

Proper 22C
October 6, 2019
Amos 6:1-7, Luke 16:19-31

THE COST OF ENTITLEMENT

One parent paid a cool quarter million for fake documents and photos depicting his son as a water polo champion so that he would get admitted to USC. But his son had never played the sport.¹

Another parent argued before the judge that because he'd given \$400,000 to admissions scam leader Rick Singer so Singer would sneak his son into Georgetown U, it was HE, the father, who was the victim and should therefore avoid jail time.² (News flash: The judge didn't agree)

A third parent paid \$75,000 to have his daughter's standardized test augmented, so she could obtain a rearranged result.³

In all, 35 parents have been charged in what's now called the VARSITY BLUES investigation. And with their behind-the-scenes actions now glaringly public, those parents are grappling with the reality that they have inflicted a "devastating blow" on the very ones they purportedly were trying to help—their children.

As many commentators have pointed out: these new incidents are part of an old problem when it comes to privilege.⁴

In 2017, The New York Times reported that at Ivy League schools Dartmouth, Princeton, Yale, Penn and Brown — and 38 other colleges — more student admissions came from the top 1 percent of the economic spectrum than from the entire bottom 60 percent.

There's a word for this. It's called ENTITLEMENT.

Put in explicit terms it sounds like this:

- Because I'm rich, I'm entitled.
- Because I'm white, I'm entitled.
- Because I'm male, I'm entitled.
- By virtue of who my parents are, where I was born, what zip code I live in, I'm entitled.

The Varsity Blues parents may represent a case in the extreme, but the truth is most of us here benefit from a preferred standing in our culture because of the color of our skin.

And the remarkable thing is, this status and the entitlement that accompanies it, is largely invisible to us who are privileged. We're mostly unconscious of it.

Like the proverbial fish that doesn't know what water is because it permeates the only reality it has over known—it simply IS.

¹ <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/ceo-to-be-sentenced-for-role-in-admissions-bribery-scheme/>

² <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/in-college-admissions-scam-a-parents-victim-claim-fails-and-he-gets-4-months-in-prison/>

³ <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/ex-leader-at-new-york-law-firm-gets-one-month-in-prison-in-college-admissions-scandal/>

⁴ See the 3/18/2019 column by Tyrone Beason in *The Seattle Times*: <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/education/the-college-admissions-scandal-is-a-small-part-of-a-historic-problem-when-it-comes-to-privilege-in-higher-ed/> Beason includes the following quote in his column: "Until the 1930s, just about any wealthy, white male could get into college with little more than a handshake and a check," former Amherst College admissions officer Willard Dix wrote in *Forbes* magazine last year.

This morning the words of Scripture and the story of St. Francis bring entitlement and privilege front and center, and challenge it at its very CORE. AMOS is the leadoff hitter:

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion! Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory!

- who eat calves from the stall;
- who drink wine from bowls,
- who anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

1st Timothy follows with a warning about the dangers that come with attachment to material wealth, and in the parable told by Jesus, issues of privilege and entitlement saturate the text.

When Lazarus lay at his gate, covered with sores, the Rich Man took no notice of him. Lazarus was, for all intents and purposes, INVISIBLE to him.

And even in death, when he finally sees Lazarus, he's still captive to the dynamic of privilege and entitlement that he knew in life:

FATHER ABRAHAM, he commands, SEND LAZARUS TO DIP THE TIP OF HIS FINGER IN WATER AND COOL MY TONGUE!

Entitlement, whatever shape it may take, doesn't release its grip on us easily.

When Francis, standing in the ruins of the church of San Damian, hears the voice of Christ tell him to rebuild what is falling into ruin, Francis takes the call to heart and interprets it literally. He reaches for the most immediate source of funds available: his merchant father Pietro imported fabrics.⁵

Entering the Bernardone warehouse while his father is away, Francis helps himself to 2 bolts of expensive cloth, rides to a nearby village, and promptly sells both the fabric and the horse...

