

[What can you do with all this?] I remember the day I learned my passport was more powerful than a machine gun. I was in Palestine with my friend Thomas, and we were returning from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. That trip involves crossing the heavily fortified wall the Israelis have built to wall themselves off from the Palestinians. So Thomas and I stood in a long line of Palestinian men waiting to return home from a day's work - this was a trip they made every day. Suddenly, the Israelis shut down the border, refusing to let anyone pass.

We quickly learned from the Palestinians around us that this was a regular occurrence. The Israelis often shut down the border, refusing to allow anyone through, either direction, for no reason and without provocation - more or less to flex their muscle. The Palestinians - most of them leaving work, trying to get home to their families in time for dinner - were helpless to do anything, as the machine gun-toting Israeli soldiers pointedly ignored them.

Not far behind us in line, an American woman quickly ran out of patience. She lived in Jerusalem and made frequent crossings into Palestine. After only a few minutes of watching the guard on duty ignore us with her feet up on her desk, the woman behind us in line exclaimed, "I've had enough of this!" She marched up the line to the glass, slammed her American passport against the glass and shouted, "Let's get this line moving!"

The startled guard quickly rushed to obey, and the line started moving. The Palestinian men around us murmured thanks to the woman as we all crossed back into Israeli territory. It didn't matter how many Israeli guards there were at that post, how many of them had machine guns, or how many bullets were in those guns.

In that moment, our American passports were far more powerful. They not only let that woman move to the front of the line, they got the line moving for all those Palestinian men who were powerless to move it themselves.

That moment illustrated for me how privileged I am, how powerful privilege is, and that privilege can be leveraged for the right causes.

I know I just said a dirty word - the 'P' word, 'privilege'. It's a word that's become infamous in our culture, a trigger word guaranteed to raise hackles and start fights. But bear with me for a moment.

Privilege isn't a dirty word, or at least it shouldn't be.

Privilege is about power, position and influence in our culture. Saying someone is privileged typically makes that person defensive because it feels like an accusation.

[Maybe a pyramid?] So let me start here: I am a straight, white middle-class male. When it comes to privilege, I'm pretty close to the top of the chain. I'm one of the most privileged persons in this room, and in our culture at large. So anything I'm saying today I'm speaking to myself before anyone else.

Today is the final week of our Lent series called System Failure. Lent is a season of self-examination, of confession of sin and repentance. This year, we've considered Sin not only as individual actions, but as whole systems that shape us. Because our culture is broken, we are poisoned by Sin from our first breath.

Religion can help or hurt when it comes to systemic sin - religion can act as an air valve that releases pressure in our spirits, allows us to continue in a life of sin. But religion can also form us to resist sinful institutions by offering counter-practices that shape us to be a people of God. With regard to privilege, faith can blind us to our privilege or faith can mobilize us to identify our privilege and wield it on behalf of justice.

Privilege can be good news. Privilege doesn't have to be a dirty word. But there is a *reason* it's a bad word. When we don't recognize privilege, we perpetuate all of these evil systems that we've been talking about for the last 5 weeks. so even if you want to make a change in the area of food or education or security or consumerism, if you don't recognize privilege, the system is likely to suck you back into it without you noticing. When you recognize privilege, you have a chance to choose how to use that power. To understand privilege is to understand why a passport is more powerful than a machine gun. To understand privilege, and to recognize how I am privileged, is to see how I can leverage my position to work for justice for everyone. Privilege is powerful. And privilege can be an opportunity to work for justice in our broken systems.

From the beginning in America, our cultural institutions have been unjust. In the earliest days of our nation, only white, land-owning men had a voice. Over the years, that's changed. Today, we are more just racially, economically and with regard to gender.

Because institutions are so big and the ways they shape us so deeply ingrained in our culture, institutional change takes a long time - at least three generations to begin to take effect. It's no coincidence that we began to consider black or female presidential candidates once the third generation past the Civil Rights movement was old enough to vote.

All that means that, in terms of race, gender and economics, we've made some good, necessary strides in our culture, but we're just *beginning* to see the effects of many of our institutional changes. We've come a long way, but we have a long way to go.

Privilege has risen to the forefront of our conversations about race and gender in large part because of the civil rights and feminist movements of the 60s and 70s, and more recently conversations around sexuality and disability Those movements addressed the obvious racial and gender inequalities in the institutions of our country - education, government, economics. Those movements culminated in some sweeping institutional changes - we passed laws to ensure more just hiring practices, integrated schools and more.

