White People School
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"White People School." That's the term my friends and I jokingly used in high school whenever we observed white people making racial *faux pas*. For example, if an adult referred to a person of color as "articulate," as though they were surprised to learn that black people could use English well, we'd say: "He must have missed the first week of White People School." "Definitely failed White People School." That was our judgment when a white person – perhaps another person in our peer group – attempted to use language they had heard in MTV hip-hop videos to relate to people of color. Or here's one that came up all the time: "What *do* black people think about …" Our white parents and teachers loved that one; it came out of their mouths often. And it definitely earned a White People School demerit. "You don't ask a single black person to speak on behalf of all black people. That was covered in, like, week three of White People School," we'd say. "She must have been absent from White People School that week." My friends and I loved to snicker at white people who ran afoul of these rules, and by our snickering, to judge benighted white people for failing to learn the lessons of White People School. Of course, as teenagers, we knew more than everyone else about everything else, and we weren't afraid to let ourselves and others know it. This was no doubt arrogant behavior. But if I'm being honest, I enjoyed this form of racialized humor – and maybe still do, just a little bit.

White People School was not, of course, a formal course of study. There was no White People School building. There were no White People School teachers, no regularly scheduled White People School course meetings, no White People School recess – although I bet I could create a great stand-up routine around the idea of "White People School recess." There definitely was, however, White People School instruction. A good bit of it was subtle, implicit rather explicit, instruction. One learned through observation, and also through correction, about what to say and do, and, more importantly, what *not* to say and do, around black people. The fundamental theme of the White People School curriculum is that it is vitally important for white people to choose their words and also regulate their behavior very carefully when in the presence of people of color. That's because, our White People School curriculum told us, black people are always and forever angry with white people and are looking for any opportunity to express that anger. It is therefore vital to do and say the right things, lest black people accuse us of being racist. Behind closed doors, of course, the lessons of White People School did not apply – in fact, White People School

lessons about public behavior reinforced private spaces where all bets were off. In private spaces, white people can say what they really think of people of color.

My White People School lessons started early. My grandmother, my father's mother, Lilly Mae was a wonderful person in many ways. She grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in the Jim Crow South. Her White People School education was much different from mine. Grandma routinely displayed distrust, if not outright hatred, of black people, whom she referred to as "colored" her entire life. She always lowered her voice to whisper whenever it was necessary to talk about people of color, which struck me as odd. I remember one time, my Dad called my grandmother out on her use of the term "colored" to describe African Americans. "Mom," he said in a joking tone, "you're like two or three politically correct terms behind the times," he said. "We now say 'African American.' That's the polite way to refer to them." That was, of course, a classic White People School lesson. My dad wanted to show that he'd kept up his White People School *bona fides*; *and* he probably wanted me to learn a lesson in witnessing that exchange. But Dad didn't anticipate my Grandma's response: "I thought 'colored people' *was* the polite way of referring to them," she said. Clearly, my grandmother used a similar White People School logic, but she was working with a different vocabulary list.

So, that was White People School in a nutshell. White People School was all about learning how to do and say the right things in the presence of people of color in order to avoid courting their wrath. And *that* was my *entire* education in race, or so I thought. I thought that learning about race meant learning how not to make black people angry. The white people I grew up with in Cincinnati, OH, thought that racism only exists in the South, and Cincinnati isn't in the South. (There are all kinds of problems with this idea, but we'll have to save that for another day.) Also, they thought, you're not really a racist unless you're a card-carrying, cross-burning Grand Wizard of the KKK, a neo-Nazi skinhead, or something like that.

Of course, White People School was really part of a deeper education in whiteness and white supremacy. That is, it was an education in how to avoid wrestling with real questions of the systematic and structural power and privilege that white people have by virtue of our whiteness, of thinking we are white people. More specifically, White People School was an education in guarding against what we now understand as "white fragility," that feeling of defensiveness that white people express when they are reminded of their participation in structures and processes that have created racial injustice and racial inequities and that go to the very heart of white identity.

In fairness, I must say that it does take some effort to navigate the world in the ways that White People School taught us to navigate it. There are lots of rules to learn and follow, lots of situations to analyze carefully so we can know what we're supposed to do. That is tiresome. It's not, of course, as bad as being systematically hunted by the police, for example. But this is why, I think, that white people who have attended White People School are enraged when they now hear that race is a problem, not of word choice, but one that is connected to whiteness and white identity itself; that we are still racist even if we perfectly heed the lessons of White People School; that what we need to do is not simply use words correctly but dismantle the very structures of power and privilege that make whiteness and white supremacy what they are – when White People School graduates that I grew up with hear these things, they get really angry. "But I did everything that these rules tell us to do," they say. "Why do you still think I'm a racist?" And then their next move, of course, is to attack the whole enterprise of White People School as fundamentally unjust for white people: "This is all just a bunch of political correctness nonsense," they say. "White people can't win for losing. I didn't create these injustices, and I'm not responsible for them." All of a sudden, we're the victims of political correctness.

