what he received, land and money, was passed-on to him by his father. My grandfather was privileged, blessed, fortunate, lucky - call it what you will.

I could go on. But, you get the point. What do Micah, Scott, Frank and Dean all have in common? We are, I think, so-called 'good people'. Yet, that is exactly NOT my point. There are many good people in the world who are not as privileged as we are.



What we have in common is that we are all, one, White; two, male; and three, heterosexual. And we are all privileged primarily because we have all grown-up and lived in a racist, patriarchal and hetero-centric society that advantages us.



This dynamic has existed since genocide was committed across north and south America, beginning in Massachusetts where my family settled hundreds years ago, and where an entire continent, including large parts of Mexico, was systematically stolen. You see, it is not hard work alone that leads people to supposedly succeed. My ancestors have been privileged since the founding of this country when people of color were considered only two-thirds of a human and until 1865 could be kept as slaves.

Because of patriarchy, my grandfathers have been privileged since the beginning of time.



Women could not vote until 1912 and still today cannot have anything in the constitution granting them equal rights (Equal Rights Amendment). And we live in a society that still struggles to recognize that which is biologically known - that sex and sexuality do not exist as

crude strict dualistic binaries. They exist on a complex and mysterious spectrum.

What do my biological and biographical comments have to do with our scripture this morning? I believe that we can explore the parable of the Lost Son from the perspective of privilege, specifically White, male, heterocentric privilege.



We know the story well, perhaps we know it so well that it is hard to interpret the story through a different lens. Both the older and younger sons had privilege. By virtue of their birth, a pure accident, each had an inheritance of half their father's estate. The oldest was hard working and obedient; the younger was not. Yet, the both received privilege, passed-on down to them because they were male - notice there were no sisters in this story. The younger son squandered his privilege. And this sometimes happens. The older son, as he was hardworking and obedient, understood his privilege was his right through merit. In other words, he felt deserving of what he had. Yet, no matter deserving or undeserving, both sons were privileged and both blessed at the end of the story. Therefore, their blessings were

not based on merit but rather sourced from their father, by sheer luck and thus determined by chance. Notice, no women or servants inherit anything - so it is not a merit based system, but an inherited privileged-based system for both the deserving and the undeserving.



There are several lessons we can take from this story. One, those of us who are privileged, myself included, need to be extremely cautious of being self-righteous. What I have is gained in large part gained gradually through four-hundred years of racism, misogyny and homophobia as much, if not more so, than by any intelligence, hard-work or ethics that I may have. I do not condemn myself. Nor is my privilege, necessarily, to my personal discredit. What I merely advocate is, 'give credit where credit is due'. And credit, or privilege, is more often than not sourced, at worst, from historical oppression and, at best, historical bias in addition to any possible hard work and good behavior.



A second and final lesson stems from the first: if we are to not self-righteously credit ourselves for privilege, then we are called by the Gospel of Jesus Christ to extend to others the same privilege. We ought not hoard privilege for ourselves, but rather offer it to others. I believe that as followers of Jesus Christ, we are not to offer health care or education based on 'financial merit' - that is, only those who can afford them.



I noticed something about our scripture reading: the father 'ran out to' the younger son *and* the older son who refused to come to the party. God desires the worthy and unworthy to be found - equally. So, should we as people of faith shower privilege on the worthy and the unworthy alike, for the inherent characteristic of 'grace' is that it is undeserved.



Yet, for the older brother in the parable and others who are accustomed to privilege, moves toward equality feel like oppression.



For those who are privileged, be we White, straight, or male, let us not be like the older son who believes that his privilege is exclusively deserved, rather than in large-part inherited by chance (and often gained through gross historical inequalities). For those of us who are straight, or White, or male, let us not be like the younger son and take our privilege for granted, wasting it on ourselves. We ought to fight to extend our privilege to it others.



I have long way to go in implementing this ethic. I pray that the Gospel, the ‘good news’ of Jesus Christ, and this church, His Body, will give me the inspiration and means to do so.

This was the word of God, and it was spoken to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.