This is why privilege has entered our cultural vocabulary in the last decade. We're now beginning to see how the legacy of our sinful, prejudiced institutions have shaped the world

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we've all inherited. Privilege is about where we start. The important thing to remember is that we can't help our privilege. Privilege isn't about blame, it's about opportunity.

[Image: racetrack starting line w/ people at different positions down the track] A good analogy is to think of a relay race. Where you start the race is like where you're born. If you're white, you start the race further down the track. Same if you're male. The more wealth you have, the further down the track you start.

Remember, this is *where you start*. And you didn't choose where to start. It was determined in part by your parents and in part by what our culture values.

It's possible for a person to be privileged in one area and not in another - for instance a white man who's born into poverty or a black woman born into wealth. Privilege in one area doesn't cancel out underprivilege in another area.

And where you start the race has nothing to do with how well you run it. It's entirely possible that someone who starts further back on the track so to speak might be a naturally gifted runner, and outperform others who started further ahead. Or someone who starts further down the track might decide not to run, or run the wrong direction. But what happens after the race begins doesn't change that when we all start in different places on the track, it's not a fair race.

The word for that in the real world is injustice. And that's the ugly truth of privilege: the world isn't fair, it isn't just, and we are born *into injustice*. That's the System Failure. You and I were all born into positions of various privilege and we can't do anything about where we started the race.

Privilege is a way of observing that our culture is unjust, that we still have a long way to go. Privilege observes that we don't all start from the same place, that not everyone has a seat at the table. And that's not your fault and it's not my fault. Privilege is a result of our broken systems. It's a way of describing the world we've all inherited.

But just because we can't help the privilege we were born into doesn't mean we can't *do anything* with that privilege. In fact, if we are willing to name our privilege, we can leverage it to be a powerful force for justice. Let's consider what that might look like - [Scripture Slide] Turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 118. The Psalms are the songbook of God's people - the hymns they sang when they gathered for worship. These are the songs God's people walked around humming, the songs that got stuck in their heads. These are the songs that formed their imagination, shaped how they saw the world.

This particular song is about going to worship God, and right in the middle of it is a phrase that seems not to belong, a phrase that became famous in Israel's history. Watch for it:

Open for me the gates where the righteous enter, and I will go in and thank the Lord. These gates lead to the presence of the Lord, and the godly enter there. I thank you for answering my prayer and giving me victory!

The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing, and it is wonderful to see. This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.

Please, Lord, please save us. Please, Lord, please give us success. Bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, shining upon us. Take the sacrifice and bind it with cords on the altar. You are my God, and I will praise you! You are my God, and I will exalt you!

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever. -- Psalm 118: 19-29

Right in the middle of this song of worship is the phrase, "The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone." It's an architectural phrase - the cornerstone is the first stone laid in a stone building. It must be carefully selected because if the cornerstone isn't sound and good, the whole building will be crooked and unstable. The cornerstone sets the pattern for the whole building. As the cornerstone is, so too will the building be.

In this song, something has been built using a stone rejected by the builders as unfit to be included in the building. But this rejected stone isn't just included - it's made the cornerstone. The rejected stone becomes the pattern, the template, the guide for the whole building.

And according to the song, *this is God's doing*, and this is what makes God worthy of praise. The reason we should worship, the reason we should celebrate, the reason to get excited is because God has made something out of this rejected stone.

Israel understood this to be a parable for how God works in the world. The builders represent the powers of the world - the people who exclude, divide and segregate. In the world, someone is always excluded. It's always been that way and it always will. It's what sin does in us and through us.

And from the beginning, the God who is the antithesis of Sin does the opposite. God does not work through the powerful, through the privileged. God selects the stone the builders have rejected, and on that Rock, God builds a Church.

When God launched a rescue, God did not come to Babylon, the seat of global power. Instead, God called a nomad named Abram, who lived in the middle of nowhere. In a world where the firstborn son inherited his father's estate and power, God called Isaac, the younger son. And Jacob, Isaac's younger son. And Joseph, Jacob's *eleventh* son. God used a little brother named Moses to transform runaway slaves into a nation. And when that nation needed a king, God called yet another little brother named David, who wasn't a warrior but a shepherd.

When God stepped into Israel's story, God did not come as a conquering King, but as a baby. And this baby wasn't even born into power or privilege, but was born in the backwoods of a country nobody cared about, to a family who lived in poverty and anonymity. Jesus came not to conquer but to die.

Again and again, God works not through power, but weakness. Not through privilege but through disadvantage.

