

The White Earth Indian reservation abuts the small community where I grew up. The wooded landscape dotted with lakes and marshes typifies the beauty of northern Minnesota. It also provides cover for the crushing poverty which is so prevalent on reservations throughout this country. Amidst the trees, rundown campers or mobile homes dotted the landscape. Rusted out trucks or station wagons were strewn throughout the woods. In school, one always knew who lived on the rez because of the tattered clothes they wore. As a child, I was often witness to discrimination toward Native Americans who lived on the reservation. Slurs, dismissals of “them” or “those people”, and statements about the worth or initiative of Native Americans were the most common expressions. These comments were the soft bigotry of harder, systemic racism that was alive and well in northern Minnesota. And still is.

At a relatively early age, I was aware that I was born into privilege. For many, a teacher’s salary in a small rural community in northern Minnesota would not be considered privilege. However, I knew that the safety of home, the certainty of three meals a day, the dependability of parents, and the access to education, employment, and opportunity were privileges I enjoyed that were foreign to most living on the rez. I also knew that the privilege I enjoyed was completely random. I had no agency in where and when I was born. I knew this to be true for my classmates who came from the White Earth. My encounter with African-Americans was quite limited in rural, northern Minnesota. My exposure to racism was not.

Educator Jane Elliot famously debunked the idea that we live in a post-racial society or that systemic racism does not exist or that living as a white person in our society offers innumerable privileges. She is seen on [this video](#) asking a room of individuals to stand up if they would like to be treated like African Americans are treated in our society. Not surprisingly, no one stands up. The scene is rather damning, for it exposes the understanding that we all have at some deep level of the inequities in our society, as well as revealing the sins of omission--the failure to act--on the part of us all.

Precisely because of this failure to act against the systemic racism of our society, the Episcopal Church in Connecticut passed a resolution at its most recent convention to observe the second Sunday in February as A Day for Racial Healing, Justice, and Reconciliation. Indeed, naming the reality that exists before us is the first step to hopefully addressing racism, working to change it, and to realize a day where we see each other as the children of God we are, and we alleviate the structures that prevent so many people from life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness simply because of the color of their skin and the randomness of their birth.

Of course, participating in a service one Sunday out of the year does not suffice in addressing the far reaching implications of racism. There is more work that we can do and must do throughout the rest of the year. I hope that you will participate in the service this Sunday and come to hear

the Rev. Michael Hyman preach. I also hope that you will participate in other opportunities that we develop over the course of the year to work with our African American brothers and sisters and to find ways to continue to dismantle the systems that marginalize, threaten, and even destroy the lives of countless individuals.

Bryan Stevenson, the director of the Equal Justice Initiative, talks eloquently about making a change in the world, and one of his points is what he talks about as being proximate. That is, we need to have direct experiences with people in a variety of contexts to understand their life. Lord knows that it feels as if there is a tsunami of issues that we need to deal with, and it can feel hopeless at times to make a dent in any one of them. Yet, being proximate to another is not that far fetched. It may take us out of our comfort zone. It may force us to deal with realities that we don't want to address. It may make us aware of aspects of our life that we would rather overlook. Such engagement will also, hopefully, help us to recognize the fuller reality that is this life. It will make us more aware of the various ways that we actively or passively participate in racism. And, perhaps most importantly, it will allow us to see the sacred reality of the other and the connection we share. The implications of this last point are profound if not downright earth shattering.