That's where a lot of white people are these days. In fact, lots of white people are doubling-down on their whiteness, through, for example, the valorization of Confederate history. White people also double-down on their whiteness when they reject and disparage public health measures as infringements on our individual freedom, because white people think that we're invincible and that the world should accommodate itself to our convenience. White people are right that their identity is being threatened. But they're only right about that if they also understand that whiteness is an identity predicated on illusion, violence, exploitation, death, and destruction. And that's an identity we should *want* to get rid of.

So, what should we do? I think Paul's thinking in Romans may point in some helpful directions. The Letter to the Romans in many ways exemplifies Paul's mission to share the good news of God's redemptive work, first revealed in the experiences of the Jewish people, and now offered to the whole world and all of creation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul wants to put all human beings and all of creation on equal footing. Thus, he works to remove any suggestion that Jews are somehow exclusive recipients of God's redemptive purposes. He does this in lots of different ways. One way is to note how deeply implicated all of us are in sin and evil, and how Jewish law is an insufficient remedy for this situation. "… all," Paul writes, "both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (3:9). And in our reading for today, Paul tells us that sin is so pervasive, that he finds himself doing the very things he hates, rather than the things he wants to do. Paul then says that if it were he who is doing these bad things, then the law would be valid,

since the law condemns persons for doing bad things. But, Paul argues, it is in fact *not* he who is doing what he does not want to do. Rather, it is, Paul says, "sin that dwells within me" that causes him to act in ways he does not want to act. The problem with the law, Paul is saying, is that the law is a remedy for the wrong problem. The situation is actually far worse than the law contemplates.

So, when we do bad things, it is because of the evil within that, as Paul says, "lies close at hand." What then is to be done? Paul asks: "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" The answer for Paul is the new and abundant life that arises in us through faith in the resurrecting power of Jesus Christ. And that new life, Paul argues, provides a certain kind of freedom – the freedom to live fully into life unencumbered by sin, pain, brokenness, and missteps of the past. "For freedom," Paul writes famously in Galatians, "Christ has set us free." We don't have the freedom to do whatever we want. But we *do* have the freedom to receive the gift of life that God offers through Jesus Christ. We also have the freedom to fail at living that life and to still be loved by God. We have the freedom, in other words, to be imperfect.

Let me be clear that there are problems with Paul's theology – not least, in my view, his association of the body with sin and death and the soul with life and redemption. We could spend a lot of time talking about why these are problems. Leaving all of that aide for now, what I do deeply appreciate about Paul is his commitment to the belief that God wants more than anything else for God's creation to have life and to have it abundantly. We find ourselves caught up in all manner of sin and brokenness. We make some of that sin and brokenness for ourselves through our own poor choices. But some forms of sin and brokenness *choose us*. That's true, in a way, of our whiteness and our white supremacy. No one of us single-handedly created whiteness and white supremacy; they chose us, and our active participation in them only reinforces their grip on us. Whiteness gets its claws on us in lots of different ways. White People School is just one of those ways. These evils are very much alive, and they are lodged deep within us. But they are *not*, Paul tells us, who we really are, nor are they who God intends for us to be.

I think that white people fear that if they dismantle their whiteness all the way down to the deepest levels of their being, they might discover that nothing remains. And then we, who think we are white, will not recognize ourselves. That *is* scary. But the Good News is that the freedom of new life that we have in Christ ensures that when we dismantle our deepest racist identities and impulses, there *is* something else there. There is life and purpose oriented around love of God and neighbor. There is life in *life together* with God, neighbor, and creation – in shared life with others whose experiences resonate with but also differ from our own. We belong to God, and we belong to one another. That is who we are made to

be. To be sure, living into the life that God intends for us isn't easy work. It is indeed a kind of burden. But as our Gospel passage for today tells us: Jesus' yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

I know this congregation has been exploring different ways of dismantling whiteness. I want to encourage all of us to consider how we might take risks in these endeavors – risks that reflect our confidence that there is life within us underneath our whiteness. Presbyterians have the tendency to think that there is no social problem that a really great book club can't solve. Don't get me wrong – reading and educating ourselves about issues of whiteness and racial justice are important first steps. But they can also serve, I think, to keep this conversation on the level of interesting ideas rather than transformative self- and community-work. And so I ask you: Where does White People School, whatever that experience was for you, still live in your deepest impulses, in your everyday orientation to the world, in your aspirations, and in your very sense of who you are? Where does White People School inform the ways that you spend your time, energy, and your money? Where does White People School get in the way of your willingness to stand and work in solidarity with vulnerable and marginalized communities? Where does it prevent you from listening deeply and carefully to members of these communities rather than speaking for them? And how does your training in White People School hinder you from engaging in the work of dismantling whiteness in risky ways – risky in the sense that you might actually lose your life and find a more abundant one in the process? Jesus tells us that "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." What does the promise of abundant life look like apart from whiteness? I'm not sure any of us really knows. But I'm hopeful that God will bless our continuing journey towards life abundant.