There's an important lesson for us here: if we want to find God at work, it's not among the privileged and powerful. God is always at work on the margins, among the excluded. God builds on the stones the builders have rejected.

Privilege blinds us. We tend only to look down the track, not backward, so we don't see those who have less advantage than we do. Which means the further down the track we start the race (the more privilege we have), the more careful we have to be. If we're not careful, sin exploits our privileged positions to warp us.

But again, the good news (especially for those of us with a *lot* of privilege), is that this doesn't have to be the case. Privilege can be *good* news, but in order for that to be the case, we have to be aware of it. And that happens when we start paying attention to the margins, look back down the track toward those who have less.

Because remember, that's where God is. God builds with stones the builders have rejected.

Why? Because God is in the justice business. God does not intend that our world remain unequal, unjust. God is working to ensure justice for all. And it's *how* God is working for justice that reveals why privilege might be good news.

[Scripture Slide 2] In your Bibles, turn over to Philippians 2. If privilege is about the advantages you start the race with, then no one has more privilege than God. God was all-powerful before God even began to create the world. We're about to read another song together, one the first Christians used to celebrate how God had rescued them through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. This song is all about privilege - about God's privilege and what that means for us. Let's read together:

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Commented [1]: this is a good place to include everyone, even the people who have not typically seen themselves as privileged. up til here, they may have been hearing the sermon as aimed at someone else, and sitting on the side of judging those privileged people. here you can help them see their own privilege... living in the wealthiest country in human history or something like that.

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. -- Philippians 2:3-11

[Turn the track image on its side] Jesus gave up his divine privileges. Became a slave. Jesus leveraged his divine privilege to rescue and restore all of us who had less than he did. As the second person of the Trinity, the firstborn over all creation, the very Word of God by whom everything was created and in whom all things continue to exist, Jesus could have remained in Heaven, secure and safe, free of pain, sin and suffering.

But God is not a God who is content to live in privilege while his children suffer. So God left Heaven, gave up his divine privilege to rescue us. And right there at the beginning, Paul challenged us to "have the same attitude Christ Jesus had." To follow Jesus is to leverage whatever privilege we have for those who have less privilege.

If life is a race, the goal isn't to win... it's for all of us to win. Liberty and justice *for all*. Which is why Dr. King can say that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

We don't serve a God who only cared about himself. We serve a God who gave up his divine privileges to rescue us.

Which all sounds great in the abstract, but is difficult in practice. The actual Greek phrase translated "gave up his divine privileges" is "emptied himself" and that too is instructive for us. When we exercise our privilege on behalf of those who have less than we do, it feels like loss. Loss of power, loss of position, loss. And loss is scary.

But God promises this is the way to life - not just life for me, but life for all.

This truth has shaped how I pastor. Pastor is a position of privilege, especially inside the Church. I stand on a platform and tell people what God says. Talk about power!

So when I first started preaching, I had to ask myself: if the God I'm always talking about gives up his power for those with less, what does that mean for my preaching? I had a dream for a preaching team, where as the Teaching Pastor, I would share my power - the platform - with others in the congregation God has called to preach and teach.

But that couldn't become a reality until I came to a church called Catalyst who shared the same vision - Catalyst is a church for outsiders, a church that acts on behalf of people who aren't here yet. I told our Leadership Team my vision for a preaching team and they loved it so since my first day here, we've worked to identify people in the congregation God has called to preach and teach (but not called to be vocational pastors) and I do whatever I can to share my position and power with them.

Is that a loss? Sure. I have less time on the platform. I preach less. I have less control. But I have to be honest - it doesn't feel like a loss. It feels like a huge win, because I see again and again people who are living into a calling they just wouldn't have if I was afraid to share, if I was worried about control or position. And the Church is formed by more than just my voice. We are shaped by how the Spirit is working among all of us.

Friends this is the good news of Privilege. Whatever power, whatever position you have, you can leverage for those in your orbit who have less. Whatever privilege we have is an opportunity for us to work for justice, to leverage where we are for the good of those who have less. Privilege is a gift that allows us to follow God in emptying ourselves, joining those on the margins.

We are not followers of the God of the powerful, the God of Empires and Pharaohs and winners. Our God is the God of the stones the builders rejected, the God of slaves, the God of the crucified, the God of losers.

On this Palm Sunday, identify your privilege. Consider how the position you were born into might have blinded you to injustices behind you. Consider how you can turn back down the track, how you can listen to the voices of those who have to shout to be heard.

Friends we can't help our privilege, but we can *use* it. We can embrace the position we were born into and use it to create a more just world.

Communion Setup