

“Witness”

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

By Tina Walker-Morin

I would like to start off by asking you a question: What do you see when you look into the mirror?

This week I read an article by a UU minister in New York, Galen Guengerich.¹ In the article, the minister tells the story that one day his wife asks him simply, honey when you look into the mirror what do you see?

His response was “I see myself”

She said, well “what do you mean by that?”

His perhaps annoyed response was, “what do you mean, what do I mean by that?”

She replies “Just answer the question. What do you see in the mirror?”

He said “I see myself...I see a person”

Just think about that question...what do you see when you look in the mirror? Do you see a man or a woman, do you see age, or your skin color? What do you see when you look in the mirror?

I am constantly amazed at the ways in which God works. Last month I had the honor of representing our Massachusetts Conference as a delegate at the 30th UCC General Synod. Synod is a biannual gathering of representatives of the UCC from throughout the country. You could say it is a time when the UCC looks into a mirror.

Being as a Delegate I was part of two resolutions of witness: 1) *Dismantling Discriminatory Systems of Mass Incarceration in the United States*; and 2) *Dismantling the New Jim Crow*. These two resolutions are interesting in and of themselves, but what really makes it interesting for me is the fact that last year, while in my final year of study at Andover Newton Theological School, I participated in a border-crossing program entitled, *Mercy and Justice in the Criminal Justice System*. Through this program, I learned more about our criminal justice system and injustices that prevail. Additionally, I was able to become a mentor to a gentleman at MCI Norfolk, a local medium security prison in Massachusetts. I am amazed at God’s work through me and how at the time I took this prison course I had no idea I would work at the national level of the UCC on this very issue.

The resolution provides information on the background of each issue and then makes the UCC statement. In the one *Dismantling Discriminatory Systems of Mass Incarceration in the United States* the UCC States:

¹ Galen Guengerich, “Privilege is Not What You Think”. Faithstreet.com
<http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2015/07/16/its-not-what-you-think/37459> July 16, 2015.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Thirtieth General Synod of the United Church of Christ identifies mass incarceration as a critical human and civil rights issue in the U.S. because of its disparate impact on and disenfranchisement of people of color, youth, people with mental illness, and people with limited economic and other resources; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Thirtieth General Synod of the United Church of Christ **reaffirms its commitment to speak and act prophetically to disrupt and dismantle the growing prison industrial complex** in the United States by pursuing every public forum available;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, **to turn this tide of institutionalized racism and economic injustice by mass incarceration in the United States**, that Justice and Witness Ministries, Conferences, and local congregations are encouraged to provide opportunities for education, mobilization, public witness, and public policy, and to engage in a periodic review.²

Did you hear that:

reaffirms its commitment to speak and act prophetically to disrupt and dismantle the growing prison industrial complex

to turn this tide of institutionalized racism and economic injustice by mass incarceration in the United States

So what does this mean for us as Christians and members of the UCC?

It means looking in the mirror.

You see the minister I mentioned before was asked this question by his wife b/c she had heard of a graduate student who heard two of his classmates discussing this question.

One of the women was white, and the other woman was black. The white woman commented that all women have the same experience as women. All women face the same oppression by the patriarchy, and therefore all women have a kind of intuitive solidarity with their sisters.

The black woman said, "I'm not so sure. Let me ask you a question. When you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, what do you see?"

The white woman said, "I see a woman."

The black woman said, "You see, that's the problem. When I wake up in the morning, if I look in the mirror, I see a black woman. To me, race is visible, but to you, it's invisible."

As Kimmel tells the story, the black woman went on to say something that startled him.

² <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/GS30-DISMANTLING-DISCRIMINATORY-SYSTEMS-OF-MASS-INCARCERATION.pdf>

She said, "That's how privilege works. Privilege is invisible to those who have it. It's a luxury." She added, "The white people sitting in this room do not have to think about race every split-second of their lives."

These two UCC resolutions come back to privilege. Privilege is the right or honor given to some people and not others. Our society is built on privilege. We are a society, which is divided into binary thinking:

...the have and have not's,
the educated and uneducated,
the young and old,
the rich and poor, and
yes the white and people of color.

