WHO'S WHITE TRASH?

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SERMON

J.D. Vance says he knew when he was growing up in the coal country of Kentucky and a city in southern Ohio that life was a struggle for the people he was raised among. In his recent book, Hillbilly Elegy, he tells of how his grandparents, the island of stability in his upbringing, scrambled to get by, while he saw little of his drug-addicted mother, and other family members careened through episodes of violence, joblessness, and abusive relationships.

These were people he loved – and still does – but he says they were also people uninclined to foster big dreams, knowing full well they were not likely to be realized.

Vance writes, though, from the perspective of one who escaped that orbit, who found his way into college, then Yale Law School, and now to a position at a Silicon Valley investment firm. But his tale is not a riff on self-congratulation or some up-by-the-bootstraps Horatio Alger myth. It is really a kind of lament for the sad straits in which a huge stratum of American culture finds itself.

He identifies this group, what he describes as his people, as millions of poor and working-class, white Americans of Scots-Irish descent, people scraping by who dispute the notion that many of us are learning to wrap our heads around, that white skin is a ticket to privileges that people of color in this country have no hope of achieving, because they have yet to experience anything like privilege in their own lives.

"To these folks," Vance writes, "poverty is the family tradition – their ancestors were laborers in the Southern slave economy, share croppers after that, coal miners after that, and machinists and millworkers in more recent times. Americans call them hillbillies, rednecks, or white trash."

They are people, he says, with "an intense sense of loyalty" and "a fierce dedication to family and country" but who also remain innately suspicious of outsiders and people different from themselves.

There are historic reasons we can cite for why all that J.D Vance describes should be so – and I want to explore some of them today – but in this chaotic election year when political candidates seem intent to double-down on all that divides us, I also want to take a moment to step away from the fray.

I want to invite us as people who covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person to open ourselves to complicated truths and reexamine some of our own preconceptions so that by careful, compassionate reflection we might in time help blaze a path to fully realizing a beloved community.

All ideas, it seems, have their zeitgeist, and this appears to be a year for "white trash." In addition to J.D. Vance's best-selling book, Hillbilly Elegy, we have Nancy Isenberg's comprehensive study, White Trash – The 400-Year-Old Untold History of Class in America. The title clues you in to the theme.

As you heard in the reading earlier, Isenberg argues that this habit of categorizing some human beings as "waste people" is a direct result of what she calls a "relentless class system" operating across this nation's history. What confuses this understanding, though, is a national myth from our founding days that, unlike the Europe that our forebears left behind, ours is a classless society.

It's a free country. Anyone can get ahead, right? All it takes is grit and gusto. And yet, we live in a society with clear evidence of vast economic inequalities. That means, Isenberg tells us, that "rationalizing economic inequality has been an unconscious part of the national credo; poverty has been naturalized, often seen as something beyond human control."

That's complicated, but it's important. So, let me tease out what I hear her saying. If we claim that there are no real class divisions in America, then when we see signs of them anyway – like poverty – we must look for other reasons to explain them. And across our history, those explanations pretty much come down to two factors: sloth and breeding. That is to say, the poor are simply lazy – "shiftless" was the term that was widely applied – or they are genetically deficient.

So, let's join Isenberg on some of the history behind all this. In her book, she carries us back to the time when the first settlements in America were planned. Leading planters in colonies like Jamestown, she notes, "had no illusion that they were creating a classless society." Rather, they recruited the poor as indentured servants to work the land, an arrangement that essentially reduced them to "debt slaves."

Indentured servants were also recruited to serve the Puritan colonies in New England. In both places, there was little economic mobility, and so even for those who completed their indenture, the only way up, often, was out, fleeing their bondage to make their own way, roaming and eventually settling in the countryside.

In much the South, Isenberg says, we see that trend most dramatically. A ruling planter class captured much of the land and took hold of the economy. Where land wasn't as productive, though, a different ethos evolved. Eastern North Carolina, with its sandy forests and swamps, was one of those. It became a harbor for some of the refugees, making it, in her words, "what we might call the first white trash colony."

Indeed, one official of the crown who toured the region dismissed it as what he called "Lubberland," a place of "lazy, bog-trotting vagrants" resistant to any form of government. Why they resisted is plain: government as they saw it largely served the interests of the wealthy, not their own.

As the frontier opened up and settlers encountered these country people, lore grew around them as either folksy sorts who welcomed weary travelers into their humble cabins, or as drunkards, brawlers and highwaymen.

As the Civil War approached, poor whites entered the debates over slavery, with northern abolitionists arguing that they were the victims of a slave economy that closed off the chance for them to advance.

Southern apologists, though, insisted that slavery elevated the status of poor whites by putting them over blacks, even if those whites complained that they had been drafted into a rich man's war that the poor were called to fight.

