

Feeding Sheep: What Peter (and Jesus) Can Teach Us About Getting Past White Guilt, Resentment, Defensiveness, and Immobilization

Amanda Udis-Kessler, March 27, 2021; updated June 26, 2021

After 30 years of trying, failing, and trying again to work against white supremacy as a white person, I've learned three things. First, I no longer make the same egregious, humiliating mistakes I used to make in my interactions with members of BIPOC (Black/Indigenous/People of Color) communities. Second, I make new, egregious humiliating mistakes in those interactions on a regular basis. Third, I now know how to apologize for them, repair relationships when needed, pick myself up, laugh at myself, and get back to work. Oh, and a fourth thing: more egregious, humiliating mistakes are undoubtedly yet to come. And I will deal with them when they do.

Recently, I mentioned my sacred music website to an African American diversity leader in an East Coast UCC conference. Since I was fairly sure he was actually going to visit the website, I made a point of saying that I write some music in gospel and other African American idioms and that I welcomed his feedback on whether that was acceptable given the specifics of how I addressed the issue on the website. He wrote back that my website mostly handled the issue well but that he didn't understand why all my gospel music was sung by white people; would I please invite some African American people to sing it? Well, that was (a) on target and (b) humiliating.

I also recently learned that the video of one of my worship pieces was, if not overtly racist, disturbingly white and problematic in some other ways as well. I learned this from someone I trust a great deal and I had to confront the fact that I had felt "off" about this video without having articulated why. Similarly on target; similarly humiliating. I really should know better by now. I should have trusted my instinct about this video but I did not want to upset the (white) woman who had made the video for free and who is a friend.

You're probably familiar with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grieving; I sometimes think there are at least eleven stages of how white people deal with the reality of white supremacy. We don't move through them neatly and we can zigzag back and forth among them with enough speed to give us emotional whiplash. As I've experienced them, they are (1) denial, (2) resistance, (3) discomfort, (4) defensiveness and resentment, (5) guilt, (6) fear, (7) paralysis or immobilization, (8) anger, (9) sadness, (10) resignation, and (11) commitment to being part of the solution. We can't necessarily control which of them we feel at a given time, but only the last two are really useful for us in our work against racism; sadness can be useful as well but only if it is not debilitating. So how can we jettison the guilt? How can we release defensiveness and resentment? How can we avoid becoming immobilized when the magnitude of white supremacy and the resistance of so many others to working against it become clear?

Here's an interesting answer from the Gospel according to John, or at least a story that suggests an answer. Peter is interacting with the resurrected Jesus (John 21:15-17; NRSV):

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him,

‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’”

What on earth is this passage about? Well, maybe it has something to do with the following passage that takes place earlier in the story (John 18:17, 25-27; NRSV):

“The woman said to Peter, ‘You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?’ He said, ‘I am not.’...Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, ‘You are not also one of his disciples, are you?’ He denied it and said, ‘I am not.’ One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, ‘Did I not see you in the garden with him?’ Again, Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.”

Peter denies Jesus three times. Regardless of whether this story is historically accurate, it is about the most egregious, humiliating mistake Peter could have made short of actually betraying Jesus. Arguably, it was in fact a kind of betrayal. I imagine Peter falling on his knees and weeping after the rooster crowed. I imagine him flushed with shame and humiliation, defensive, guilt-ridden. Ready to quit this whole crazy movement, maybe wondering why he ever got involved in the first place.

And yet history tells us that Peter became one of the most energetic leaders of the Jesus movement. Something allowed him to move past the shame, humiliation, defensiveness, and guilt; something allowed him to move forward into a future of serving the one he had denied for the rest of his life and even to give his life for the movement. We don’t know exactly what that something was, but the story of the resurrected Jesus telling Peter to feed and tend his sheep is instructive – not least, as an opportunity for we who are white and struggling with guilt or defensiveness or immobilization that makes it harder for us to work against racism effectively.

Jesus, one presumes, could have been angry at Peter for denying him. But that is not what we see in this breakfast scene. Jesus does not berate Peter or chastise or shame him. Jesus does not tell Peter to take a long walk off a short pier or imply that he is inadequate or worthless or say that he has flunked apostledom. Instead, Jesus asks a question and makes a request – the same question and request three times, once for each denial.