But Jesus never talks about separating God's people. In our passage today from Paul's letter to Corinth he is addressing a divided people as mentioned in Chapter 1:12. There are people who say they belong to Paul, others who say they belong to Appolos or Cephas and those who say they belong to Christ. He continues in chapter 11 to state: "**I hear that there are divisions among you**; and to some extent I believe it"...

divisions among you

Is that not our society? We are a society divided, built from a foundation of privilege and division. We started out a people dividing away from our homeland looking for a new start and then we brought others over enslaved them and kept them divided from us.

We are a country built on privilege and inherent racism.

John Metta, a man of color and a writer for the Huffington Post writes: "But racism is even more subtle than that. It's more nuanced. Racism is the fact that "White" means "normal" and that anything else is different."³

The construct of the society we live in the experiences of the minority population do not affect or influence the majority thus little attention is often given to the minority's view and situation. Yet the minority group must understand the majority's views and ways but that is not a reciprocal truth. So we end up with a system of the majority being less aware about the minority group and the minority group being very aware of the majority. The system was made for White people, so White people don't have to think about living in it.

Here is an example at Synod we passed a resolution calling for the end of the

³ John Metta "I, Racist". Huffington Post http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-metta/i-racist_b_7770652.html. July 10, 2015.

Washington NFL's team name because it is associated with bounties on the indigenous people. The indigenous people are in full support of this action, they too want the NFL to stop using that word. As this was passed I was in conversation with a person who was calling for the UCC to expand that to include all pro and college sports using Indigenous people icons or names. This person was not of indigenous people, i.e. not part of the minority population and assumed they knew what that population wanted. I quickly pointed out to them that the Seminole tribe in Florida is happy to allow Florida State University to use their name as their mascot. So as a majority we must be aware of the minority's views and listen to that population. The majority cannot assume they know what is best.

This does not mean that the majority is always trying to squash the minority group but it is something we must be aware of and see when we look into the mirror.

We are not the ones to say when the minority is oppressed. We need to listen to the minority because we are all created by God.

In the passage we heard this morning Paul understands people are divided and he uses the analogy of the human body as a way to bring people together and to describe the Body of Christ. Listen again:

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. **15** If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. **16** And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. **17** If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? **18** But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. **19** If all were a single member, where would the body be? **20** As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

More importantly, Paul reminds us that God calls us to lift up the oppressed and to open our eyes and ears to the experiences of our minority brothers and sisters. Paul writes, *"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."*

Theologian Carl Holladay states: "It is impossible to speak of one body in any meaningful sense unless we grant the existence of its many parts. Oneness does not mean sameness. Unity does not mean uniformity."⁴

this is our ideal society, the body of Christ

This can all be applied to Mass incarceration. As a country we are continuing to exhibit privilege and keeping people of color, who are also part of Christ's body held down. The

⁴ Holliday, Joan *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*

US makes up 5% of the world's population and we have 25% of the world's prisoners.

- About 14 million Whites and 2.6 million African Americans report using an illicit drug
- 5 times as many Whites are using drugs as African Americans, yet African Americans are sent to prison for drug offenses at 10 times the rate of Whites
- African Americans represent 12% of the total population of drug users, but 38% of those arrested for drug offenses, and 59% of those in state prison for a drug offense.
- One in six black men had been incarcerated as of 2001. If current trends continue, one in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime

As Michelle Alexander explains in her book *The New Jim Crow*, mass incarceration is the new system of modern-day enslavement. We must have the race and privilege discussions and we must recognize our own flaws and tendencies that have been created through our society. It is time to look in the mirror.

Now I am not saying we are all racist, what I am saying is that we all live in a society built on racism and privilege and these two constructs are blocking us from God.

It is time for us to stand up and speak out on the injustices and the best way to do that is look into the mirror and to learn more. One great way to better understand how our society works against those who are not privileged is to read the book *The New Jim Crow*. There are also organizations that work for changing the prison system and helping those who are incarcerated get out and become productive citizens. I am a mentor through Partakers for a gentleman in the Norfolk prison I have learned so much from him about privilege and the evils of our prison system.

And lastly and most importantly ask questions and speak out.

What do you see when you look in the mirror?

I hope you see the body of Christ, because you are and together we are the body of Christ. As the Apostle Paul states in order to be the body of Christ **The members must have the same care for one another. Because you are the body of Christ.**

Amen.