

Have We Overcome?

14 January 2007

(*MLK birthday*)

Bible passage: **Galatians 3:28** (*The Message*)

“In Christ’s family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, since you are Christ’s family, then you are Abraham’s “descendant,” heirs according to the covenant promises.”

Sermon nugget: Prejudice and all the “isms” can be very divisive and destructive. How are we doing at overcoming the biases we have?

A few weeks ago, I happened to catch a segment of the Paula Zahn Show on CNN. It was entitled, “Skin Deep,” and the whole topic was around racism. One of the pieces of the show featured a town in Texas near Beaumont that had been known as a “sundown” town, meaning blacks were not allowed to stay there after sunset. Although the town officials insisted that the sundown laws were a thing of the past, a couple of the people who were interviewed still showed some pretty blatant signs of prejudice. For instance, one woman said something to the effect that she didn’t mind blacks living in their town; she just didn’t want to “mingle” with them. That’s where she drew the line.

Frankly, I was stunned that the kind of prejudice imbedded in her comments was still around today, much less spoken aloud to a TV camera! Forty years after Civil Rights, countless instances of positive experiences, and all kinds of laws banning discrimination, and there are still pockets of bias like that?

As I thought about it though, I don’t really know why I was so surprised, because I’m aware of the same kind of residue prejudice that exists when it comes to women. Believe me—it’s very alive and well in the church, of all places! When I was in seminary, I recall how surprised I was that this gender bias existed at all, but I was really surprised when, 10 years later as I was finishing my doctoral work on the role of women in the church, to learn that little had changed in the last 10+ years. I have a friend who’s doing her doctoral work right now, and she tells me that things today—more than a dozen years after my work—still haven’t changed!

It does seem that prejudice is alive and well in our world and society, even though there are many instances when we try to hide it, or at the very least, have learned to be polite and not spew out racial or sexual slurs. Nonetheless, it’s naive of any of us to think that prejudice is non-existent. There are many forms of discrimination and intolerance in America against one group of people or another—Hispanics, Muslims, Asians, gays, women, and the list goes on and on.

You see, the reason is that many of us, often without even being aware of it, harbor some stereotypes that can easily slip into the prejudice category. When I was doing my research for

this sermon, I did some checking online, and one of the things I found was something called “The Prejudice Map.” It notes what, according to Google, people in the world are known for, and it’s filled with example after example of stereotypes.

Let me share some of what it says. For instance, those living in Norway are known for their thriftiness, their openness and humor and their love of fish. Now, I ask you—do you really think that’s true of every single Norwegian? Those in Kenya are known for their fast running, and Canadians are known for their cultural diversity, their humility and kindness, for being tolerant and for liking their beer. According to this map, people in the United States are known for their strength, for their dislike of walking, for geniality and hospitality, for guarding their rights and for anti-Muslim politics. See what I mean? That’s the kind of stereotypical thinking that exists all too often without our even being aware of it.

I was interested in a story Malcolm Gladwell tells in his book *Blink*, about a law professor in Chicago named Ian Ayers who conducted a social experiment in the 1990’s around the issue of car buying. He gathered a team of 38 people—18 white men, 7 white women, 8 black women and 5 black men, and sent them all to 242 car dealerships to bargain their way to a new car. He made sure they were as similar as possible—in their mid-20’s, average appearance, dressed in conservative casual wear, college-educated young professionals. The results he got were stunning. White men received the best deals, while black men got the worst, with white women following the white men, and black women third in the results.

Blackwell noted that it would be possible to say that the experiment showed outright bigotry and sexism on the part of the salespersons, but that may too strong. Rather, he thinks that they, like most of us, have the tendency to make decisions on the spur of the moment. While those salespersons may well have had a strong conscious commitment to racial and gender equality, they were probably making their decision based on unconscious reactions. They were silently picking up on the most immediate and obvious fact about the car buyers—their sex and color, and sticking with that judgment even in the face of all manner of new and contradictory evidence.