Then, his purse flush with gold, he sets off on foot for the crumbling church to offer the money to the priest there. But the priest, who discerns who knows who Francis is and discerns where the money came from, refuses.

When Pietro returns to Assisi and discovers what his errant son has done now, he explodes. He has endured Francis's outrageous disregard for his hard-earned wealth long enough!

Father and son are summoned before Bishop Guido, who is called upon to adjudicate between them. At first the Bishop tries to reason with Francis. He points out how Francis has "scandalized" his father and that surely Christ wouldn't want him to use ill-gotten gains to do God's work.

But then the Bishop's turns surprisingly tender.

"My son," he says, "have confidence in the Lord and act courageously...

[God] will be your help and will abundantly provide you with whatever is necessary."

The words penetrate Francis's heart. And moved by a surge of faith, Francis strips off his clothes layer by layer, and with them all his entitlements. And he hands them all to his father.

"Listen," he calls to the crowd gathered in the cathedral. "From now on, I can say with complete freedom, 'Our Father who art in Heaven.' Pietro Bernardone is no longer my father."

⁵ The retelling of this story from the life of St. Francis was published on the Center for Action and Contemplation website on October 4, 2019: https://cac.org/naked-before-god-2019-10-04/?utm_source=cm&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=dm&utm_content=summary It is adapted from Mirabai Starr, *St. Francis of Assisi: Brother of Creation* (Sounds True: 2007, 2013), 83-85. I use the story here, with some editing.

Stunned, the bishop wraps his own cloak around Francis's naked shoulders. His father leaves the cathedral defeated and bereft. Francis, released into the service of humanity, is lost to him forever.

In the first version of the guiding rule for his new order, Francis wrote:

“We should have no more use or regard for money in any of its forms than for dust.

The friars should be delighted to follow the lowliness and poverty of our lord Jesus Christ . . .

They should be glad to live among social outcasts, among the poor and helpless, the sick and the lepers, and those who beg by the wayside.”⁶

Throughout this month we're lifting up the [Social Ministry of our congregation](#).

And throughout this month, also, our adult class is reading a book by ELCA pastor Lenny Duncan, entitled: [Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.](#)⁷

The book is a challenging read because Duncan asks us, his fellow and sister Lutherans, to examine our relationship with entitlement—and most particularly to examine our captivity to white privilege—not only within the culture of our country but within the structures of our Lutheran Church.

Duncan has introduced me to someone in American Lutheran history I'd never heard of before—the first pastor of African descent in the Lutheran Church—Jehu Jones. I shared some of Pastor Jones' story in my Pastor's Pen column in PEACE NOTES and I want to repeat some of it here this morning.⁸

Pastor Jehu Jones, Jr. grew up in Charleston, South Carolina, the son of a father who, through grit, and careful management purchased his own freedom from slavery and became a prosperous hotelier in the heart of that city. Though Jehu had grown up at St. Philips Episcopal Church, his family's home congregation, something in the preaching and teaching at the Lutheran church of St. John's—which had newly opened its doors to the black community—stirred within him, and he became a Lutheran and had his children baptized there by Pastor John Bachman.

A decade and a half later, Jones felt a call to be a missionary in Liberia—the newly forming West African country founded by former slaves. But he knew that, because of his race, southern Lutherans would never ordain him, so he headed north to New York City with letters of recommendation from his Pastor John Bachman in hand. And after being properly examined with respect to theology and moral rectitude, Jones was ordained by the Ministerium of New York at the age of 46.

When Jones returned to Charleston to prepare for the trip he was to make to Liberia with his family and other black missionaries, he was arrested and jailed under the Negro Seamen's Act, a law which forbade any free Negro from reentering South Carolina, on penalty of being jailed or put on the auction block.

Forced to make a choice between jail time or immediate departure, he chose to leave; and after stopping home long enough to say goodbye to his wife and children he left Charleston forever, and headed to New York.

Jones fought hard to find another way to pursue his Liberian dream, but his efforts and those of his supporters were rebuffed. The dream of ministering in Liberia was set aside. Yet he knew God was calling him into ministry still.

