Good News for the Privileged

Co-missioners,

The gap between rich and poor gets ever wider in the United States—in the world as a whole, for that matter. God has much to say about this, also through people who can’t imagine they’re speaking for him.

Today Carol Braun wrestles with the dilemma this poses for someone situated as she is in a system that caters to the rich. Most Americans are so situated, including those who are sure

they’re not. Ask anyone who woke up in Haiti this morning. May Carol’s reflections prove useful for us all.

A quick reminder that the next Crossings gathering is in the works—a two-day seminar set for January 23-25 with options to attend virtually or in-person. Mary Hinkle Shore, Kit Kleinhans, and Robin Lütjohann will anchor an extended reflection on “The Promising Community.” We hope we’ll see you.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

Good News for the Privileged

by Carol Braun

For all my working life, I’ve taught physics and math to high school students at elite, expensive private schools. My relationship with that work bears some resemblance to my relationship with steaks and burgers: I love them, but deep down I know that I avoid thinking through their ethical implications.

This avoidance has gotten harder in recent years as discussions of inequality in American education have knocked more insistently on the door of my cloistered teaching life. Elite private schools, like many other institutions, have been striving lately to atone for past injustices and do better with diversity, equity, and inclusion. In so doing, they face uncomfortable questions about their very existence—questions I find myself finally, reluctantly poking at, both as a teacher and as a Christian.

I bumped up against some of those questions a few months ago when I read Caitlin Flanagan's bluntly titled cover story, "Private Schools are Indefensible," from the April 2021 issue of The Atlantic. Though the title refers simply to "private schools," the piece focuses on the very expensive ones. (Not, say, parochial schools charging modest tuition and doing their best to serve needy kids in their neighborhoods.) Flanagan herself taught at and later sent her sons to an elite, expensive private school. As she sees it, "what makes

these schools truly ludicrous is their recent insistence that they are engines of equity and even 'inclusivity.' A $50,000-a-year school can't be anything but a very expensive consumer product for the rich. If these schools really care about equity, all they need to do is get a chain and a padlock and close up shop."

I came across a similar claim in an insightful piece of commentary by David J. Ferrero from August 2020 in the online magazine Aero. Like Flanagan, he also worked for a while at an expensive prep school and loved it. He writes, "If private school leaders truly adhered to the principles of social justice as understood by those of us in state-funded education, they would voluntarily and permanently shut down en masse, forcing families to take their children and social capital back into government-run schools."

These arguments—grounded in justice and care for the least advantaged among us—resonate with my Christian understanding of the world. In her cover story Flanagan asks, “Shouldn’t the schools that serve poor children be the very best schools we have?” And it’s hard to fathom any answer but yes, of course. Jesus identifies righteousness with acts of service, love, and care for “the least” (Matt. 25:40) among us, and he embodies that righteousness himself. How can I, a Christian, justify spending my time and talents serving not the least of those among whom I live, but the most privileged?

These are hard questions for me to approach honestly. I feel at home in such schools. I loved attending one, and I’ve loved teaching at them. I’ve benefitted immensely from them—as a student, in the quality of my education; and now, as a teacher, in the intellectual energy and devotion to high standards of learning among my students and colleagues. Can I ever let myself conclude that the path I’m on is indefensible? That the schools whose students I cherish and specialize in teaching should close and redistribute their resources to those most in need? That I should quit my job, train myself up for a new one as a public-school teacher? A job that, depending on the school I serve, may be much harder, and perhaps less intellectually rewarding, than my current work? A job I may be worse at? Frankly, I doubt my ability to see these things clearly, when I have so much comfort and joy at stake, and so much of my sense of self.

Here I’m reminded of the rich young man asking Jesus what good deed he must do to have eternal life, who, on hearing Jesus’ answer, “went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (Matt. 19:22).

Though I’m loathe to admit it, any enjoyment of the benefits of exclusive schools comes at someone else’s expense. Even when diversity initiatives and financial aid create an aura of

meritocracy, space is limited. There are always talented students who could thrive in such schools but are not given the chance to attend. This point is explored by the sociologist Shamus Rahman Khan in Privilege, his 2011 ethnographic study of St. Paul's School, a prestigious boarding school in Concord, New Hampshire. By his account, most students at the school speak of their and their classmates' places there as having been earned through talent and hard work. They are, after all, the few who survived the cutthroat application process, and they see a relatively diverse student body around them. Khan notes one exception to this sense of earning one's place: "In conversations with non-white students

about their lives before St. Paul's, I was startled by one consistency: they did not frame themselves as exceptions—as the smartest kids in their [presecondary] school. In fact, they often spoke of others like them from home, other boys and girls who were equivalent to them, who perhaps deserved to be at St. Paul's just as much" (Khan, 113).

This unfairness to the students excluded by exclusive schools also shows up in a riveting episode of This American Life called "Three Miles." In it, Chana Joffe-Walt reports on the experiences of a few outstanding students who attended a poor school in the Bronx and then visited an elite prep school just three miles away and saw what they'd been missing. Their reactions were varied and included total outrage.

In his commentary in Aero, Ferrero suggests that elite private schools might do better by their students and the outside world if they would teach their charges to recognize the privilege inherent in attending such a school. The students could be taught to acknowledge their privilege as a desirable but unearned benefit in an unjust world, and to accept it as coming with a solemn responsibility to make good use of it to serve the

world around them. (Ferrero cites Jesus' words from Luke 12:48: "To whom much is given, much is required.") I find something to admire in this approach, with its emphasis on humility and service. Still, I feel the stark disparity between that incomplete striving toward justice and the absolute standard—God's standard—which Jesus held up to the rich young man.

In some ways the part of the Bible that reminds me most of the world of expensive prep schools is the part where the mother of James and John asks for special treatment for her sons. Her pleading strikes a note that must be familiar in many a wood-paneled college counselor's office:

> Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to [Jesus] with her sons and, kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" (Matt. 20:20-22)

Jesus says it's not his benefit to grant, that it's set aside "for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father" (Matt. 20:23). The other ten disciples get angry when they hear about the brothers' request. Here too I recognize the furor of prep-school parents storming into the college counseling office, mad over rumors that other parents' kids are getting special treatment.

Jesus has an answer for them all: the old, earthly system of specialness and privilege and calling in favors isn't how things work in the kingdom that God is getting started through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. As Jesus explains,

> "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles [here I think of

> the college counselors, the admissions teams, the scholarship committees, the systems of educational privilege] lord it over them [here, perhaps, the desperate applicants and their parents], and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:25-28)

And does Jesus then send the privilege-seeking prep-school mom away in disgust, cutting her off for her impudence? No. He corrects rather than rejecting her, just as he does in the face of all the wrongheadedness his disciples foist upon him throughout their time together. There she still is at Jesus' burial, with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, one of the many women who "had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him" (Matt. 27:55). He keeps her with him, just as he does with the disciples who got sore when she tried to grab those privileges.

For better or worse, the schools of the wealthy and elite are where I find myself at home. These are my neighbors, the people I'm called to serve. They're as much in need of God's grace as anyone else. Though I'm not in a position to discuss that grace explicitly with them, I've been encouraged over the years to think of myself as a kind of undercover agent for God. I've learned to see the world through the lenses of God's law—written on all human hearts—and God's promise. I've glimpsed the beginnings of God's kingdom, and I can't help but let those glimpses inform the way I see and interact with the people around me. I bring a perspective that holds onto each one of them as an immeasurably precious child of God, no matter where they fit into human hierarchies which, in God's eyes, are doomed for the dustbin.

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