I wonder how many of us do that without being aware of it? To my disappointment, I discovered that I do more of that than I wish I did. On the CNN web page with the Paula Zahn show synopsis, I found a link to a bias quiz, and I took it. There were lots of options for the grouping to choose on this “Implicit Association Test”—by age, sexuality, disability, skin tone, race, gender-career, Arab-Muslim, religion weight, and so on. I chose one that I thought I knew most about and did the gender-career one. Now, I don’t know how this little test works, but I came out very differently than I thought I would and wanted to! I’m not sure what that all means, except that within myself, and possibly within most of us, there’s some

seed of bias that been planted there without our knowing how or when.

Let's be sure we're all on the same page when we talk about bias and prejudice. One definition of the word is this: "an adverse judgment or opinion formed beforehand or without knowledge or examination of the facts." A second meaning is, "a preconceived preference or idea." Ambrose Bierce put it like this: "A prejudice is a vagrant opinion without visible means of support."

Without trying to do a sociological study (of which I'm not capable), maybe the best course for us is to do our best to become aware of the biases where they exist, and deal with them in a positive loving manner. That's really what our Bible passage is urging us to do. This passage is from Paul's writing to the Galatians, and it's about the equality we all share. It reads like this: "In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, since you are Christ's family, then you are Abraham's "descendant," heirs according to the covenant promises."

What Paul articulates so clearly is that, in God's eyes, we are all equal; we are all part of God's family. That means we are brothers and sisters, you and I, and all the people in the world. We are all inheritors of God's love, and we are to love and honor one another. When we live by that understanding, there is no room for prejudice, discrimination, or any intolerance, for to be biased against another is to be separated from God.

Now Paul is certainly not saying that we are all the same; that's simply not the case. No two people in the world are exactly alike, and that's a good thing. That diversity offers a richness that makes our world a more vital, interesting place to be. There's no way that we have identical views and opinions, or think alike. We don't have to agree with one another, but it's important to respect each other's right to differ with us.

I think it was the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, who said, "If we cannot all think alike, we can at least love alike." That may not be an exact quote, but it's close, and it says it well. We don't all like the same food, play the same sports, enjoy the same music, or practice the same religion, but we can be open to learning about each other. Seeing in a new way leads to greater understanding and tolerance, and serves to reduce prejudice. Being respectful of each other is about accepting people for who they are, for their best selves, and it means treating people the way we want to be treated.

How can we, as people who are trying to be faithful, do our part of overcome prejudice in our homes, in our community, in our world? There are a few basics that we might want to keep uppermost in our hearts and minds. First, we need to try not to judge a person on first impression. Most of the time, that opinion is based solely on the way the person looks, and is a poor indicator of who he or she is and what they're like. We

have to take the time to learn more about someone than what's just on the surface, and when we do, we're in for some wonderful surprises.

Most of us have to make a real effort to keep an open mind, amid engulf ourselves in the familiar rather than the unknown and unfamiliar. We tend to stick with the folks who are like us, or who enjoy what we enjoy, and when we do that, we miss out on some interesting experiences. Getting to know those who seem different can be difficult for some of us, but my guess is that we'll find out we have a lot more in common than we think.

Yet another thing we can do to lessen any prejudice within us is to be informed. We can find out what's happening in our world and make a positive contribution. How can we combat hatred? How can we express a more open, loving way of being that can influence others in a positive way? How can we learn more about those who appear to be different from us? When we take the time to do so, we usually discover that the myths and stereotypes we hear are unfair or incorrect.

If you and I can commit ourselves to being more open toward those who are different from us, my guess is that our lives will be the better for it. And you know what? We may actually take a step toward overcoming our prejudices. Shall we take that step?

Closing:

On Christmas Eve, Pope Benedict XVI urged people everywhere to "overcome preconceived ideas and prejudices, tear down barriers and eliminate contrasts that divide—or worse—set individuals and peoples against each other, so as to build together a world of justice and peace." While I don't often agree with the Pope, to that statement, all I can say is "yes!" You?

Have a great Sunday and go in peace. Amen.