After the war, the anger of poor whites at policies that they felt helped blacks but left them languishing built a deep resentment that fueled the growth of the Klan and support for Jim Crow laws that marginalized and disenfranchised blacks.

Meanwhile, the economic shackles that left many poor whites scraping by as tenant farmers remained essentially unchanged well into the 20th Century.

For some time, the rag on the poor had been that they were simply deficient human beings, but after World War with the rise of the eugenics movement it took on a new edge.

As the notion gained currency that what were considered "unfit human traits" could be reduced with controlled breeding, reformers turned their eyes to the South, where lack of education funding and medical care left many illiterate and in poor health. Poor white women became the major target of a campaign to isolate, quarantine and sterilize people declared to "feebleminded" and "unfit for breeding." In North Carolina alone, for example, from 1929 to 1974 some 7,600 people – men and women, white and black – were medically sterilized.

It wasn't until Roosevelt's New Deal, Isenberg says, that class divisions were recognized not as preordained or somehow the fault of the poor, but the result of concrete, mutable conditions that government could alter.

She points to James Agee's famous Let Us Now Praise Famous Men as making a similar case. The poor, Agee insisted, "are not dull or slow-witted; they have merely internalized a kind of 'anesthesia' that numbs them the shame and insult of discomforts, insecurities, and inferiorities."

This takes our little tour of history takes us roughly to the 1950s and 1960s and the economic boom that did in many ways raise all boats. And along the way as conditions improved the label of red neck, white trash shifted from badge of shame to a cultural trope, with everything from the rise of Elvis Presley to the "Beverly Hillbillies" and "Gomer Pyle."

Around here, the trope for mountain people is different - the hillbilly with his coon dog, rifle and still. But the pressures are no less real. Ours is a region that has never known much wealth, where land-poor people hold tight to steep mountain acres that bring them no income, and employment is hard to find.

In an interview from 1988, Jim Wayne Miller, author of the poem you heard earlier, said he worries about the effect that this economic instability is having on people in this area.

"Poverty, or the perception of poverty, is often a matter of discrepancy. It's not a matter, inherently of what you have or don't have, but what you have compared to someone else. . . . If I had a nightmare, it would be that we will never be able to talk about the last taboo in this country, which isn't sex or death, but class. Class is the one thing we will not admit."

And yet its influence continues to intensify. As J.D. Vance notes, recent years have been less kind than previous decades, resulting in increasing numbers of people being pulled into economic instability. As income equality grows, many are losing ground, and once again pundits are putting the onus on struggling people to get themselves out of their messes without any hope of a hand up. Some make it anyway, like Vance cobbling together a series of fortunate circumstances; many others crash and burn into long-term unemployment, broken families, addictions and suicides.

At the same time, Vance says, he sees growing cynicism that nothing anyone can do will make a difference. The feeling is, he says, "We can't trust the evening news. We can't trust our politicians. Our universities, the gateway to a better life, are rigged against us. We can't get jobs."

Vance identifies himself as a conservative, but says the political right has done his people no favors by "fomenting the kind of detachment that has sapped the ambition of so many of my peers."

"What separates the successful from the unsuccessful are the expectations that they had for their own lives," he says, "yet the message of the right is increasingly: It's not your fault that you're a loser; it's the government's fault."

And it's plain how that old bait and switch strategy is affecting our politics. Simmering feelings of disillusion, disappointment and shame are being fanned into blind and feral hatred and rage. All that energy not only does terrible damage to our public life, but it conveniently distracts people from that apparent unmentionable in our politics: class.

Yet, there it is. As Nancy Isenberg puts it, "Class defines how real people live. They don't live the myth. They don't live the dream. Politics is always about more than what is stated . . . . Even when it's denied, politicians engage in class issues."

So, friends, let's stop fooling ourselves and name what we see, not as political partisans but as people committed to healing the brokenness of humankind, as people who find beauty and wonder, hope and possibility in every living soul.

Let us abandon the scorched earth of fearful speech and fevered imaginings, the sad hubris of wounded ego, of desperate, predatory disrespect.

A generation ago the New Dealers opened the door with the then-radical notion that class divisions were not preordained or somehow the fault of the poor, but the result of

concrete, mutable conditions that people working together could alter. It remains no less true today.

Growing up in his “hillbilly” surroundings, Vance says, there were any number of occasions when because of his own poor decisions he skirted disaster. But he says he was blessed to have family and friends who stuck by him and saw him through.

It’s another reminder that none of us is self-made. Each of us struggles and stumbles and sometimes needs to be called back to the original wholeness that is our birthright.

As in the story that Joy told us earlier, even in bleak and scary times, we are called to see the beauty, the vital energy and aliveness that is present in the world. Even when our lives seem “weathered and old-fashioned,” in Jim Wayne Miller’s words, we have the capacity to leave the heaviness that dogs us behind, let it perish, let it topple like a stone chimney and instead let us live into the lightness that dwells within us like a song.