

Journeys

February 14, 2018

When I moved to Louisville to work for Presbyterian World Mission, I listened to the radio as I drove to and from work. The traffic reports were meaningless because I didn't know the street names or highway numbers. Little by little, however, my familiarity with the city grew, and I used those traffic reports to navigate a quicker route.

The same has happened with my move to Milwaukee. As I drive to the Presbytery Office, I'm starting to recognize bottlenecks that will adversely affect my drive. Still, much is unfamiliar. For instance, I don't know what route takes me from "the Q to the Zoo," but I know it's usually at least 30 minutes in the morning. The learning process is slow, but it's coming along.

This past week though I've intentionally started the "unlearning" process. Through April, I will be taking a course at the local YWCA called "Unlearning Racism: Tools for Action." The course covers the historical roots of racism in the Milwaukee area, resources enabling us to take action against racism in our communities, and encouragement to advocate for change.

Racism is a learned response. We aren't born with a belief that one group is better than another because of skin tone. As we become adults, that changes due to the culture around us. Most of us don't feel racist, and we don't see the need to unlearn something we don't feel. But, racism is more than personal animus toward people of another color.

For me, personally, I want to understand better how I (as an Anglo) have contributed to subtle systems of racial injustice. If you read [Waking Up White](#) by Debby Irving, you might have been struck by the patterns of discrimination embedded in our government at every level, in our schools, and in our healthcare system. A policy or practice that seems innocuous can have a disproportionately negative effect on racial-ethnic groups. Without awareness and advocacy, racism goes unnamed and unchecked.

One of our leaders warned that these classes over the succeeding weeks would make us feel uncomfortable. "We're not doing our job if you don't feel uncomfortable."

Today marks the start of our Lenten journey. Through prayer, fasting, and giving, we focus on the Christ, in the forty days leading to his death. It's not meant to be comfortable either. Rather than give up a favorite food, I've decided to embark on a Lenten practice of awareness about racial injustice. I want to pay attention, so that I can recognize racism around me. I want to be told when I'm abusing or perpetuating the privilege given to me by the fortuity of being born white. I want to ask hard questions.

It will be uncomfortable, and I will make mistakes in the "unlearning" process. But, hopefully, this process will make Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, for me and for us, all the more prized.