

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
September 6, 2015

It's a summer afternoon on the playground. Two children, about 2 years old, are in the sandbox sitting next to each other. Each one has a shovel and a bucket. One child begins digging deep into the sand with the shovel, while the other bangs on the bucket with the shovel. Noticing what the drumming child is doing, the other child starts banging on the sand and sand goes flying in the air. These two children continue noticing one another and modifying behaviors, but are generally engaging in their own play.

This type of play is what we would label parallel play. It's "considered an early stage of development, characterized by egocentric behavior and the inability to decenter and coordinate with the activities of a 'playmate.'"¹

Parallel play goes on all around us. Significant others sit in bed both reading their own book alone, or even two strangers playing the same game on their computers in a coffee shop. Yet, parallel play doesn't neatly fit into the good or bad dichotomy. After all, a Wall Street Journal article recently noted that parallel play could actually be the key to a successful retirement with your partner.² However, parallel play can also lead to a sad state of affairs.

"Parallel lives" is the term that the presiding bishop of our denomination used to describe the differences experienced between white people and people of color in the United States. Bishop Eaton noted in the recent "Confronting Racism" webcast³ that although we may grow up in the same eras and even the same location, people have a completely different experience depending on their race or economic class. Although we live in the same city, watch similar sunsets, breath similar air, drink similar water, and watch similar things on TV our experiences are not all that similar, instead they are parallel.

In the wake of the Ferguson protests following the shooting death of Michael Brown one Iowa pastor decided to head down to Ferguson. Her purpose was to go door-to-door and register people to vote. The neighborhood she canvased was an integrated community – a fairly mixed white and black neighborhood. However, what she experienced in that community wasn't homogenous. On one block she meet white residents who were surprised by the protests and had no idea that their neighbors were so angry and having a different experiences than theirs. Black individuals on the same block had a totally

¹ Conrad, Peter (1997). "Parallel Play in Medical Anthropology and Medical Sociology" 28.. p. 91.

² <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324879504578601912107485252>

³ <http://www.elca.org/webcast>

different view. They'd tell her how police harassed them. One mother of a 10 year old wondered if she needed to dress him in a suit everyday so that police wouldn't think he's a gangster.⁴

I read the experience of this pastor and said, "oh, what a sad state of affairs in Ferguson." And then I wondered, "what about here in Wicker Park? If I went door-to-door what would people's experience be?" Well, I didn't go door-to-door but I did call a few of our members who happened to be black and lived in the neighborhood. One member noted that she hadn't really experienced anything different, nothing like a parallel life. However, another member told me story after story of the ways she had been treated differently.

She told me how her boys were at home watching the draft all. They walked outside briefly and a police car slowly drove by with an intoxicated white man in the back. This drunken man then claimed that her sons mugged him. Although all he could remember was that the muggers were black. Her boys were arrested on the spot, spent most of the night in a stressful police station, only to be released as innocent.

This same member was driving outside the church. She stopped at the corner of Hoyne and Le Moyne, turned the corner, and then the police pulled her over. The police stated that she didn't fully stop, although our member said she did. The police asked for her insurance papers. Our member said she'd get them and leaned over to grab them only to turn back around and see the police office with a gun drawn. After some time the police let her go without a ticket.

Our member notes that she attends the local police beat meeting every month so that the police will know her face and know her boys so she might minimize future issues.

Our member's experience is parallel to mine. I know that I don't feel the need to attend police meetings for my own protection or fear of incarceration. I know that when I've been pulled over, and I have only once that I'll admit to, I've never had a gun come out of its holster. I never fear that when I walk out my front door I might end up spending the night in a prison cell. My experiences of Wicker Park run parallel to our member who happens to be black.

And today's gospel reading illuminates this parallel life for us a bit more. In Mark we see Jesus' interaction with two people. First we see Jesus talking with a woman from Tyre, and the deaf man in Decapolis. Both were gentile regions, some with more Jews than the other. Both of these people, though, were beyond Jesus' ethnic enclave. We hear that Jesus was approached by this Syrophoenician woman who asked for her daughter to be healed. Jesus then responded in an unexpected way. He said let the Jewish people, the people of my ethnic origin, be fed first. Why waste resources on your people who are dogs, he said.

