

PRIVILEGE, INTERSECTIONALITY, & JUSTICE-IN-COMMUNITY

by *Eric Van Giessen* as presented at the 2017 Ontario Generous Space Retreat

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As some of you know by know, I mostly work behind the scenes to try to make sure that all the structures that hold the day to day workings of the organization together to do their jobs properly. As you may gander from that set of tasks, speaking in front of large crowds is quite terrifying for me - so I ask you to please bear with me this evening as I try to share some thoughts with you.

My goal tonight is to spend a bit of time for those of us who were at last year's retreat to remember and renew our zeal or passion for intersectionality. For those of you who were unable to join us, my hope is to catch you up a bit and invite you into this journey we're on as a community, with Jesus as our guide, in pursuit of humility and justice.

Before I say anything else I want to name the fact that I'm a white, cisgender, able-bodied, queer-identified man, and it's important for me to acknowledge that I enter this conversation with many various privileges that are bestowed upon me because of those identifiers. I also carry with me into this presentation an incredible amount of anxiety, not solely because you're all staring at me, but because I'm incredibly passionate about the centrality of intersectional justice and too many people who look and identify like me have f****d up in the midst of this conversation. I pray that some piece of our time together tonight will teach us to love each other better.

Many of us in this room have experienced what it is like to feel other-ed or treated as a 'them' in our Church communities and relationships. You may have had your voice silenced, your existence denied, your story tokenized, your integrity questioned, your relationships deemed illegitimate, or your belovedness debated because of your sexuality or gender identity/ expression...and my hope is that this weekend some of the weight of that marginalization has been lifted and that you may have had moments where your voice has been heard, your existence celebrated, your story shared, your integrity assumed, your relationships deepened and your belovedness more intimately woven into who you are as an LGBTQ+ person.

As Wendy introduced for us yesterday, when we speak about justice, we are speaking about dismantling the structures, cultural norms, and inter-personal behaviours that bestow advantages upon certain individuals simply due to their membership in dominant groups. These socially and culturally given advantages in turn disadvantage or oppress groups and people who do not meet social expectation. In the oversimplified example of sexual difference and the Church, these structures might be policies which prevent LGBTQ+ individuals from holding

leadership positions, these cultural norms might be the dominance of heterosexual nuclear family stories in sermons, and these interpersonal behaviours might be a joke that subtly undercuts the legitimacy of queer relationships.

These structures, cultural norms, and interpersonal moments work together to advantage or privilege cis-heterosexual individuals in Christian spaces. Cis-straight congregants rarely have to think about their sexuality let alone incorporate it into the defence of their leadership ability. Sermon allegories that highlight people who look and act and identify like them means that they don't need to labour to identify where they fit in the story, and the legitimacy of their relationships is celebrated at the front of the Church—often as the highest expression of human love—rather than as the butt of a joke.

Why am I telling you about something you already know? Well, in order to understand intersectionality, we have to be able to recognize privilege—to recognize the ways that power and advantage exist on multiples levels within all of our social spaces. Intersectionality is the belief that the oppression that we experience as LGBTQ+ people in the church is intimately, inescapably interlinked with all forms of oppression that exist within our society and that one story of oppression cannot be solved without overturning a system that links up our social and political advantages to our membership in particular dominant groups. Intersectionality calls us to acknowledge that along different axis we are all both privileged and dis-privileged.

Practically, what this means is that if we are not recognizing, and subverting privilege and oppression within our own community we cannot possibly hope to be agents of justice in society at large, or in the churches we might return to. If we want to effectively end homophobia and homonegativity in the church, we must also work toward ending transphobic, racist, ableist, and patriarchal structures, cultural norms, and interpersonal behaviours. If Generous Space Ministries is to truly take up our commitment to justice, we cannot limit our conversations to the white, cisgender, able-bodied, gay male experience.

A few weeks ago, I was went out for lunch with my friend Winnie and we were having a conversation about racism within the Generous Space community. Somewhere amidst this conversation, I casually mentioned that sometimes I feel guilty for asking the Generous Space community to engage in conversations about race and intersectionality. Winnie, in her gracious patience, looked at me and asked, “Why?” Suddenly, I realized that in my off-handed comment I had mindlessly prioritized the white, cis, able-bodied, mono-sexual experience of Generous Space. By framing racism and intersectionality as a ‘side’ conversation, I was asking Winnie to compartmentalize her identity...to prioritize part of her experience as a bisexual, female, person-of-colour so as not to ‘complicate’ the conversation.

