

Task Force on Theology of Social Justice Advocacy
October 11, 2019
Meeting notes

Meeting via Zoom Teleconference Call

Present: Sarah Lawton, Dora Mbuwayesango, Reuben Varghese, Lallie Lloyd, Prince Singh, Ruth Frey, Susanne Watson-Epting

Absent: Anne Hodges-Copple, Brant Lee, Jose Rodriguez, Andrew Dietsche

Reuben opened our online community gathering with prayer. We were also asked to remember Anne's mother in our prayers, along with Prince's mother Ida, who are both ill.

We were blessed to have Prince share some of his story and the lens that deeply informs his theology of social justice advocacy.

Prince has been the bishop of the Diocese of Rochester for 11 years. Originally, he is from Madras in South India (now known as Chennai). He is one of two children. His father was an economics professor who wrote books (and published his first when he was around 30 years old). His mother was a social worker at the Y, working primarily with women, providing basic education, and helping with functional literacy.

His father left them when Prince was 11. Prince felt as if the bottom had dropped out and felt lost and alienated. But he also realized that in giving people certain tools, one could make a difference in their lives.

Prince engaged in the church as a young person and the church became his family. (This was the Church of South India. Prince explained that this consists of a coming together of Anglican, Presbyterian, Reformed, and British Methodist Churches, that was 29 years in the making. It came into being in 1947, a unified Church rather than many denominations.)

Prince had decided to study public administration, but it was when he was about to take his police force exams that he sensed a call to seminary and changed his vocational pursuit.

He shared with us that his first encounters with advocacy were as a priest, posted to very rural areas. This had much to do with what became his theological lens, one he describes having to do with purity and pollution. This relates directly to the caste system. (In that system, Brahmins (priests) are the highest, then Kshatriya (warriors), then Vaishya (traders/business people), then Shudra (laborers and servants).

The castes are built on a purity system. The Dalits (untouchables) are below all the others and represent pollution to the other castes.

But in Prince's first pastorate, he had 14 congregations (and much lay leadership!), and they were primarily in the colonies, where Dalits lived. In fact, he shared that Dalits are primarily the community that follows Christianity. To get to the small colonies in which the Dalits live, one often must go through the main village, so it is possible to see who is coming and going. Because it is believed that Dalits pollute both people and places, they are terribly abused. One will go be polluted by Dalits except in cases of rape (because it is acceptable to rape Dalit women.)

Prince said that the church became an advocate simply by virtue of its location in the Dalit community. The presence of the church became both a political and pastoral statement.

We learned that rather than reinforcing the purity/pollution dichotomy, the Gospel disrupted that narrative for Dalits. It was a place for them to reclaim their humanity. For many it was the first book they were able to read (because they were not allowed books and reading). In reading and hearing the Gospel, Dalits realized there was no pollution in themselves.

Prince shared a powerful story about how important this new narrative and faith were to the Dalits where he was serving.

He told us that he would usually suggest a private baptism for those who wanted to be baptized. This, because if Dalits were known to become Christians, they would lose their government subsidies, and this would be a tremendous sacrifice. This was one way the government could prevent mass conversions.

However, one day he was approached by many Dalits (about 100) who wanted a public baptism. They wanted the world to see that they were not polluted anymore. They were all baptized in a tent by a bus stand, and that power of public witness provided agency for them, provided a sense of their own humanity in a public place. It was not without great cost for some of them, including a gentleman whose relatives burned his home to the ground.

And so, Prince reflected, in the 25 years that he has been here in the United States, that purity and pollution lens has stayed with him. He believes it is part of every culture. It is a part of our culture here as we see through the centuries of systemic racism. Prince is suspicious of any system that sustain or contribute to that internalized pollution.

Some reflections on what we heard . . .

Ruth observed a difference between how the Gospel is seen and heard between cultures. For example, it is embraced by Dalits (and other people who are oppressed) as a liberating text. Is that so among people of greater privilege? Is the message of love within the whole Body of Christ subdued or quashed?

Prince observes that immigrant communities are somewhat similar here as the Dalits. And he reminded us that Jesus died outside the city as a troublemaker because he was asking for justice.

Sarah was taken with the special separation in India and observed that it happens where we are as well. In the United States we are separated, geographically and spatially by race and class. How we're located creates different theologies. The power of the Dalit theology comes from community. TEC is an establishment church where agency needs to come from those most marginalized.

Lallie shared that she was especially touched by the courage of the Dalits and their public witness, and observed that their courage emanated from the liberative love of God. She wondered at what must be so threatening to the government about unity, that they would take away subsidies to prevent "mass conversions." She also shared how she has come to work personally with her internalized white supremacy.

Reuben commented on the importance of liberation from human systems that privilege some and disadvantage others. He also shared his own struggle with our church and its privilege, and its tendency to suggest that "we've arrived," when we do some small things for justice, when in fact we can be/are complicit in systems that perpetuate inequality.

Guy observed that, once again, we were dealing with race and that as we talk about culture and privilege, we seem always to return to race. He suggests that there is "white supremacy pollution" in our church and talked about macro-aggressions. He shared his feeling that the privileged co-opt the biblical narrative that addresses transformation and justice and that the "white Jesus" is still everywhere. He suggests that must deconstruct and reconstruct our power structure.

Dora shared that she was moved by Prince's story and that, as an African woman, now living in the United States she resonated deeply with it. She observed that Western Christianity is a very capitalistic Christianity, where money is more valued than people.

Sarah then reminded us of our in-person meeting in April (20-22), probably in Baltimore. Our tasks for our next meeting:

Story sharing – to be determined

Note taking – Lallie

Prayer leading – Susanne

Reuben graciously closed us with prayer.