⁴ <http://northeasterniowasynodelca.blogspot.com/2015/08/confronting-racism-parallel-lives.html?m=1>

Then the woman, in a boldly prophetic voice - a voice that echoes what we heard read today in Isaiah, a voice that demands the impartiality we hear read in James - this woman speaks up to injustice. It is her voice and her experience that is rewarded in Mark. Matthew has a similar story about this Syrophoenician woman, but there the woman is rewarded for her faith. Here in Mark she is rewarded for what she said, for speaking up, and for making injustice known. Through her pushing Jesus changes his demeanor and says, "the demon has left your daughter."

A woman who led a parallel life to Jesus, one of different ethnic origin and different worldview, speaks up to Jesus, he intersects with her life, and wholeness is found. Parallel experiences and parallel lives intersect. In these intersections, wholeness and life is found.

Now I get it, it feels like a burden to us white individuals to have so much responsibility. It's hard. We say, "what can we do?" We say, "is this even our problem?" and "why is this even being mentioned in church of all places?"

Well, my friends, here are some flabbergasting statistics. Pew Research just released a study that the ELCA, our denomination, is the whitest religious group in all of the United States⁵ - whiter than the Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod, the Episcopal Church, the UCC, the Unitarians, and even Jewish sects.

In the shooting that recently happened at Emmanuel AME in Charleston two of those killed were graduates of ELCA seminaries, and the shooter - want to guess what denomination he was? ELCA.

The fact is that our church *must* speak about race and racism. We cannot be silent when children of God are dying. We cannot ignore that the problems of racism are deeply entrenched in our denomination. So when the leaders of the African Episcopal Church invite the ELCA on this day to confess, repent, and commit to end racism, we must respond and engage their request.

"So what can we do?" I know I don't have all the answers, but I do have a few suggestions.

First, let's recognize that we are all God's children. Jesus reached out to heal ethnic minorities in today's Gospel, then in the reading from James we hear an argument for impartiality and the necessity to live our faith as we care for those we perceive as different, and in Isaiah we hear that our God stands on the side of justice. We too are called to see all as God's children.

Second, acknowledge. When a middle-aged white woman sat down with a young black man and asked him what he wants from the Black Lives Matter movement, she said, "what do you want from me as a white woman?" First, this young man was dumbstruck that someone cared, and then the young black man said, "I want to be acknowledged.

⁵ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>

When you see me, say hi or at least smile when I smile at you.”⁶ Acknowledge all people as people.

Third, be gracious with each other. Let’s face it. This world can really crap on us at times. Things aren’t easy. Some of us were born into loving, caring, financially well-off families and that shaped us in certain ways. Others have not had the same opportunities for education, for good food, for a good night’s rest, or for love and respect. While we don’t dismiss everything a person does because of their upbringing, we can show grace and mercy – the same grace and mercy we have been shown by our God.

Finally, pray. Pray that our God continues to refine our wills and our actions. Pray for leaders in our neighborhoods, city, state, nation, and world. Pray for justice and impartiality. Pray to God, ask of God, and speak out.

Each of us fails every day. Some of us gain a lot through our current systems in the United States. Whether we like it or not, some are pulled over more frequently than others with guns drawn. Some of us roll through stop signs without a second look. Some of us have privilege because of our skin color. We lead parallel lives.

However, no matter your race, God loves you. Your life matters. You are a beloved child of God. The person on either side of you is a child of God. That person you walk by on the street who lives a parallel life to yours is also a child of God. Each one of us is loved completely and fully by our God.

So, this week walk into the world to glimpse the grace we’ve been given. Look for those moments of intersection with someone perceived as different than you. Look for those places where our parallel lives can intersect. Where the tangent of life drops you in to something new, where the perpendicular moment in time opens you to reveal the grace and love of God in a whole new way. Look for these moments and step into them, for they are gifts from God, they are moments of restoration and wholeness. Thanks be to God for these divine moments of love and life. Amen.

⁶ <http://www.startribune.com/what-does-black-lives-matter-want-from-the-average-white-citizen/324011181/>