

Affirming Minute for January 21, 2018

Today's affirming minute returns to the concept of privilege. It is based on an article written by Derek Penwell for a website called "The Good Men Project". Penwell first poses the question, "Should I feel guilty about my white male privilege?"

Penwell writes, "Privilege is a set of benefits conferred on you without your consent." We don't get to choose where we are born, who our parents are, our first language, our gender identity, our sexual orientation, our eye colour or our height. We don't control any of these factors so feeling apologetic or guilty is unproductive.

What is helpful is to look at our society through the eyes of our neighbours, to remember that life is not the same for all. Most of us don't have to think twice when we venture out each day to go about our daily business.

Coming from an English-speaking middle class Canadian family, I was given the opportunity to complete high school, to attend university to get a degree and to find a good paying job. At the time I didn't appreciate how relatively easy it was. Now I see how difficult it is for people from disadvantaged or marginalized communities to achieve these same goals. Resources and supports are lacking.

I have never experienced prejudice because of my accent, my skin colour or my clothing. I have never been threatened or told to return to my country of origin. I have never been followed around a store by security assuming I would shoplift.

I have always had a comfortable home, nutritious food and loving family members. I haven't had to worry about being evicted, or where my next meal was coming from, or any other poverty-related issue.

I have never been made to feel ashamed about who I am. I have not had to endure looks of disgust or hurtful comments about my gender identity or sexual orientation. I have felt safe to be myself at work and out in public.

Derek Penwell concludes his article by stating, "A better question to ask ourselves is, 'Having concluded that I have these advantages, how will I use them to try to create a world in which everyone shares them with me?'"

"We need to challenge assumptions about who is capable and competent, to help provide access to those who don't yet enjoy it. We also need to confront the prejudices of race, gender identity and expression, ability and sexual orientation that our culture takes for granted."

May we at St. Martin's continue to work for justice, safety and opportunity for all.