

“Overcoming Our Bias”
March 7, 2021
Scripture: I Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

I subscribe to a daily devotional email written by Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest who is director of the Center for Action and Contemplation. The CAC is devoted to helping folks make a connection between the spiritual life and social action. This past week Father Rohr has focused on the topic, “learning how to see.” He’s using a podcast recording he made back in October with Brian McLaren, an author and theologian and the Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, a Presbyterian pastor in New York City. Rohr begins by quoting a Latin phrase he learned in seminary attributed to Thomas Aquinas that’s translated as, “whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver.” In other words, we’re all biased in how we see the world.

In the podcast Brian McLaren identifies 13 types of bias that shape our worldview. I’m not going to name them all here. The point is we are limited, severely, in our understanding of the world around us and it takes some deep disruptions to shake us out of our preconceived judgments.

That may be what lies behind this story of Jesus in the temple. This occurs in all four gospels, but only in John does it happen at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and not the end. I think the writer of John sees this event as Jesus’ attempt to clarify his mission and shake the foundations of his world. It’s a startling act of aggression that troubles his followers even today. I’ve read some commentaries that say what happened may not have been all that disruptive because there would have been so much else going on. But it’s more likely that this is what actually led to Jesus’ arrest by the Romans. He was putting himself and all his followers in danger by doing exactly what the occupying troops who were stationed all over the temple during Passover were watching for. There is just no way it would have gone unnoticed.

Jesus’ actions challenge our bias by causing us to question the image we’ve been raised to have of him as meek and gentle. The image of Jesus has been so thoroughly domesticated by the church that we find it hard to think of him as challenging the status quo. What, for instance, might make Jesus angry about our practices? What tables do we set up that Jesus might overturn? Overcoming our bias requires looking closely at what we do and being honest about our shortcomings. If Jesus is concerned with creating a world where all have access to power and the levers of influence, where the weak and vulnerable are valued, then what barriers have we erected that need to come down? His actions in the temple are a challenge to our world’s centers of power and those who would control it as much as it is to his own.

But our bias, rooted in convention and prejudice, prevent us from seeing the deeper significance of God’s kingdom breaking in on us. What God has done in Jesus changes everything, all the categories we use to understand the world have been inverted. That’s what

Paul is trying to explain to the Christians in Corinth. For some reason they have clung to the belief that they can continue with business as usual once they've embraced God's love revealed in Christ. So, apparently, they have hung onto the old divisions and stratifications of their society. They continue to look at their world through the same old lens, the filters of their bias.

As the letter unfolds, we'll uncover some ways their behavior has strayed from the open, inclusive community they're intended to be. But first Paul lays down a foundational truth that shakes their world to the core. "We proclaimed Christ crucified." There is no more startling claim than to describe their savior as a criminal executed for subversion. The message of the gospel, the message of Christ crucified, turns the logic of the world on its head. What once was considered as weakness is revealed as God's power. What once was considered foolish and pointless is revealed as God's wisdom.

Essentially, what Paul is telling this community is they must unlearn everything they once knew. They must abandon their bias against personal sacrifice and full acceptance and inclusion of others if they want to experience the presence of Christ in their lives personally and collectively. They have to join Christ in weakness and foolishness; join him on the cross.

It didn't come naturally to them, and it doesn't come naturally to us. We live in a society that insists on measuring worth by wealth, a culture built on a foundation of racism. Our bias is deeply engrained and is reinforced through media and education and law enforcement and virtually every social institution, including the church. We have a lot to overcome. In fact, we have more to overcome than the Christians in Corinth did because at least they lived in a society that did not claim to support them. Our society gives lip service to faith because it counts on Christians being docile.

We must shake the foundations of our bias. We must overcome it and dig deeper into our spirits to find Christ crucified, to find the true power and wisdom of God. That's why Jesus turned those tables over; he was showing us what needs to happen within our spirits so God can mold us into something new, so we can have new eyes to see. And with new eyes to see we can imagine a new world taking form. We can imagine a world where divisions and hatreds and fears are wiped away. We can imagine a world where sacrifice is elevated above success, where character is valued above status, where privilege is reserved for those who are the most vulnerable and have the fewest resources.

By overcoming our bias we can become the children of God we're meant to be. So, open your hearts and let the crucified Christ rock your foundations, overturn the tables of conformity and compliance, and mold you into a new creation so a new world can begin.

Amen