Jesus asks Peter: “Do you love me?” Not “Why did you deny me?” Not “What on earth were you thinking?” Not “How many more times do I have to tolerate your screwups?” Only: “Do you love me?”

When Peter affirms that he loves Jesus, Jesus does not say, “You hypocrite! You don’t love me, you denied me to save your own sorry skin!” Jesus does not say, “Wow, if that’s love I think I’ll stick with hatred since at least I know who my enemies are.” Jesus instead tells Peter to feed Jesus’s lambs and tend his sheep.

Jesus doesn't tell Peter how to feel (or how to process his feelings). He doesn't ask for a confession or penitence. He simply tells him what to do moving forward. Peter is to embody (incarnate) his love for Jesus by taking care of the poor, the dispossessed, the lost and the lonely and the least. He is, to borrow from my antiracist confessional psalm "Oh, My Shepherd," to become a shepherd of his very own. And he does, and his doing so is part of a larger story that has led to us reading this story today and asking what it means to us.

I find this story deeply reassuring. It doesn't mean that my egregious, humiliating mistakes are magically turned into something good; they are not. But it does mean that I am more than those mistakes. It means that I always have a way forward. It means that all the guilt or shame or defensiveness I feel as a white person in a white supremacist society is not the point. It cannot possibly hold a candle to the guilt, shame, and defensiveness that Peter must have felt. And yet we see how that story ended.

Our stories can, in their own ways, be like Peter's story. We are free, invited, even called, to do whatever personal work we need to do to release the negative feelings that are keeping us from feeding lambs and tending sheep. Jesus did not appear to care whether Peter felt guilty or ashamed or immobilized. That wasn't relevant to the situation at hand. What Jesus cared about was whether Peter was going to co-create the sacred realm that Jesus had envisioned. It's hard to build the Beloved Community if you are resentful, shame-filled, immobilized, and guilt-ridden. It would have been hard for Peter and it's certainly hard for us.

So, what do we do about our guilt or shame or defensiveness? We do the emotional and spiritual work of letting it go. It doesn't serve us. It certainly doesn't serve people from BIPOC communities. And therefore, it doesn't serve Jesus's vision of what the world could and should be.

How do we do that work? That's up to each of us to figure out. Our society has worked overtime to make us racially fragile: defensive, resentful, guilt-ridden, shame-filled, and immobilized. Fortunately, there are many ways to approach the work of healing. The books *My Grandmother's Hands* and *Mindful of Race* represent one way to start this work; there are also more explicitly Christian approaches to this work. Any way we approach it, our goal is to move from fragility to resilience.

The difficult emotional responses mentioned above are natural. They are, given our culture, overdetermined in fact. But if they are the beginning of the story, they do not need to be the end of it. They weren't the end of the story for Peter; in fact, in a way they were the beginning of his story. Our white guilt, our white shame, our white defensiveness can be the beginning for us as well, a beginning that opens into an ending we can't see yet but that will involve, I suspect, an unbelievable amount of love.

After I heard back from the East Coast UCC diversity leader, I immediately contacted an African American college friend, an opera singer, asked her to look over my website, and offered to pay her to record some of the African American-inspired music. She agreed to review the website. Contacting her about this was terrifying and she could have said no. Graciously, she was entirely

positive. Whatever happens, I am relieved to have done the right thing and am committed to looking for other musicians over time.

After I received the constructive feedback about the video of my song, I contacted my white friend who had made the video. I asked her to address the areas of concern in a way that was respectful and not likely to trigger her own racial shame. She made the changes without fuss or resistance, and the improved video is now on YouTube and my website.

And as for all of the mistakes I have yet to make and all the guilt I have yet to feel, those are just more opportunities to keep practicing, more chances to feed lambs, tend sheep, and co-create the Beloved Community with other flawed, beautiful people. For which I give thanks with all my heart.

I would love to hear your thoughts, questions, objections, and other responses to this essay. Please contact me at amanda@amandaudiskessler.com if you wish.