⁶ Quoted by Colman McCarthy, *The Washington Post*. December 27, 1981.

⁷ Lenny Duncan. *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* (Augsburg Fortress, 2019).

⁸ You can read the column I wrote about Jehu Jones in the October 2019 Peace Notes newsletter: <http://www.peacelutheranseattle.org/?p=2965> Sources for what I share here about Pastor Jones include Philip Pfatteicher, *New Book of Festivals and Commemorations*. 2008, an essay in *The Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume X, 1996 by Karl E. Johnson, Jr. and Joseph E. Romeo, and Duncan's book.

Choosing Philadelphia as his new home base, he arrived with letters of recommendation, but was immediately discouraged by the Lutheran leaders there from starting a Lutheran mission to the black community.

“The people will hate you because of your color” they told him; why not join another communion—the Methodists, Presbyterians, or Baptists—who already have pastors of color among their ranks?”⁹

That, Jones told them, was not an option. He was Lutheran through and through.

Using his own resources and those he acquired through a fundraising tour, Pastor Jones bought land and began building St. Paul’s Church, the first independent African American Lutheran congregation in the country. A place where, if you were black, you didn’t have to sit off in the balcony or somewhere else while white people sat in front. No, this was a church where you sat where you wanted to sit. And his mission to the black citizens of Philadelphia began to take root.

I wish I could tell say that that mission flourished, that they had all the financial resources that they needed, that the Lutheran community of privilege in that place recognized the importance and vitality of that ministry and partnered with them. But that’s not what happened.

In the chapters of the story that followed, Pastor Jones’ tireless efforts to make the community he served prosper follows a downward spiral that, in the end, indicts not only the racist systems within 19th century culture in which he lived, but the very Lutheran adjudicatories who failed to make good on their financial promises to Pastor Jones, who did not pay him, and did not stand by him as a servant of the gospel.

Yet, even though the institutional church failed Pastor Jones abysmally, Pastor Jehu Jones continued to be faithful in keeping the congregation he had founded—a community now bereft of their building which had been sold out from under them to payoff accumulated debt—to keep them together

As late as 1851, at age 65, he could proudly say, “I continue to preach to the [black] congregation of St. Paul Lutheran Church.” In the face of the Lutheran Church’s unfaithfulness to him, Pastor Jehu Jones remained faithful to the gospel and to his call to proclaim it.

He died a year later, the victim of prejudice, rejection, and institutional abuse. Friends—I knew nothing of his story; after being a pastor in the church for 33 years I knew nothing of his name until two weeks ago.

Two centuries later, white supremacy, white privilege and the systems of entitlement that come with them, remain alive and active in our country and in our church.

What is changing—and what, perhaps, is hopeful—is that more of us who reflect the white spectrum of heritage are beginning to see the layers of privilege that we haven’t been able to see before.

This month, as we celebrate the various ways our congregation has engaged and is engaging in ministries of social outreach, assistance, service and advocacy, we remain mindful of the reality that systemic oppressions of all kinds inhabit and bedevil our culture at every level.

The church’s mission in the midst of this reality is not only to feed the hungry and bind up the wounds of the Lazaruses of this world, but to consciously and purposefully engage white supremacy and the other

⁹ Lutheran Quarterly article.

demonic forces, both within us and without, which call into question the irrevocable image of God that resides in every human being.

Jesus' ministry among those who were marginalized, his model of bringing them into the circle and challenging the forces—both social and spiritual—that were against them, must be our model.

The impulse to reach out beyond these walls in service to others is embedded in our congregation's DNA,¹⁰ and this is worth celebrating.

At the same time, we remain alert to the deep and ongoing work to which God, and our siblings in Christ, like Pastor Duncan and Pastor Jehu Jones, are calling us.

God grant us grace and the courage to do just that. Amen.

¹⁰ See article #8 by Boots Winterstein in the October 2019 edition of Peace Notes. It can also be found here: <http://www.peacelutheranseattle.org/?p=2857>