If we are to truly be a community that insists that our WHOLE selves are beloved by God, and if I believe that everyone in this room is included in that statement...if we want to live out our

declaration of one another's belovedness in a fleshy, actualized way then I MUST actively work to create space for conversations about racism, about ableism, about transphobia, about biphobia, about patriarchy, about classism alongside of my conversations about homophobia in the church.

Wendy told us yesterday that the Generous Space value of mutuality is animated by the question "Is everyone in our community empowered to make a difference?" She mentioned that part of mutuality is sharing power and that one of the challenging nuances of this, is knowing when to stand up and insist that my voice and experiences need more space, and when to take a step back so that we can thoughtfully listen and make space for another person's experience. I would suggest one of the ways we navigate this is through recognizing our own privilege, and the power those privileges give us in particular spaces and then working towards giving the greatest honour to the voices of those who are most often silenced in our midst. Practically, for those of us who are white, cis, able-bodied men, taking up mutuality in this community means that we are quick to listen and slow to speak - in non-Christian spaces, I might say that it's often our role to show up, to shut up, and listen well (Mia McKenzie 2014).

While some of you may be intuitively connecting what I'm talking about with scripture, let me highlight some passages. I invite you reflect on how these might prompt us toward recognition of our own privilege and guide how power is shared in our communities:

Philippians 2: 2-4 — Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interest but each of you to the interests of others.

1 Corinthians 12: 24b-28 — God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

Romans 12: 9-16 — Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. [another generous space value]

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not think you are superior.

Jesus himself was continuously giving others more honour than himself, and in these letters to the early church we see an emphasis on unity, humility, and honouring the other. Now, too often have these passages been used to encourage peace at the expense of those who come into conflict with the status quo. Too often honouring the other means that those who are marginalized need to repress their anger, or downplay their experiences of being oppressed in the church or in our community. Some of us may have come up against this when raising the topic of LGBTQ+ inclusion, and we're told that we're instigating division - disturbing the peace. A commitment to humility, hospitality, mutuality and justice means that when someone who is differently marginalized than myself tells me they are being silenced, I must labour hard to change my behaviour, the cultural norms of my community and its structures such that the way I show up isn't a barrier to another person's flourishing.

When speaking about oppression, it is vital that we centre the voices of those who are experiencing that oppression. So why is this cis white able-bodied guy talking for so long. For one, it's important that the Generous Space Staff as represented by me at this moment, affirm and reaffirm our commitment to intersectional justice. It also because it is those of us, such as myself, who are culpable in oppression, and who are given unearned privilege in our communities that need to labour to change our behaviour, deconstruct unjust systems of power in our communities, refuse to reproduce our privilege in our spaces, and challenge the worldview that dominant groups are expected to adhere to. Lastly, when asked, we need to be willing to share the burden of education.

So this presentation is a particularly strong call for the white, cis-gendered, straight passing, able-bodied men in the room to recognize our privilege, and to refuse to reproduce it in our interactions. This means adopting a posture of humility where we are quick to listen and slow to speak, it means thoughtfully speaking out against racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and homophobia when confronted with it - it means being traitorous to the dominant groups for which we have membership and giving greater honour to the people in our community who are too seldom honoured due to their skin colour, their gender identity or expression, their economic background, their education, their physical ability, their mental health, etc.

I'm not going to conclude more than what I have just done because it is vital that this conversation continues, that we continuously listen and reflect and act on how we can do better at living out our values in this community regarding intersecting identities and dismantling oppression within our spaces. As a staff that holds a lot of privilege, we invite continuing conversation and exploration on how we can move forward in this pursuit of intersectional justice and community.

We're going to do an activity now together that will help us to recognize the different types of privileges, rights, and expectations that we experience. If I can get one or two people to help me hand out two of these sheets of paper to each group. This activity can often impact people quite

differently depending on your own identity, so I encourage you to speak with compassion, and listen well. Then we'll come back and reflect.

Intersectional Privilege For Sale Exercise: Please open or print the Privilege for Sale PDF document.

References:

McKenzie, Mia. (2014) *Black Girl Dangerous on Race, Queerness, Class and Gender*. BGD Press, Inc.