

John 9: 1-5/Luke 4: 14-30
Color Courageous Community: Week 3
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A study was conducted of over 6,500 professors at top U.S. universities drawn from 89 disciplines and 259 institutions. It was conducted by three business professors from three separate business schools. In the study, professors were contacted via email by fictional prospective students seeking to discuss research opportunities prior to applying to a doctoral program. These emails were identical and written in impeccable English. The only difference between the emails was the name of the student sender. The messages came from students with names like Meredith Roberts, Lamar Washington, Juanita Martinez, Raj Singh, and Chang Huang, names that earlier research participants consistently perceived as belonging to either a white, Black, Hispanic, Indian, or Chinese student.

There was good news and bad news found in the study. The good news is that almost 70% of the professors contacted responded to the emails. And almost 60% of the responders agreed to meet with the student who contacted them even though they didn't know much about the student.

But there was some bad news. Researchers computed the average response rates for each student category (e.g., white male, Hispanic female), dividing the number of responses from the professors by the number of emails sent from students in a given race or gender category. This revealed that the response rates depended on students' race and gender identity. And guess which group professors were most responsive to...yes, white men. This held true across all types of universities and almost every discipline. The business professors who conducted the research were surprised to learn that their own discipline showed the most bias, with 87 percent of white males receiving a response compared with just 62 percent of all females and minorities combined.¹

The professors who received the emails are likely not even aware that their responses reflected their unconscious bias. That's the thing about unconscious bias; it lives in us, impacting our choices, and until we know to look for it and practice self-awareness, we don't even recognize it's there. At birth, we haven't had any life experiences to draw on as we make decisions. Right away, our parents and others begin imprinting on the new arrival. As parents, we pass along our own preferences and beliefs. Children, we know, are like sponges, soaking it all up. And they soak up our biases as well. We come to everything with bias: some we recognize and some we don't. Bias alone isn't a bad thing. Bias is a problem if it leads us to treat a person or group of people as "less than" or "other," like when the professors were more attentive to white male doctoral candidates. Psychologists and social scientists have examined how unconscious bias

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/11/opinion/sunday/professors-are-prejudiced-too.html>, accessed 1/22/24.

affects personal behavior in all aspects of modern society, not only in higher education but also in places like hiring, healthcare, and law enforcement.

Just as unconscious bias shows up in many places and many ways today, the Bible addresses unconscious bias in more than one place and in more than one way. Today, I will offer two examples. The first is found in John 9:1-5.

¹As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

In the Gospel of John, light vs. darkness is a metaphor the author uses to talk about belief and unbelief. This story was originally used to teach early followers of Jesus about seeing and believing and to reassure them that Jesus was who they thought he was. But there is something else for us to learn from it. This encounter between Jesus, his disciples, and the man who was blind is an example of unconscious bias in the form of “attribution error.” Attribution error is the tendency to assign blame wrongly. The disciples assume the man is blind because of something he or his parents did wrong, which was a common belief in the ancient world. “Surely you did something to make God mad, or you wouldn’t be blind or sick.” To be fair, I am surprised at the number of Christians who continue to use “God’s will” to explain why bad things happen. That bad theology is one of the reasons people flee the church.

When we blame a person for their plight rather than recognizing the ways in which their situation contributed to their plight, that is an attribution error. In Michelle T. Sanchez’s book *Color Courageous Discipleship*, she writes about how that plays out in conversations about poverty and crime in predominantly Black communities. Instead of recognizing the many racist systems at play that create and fuel the problems found in Black communities, it isn’t uncommon to point to the Blackness of the ones living in the community as the cause. “I wonder what it is about Black culture that causes all of this?” some people waste their time wondering. The real question is the question I answered last week in the sermon about the myth of equality, “In what ways are the systems in this nation set up to cause communities made up of people of color to have these problems?” Just as the blind man and his parents did not cause his blindness, Black people do not cause the inequality produced by racist systems.² The problem is racism, and the symptoms of that problem are everywhere...in our schools, our prisons, our hospitals, and our offices.

Last week, I said it is important to recognize that the statistics we read about the impacts of racism correspond to real people. You may remember that Alex Rivera, our

² Sanchez, Michelle T., *Color-Courageous Discipleship: Follow Jesus, Dismantle Racism, and Build Beloved Community*, (Waterbrook Publishing, a division of Penguin House, 2022), 77.

former Director of Music, who is also an educator, created a presentation about unconscious bias in education. Because he is a person of color and because he has not only done a lot of research but has experienced the impact of unconscious bias, I asked Alex if he had the energy to share part of his story with me as it relates to today's sermon. I am deeply grateful for the ways in which he has always taken the time to help me understand his experiences. This is what he said to me this week:

"My entire family has first names that most people don't know about. We were all given "easier" Americanized names. My first name is Jairo (pronounced High-rrro), but when I started PreK, they didn't want to learn that name because it was too hard, so they saw my middle name (Alexander) and went with that instead. It convinced me that my name is hard, a hassle, a barrier. Now, I teach in a predominantly Latinx school where the older students routinely say, "You can call me ___ since that's easier," because that's what they've been conditioned to do at school...I've been in education for 11 years, 10 of them in a super-majority white district, and I've never heard of white kids with unique spellings (think Braxtylyn, Maxkenleigh, etc.) being given names to make it easier for others."

He went on to say, "A big way bias affects students of color is just in representation. I was one of 3 teachers of color at BHS before I left. Out of over 100 on staff.

There are many BIPOC (BIPOC students make up about 50% of students in public schools, only 20% of teachers and principals are BIPOC.³) who report never having a teacher who looked like them. And honestly, for me, as a student and then a teacher in a white district, a really insidious part of bias is the willful ignorance on the part of the majority. You could give fact after fact of the effects of bias on students of color, but because white people didn't experience it, they will gaslight BIPOC students into believing it's not as bad as they think it was. And that hurts deep when you finally can feel your body again and realize how much you hurt, how much you did try to cry out with no one listening. This ignorance allows the *conscious* bias shit to happen. Like when I was called a beaner, illegal, and dirty daily in AP US HISTORY of all classes, then the teacher told me to 'learn to take a joke.'"

Alex ended by saying, "Bias in schools causes students of color to believe the lie of racism. Because the ones in power are saying we're faking it, it's not that bad; we're misreading the situation, they didn't mean it like that, etc. etc., etc. Until one day you believe not only that all these assumptions about you based on your race are true but also that you can't even trust your gut, intuition, or eyes and ears to ever tell you the truth."

That is just one story...can you hear the anger and hurt in it? There are millions more stories like this one. Alex's statement, "Bias in schools causes students of color to believe the lie of racism," had me thinking about the lies of racism I've heard. Lies like, "Racism is a thing of the past. Racism may be a problem in other places, but not here. Even if racism does exist, the impact is minimal. Other people have harmful bias,

³ <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Voices-Deep-Dive-BIPOC.pdf>

I don't." All lies. The lies are being protected and perpetuated so well that people of color who experience racism question their own experiences. That is messed up. And white people don't like to be told that, maybe especially not at church.

This brings us to the story in Luke 4, where Jesus goes to preach at the synagogue in his hometown. He began by reading the part of Isaiah that says,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The text goes on to say, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." But then things took a turn when he added his own commentary. He drew the circle of who matters wider, and he included "the other." This is Luke 4:24-29.

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months and there was a severe famine over all the land, ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

These were good Jews. They were in the synagogue, presumably to learn about and worship God. These were not "bad people." They were wrong people. And being wrong is part of being human. Unconscious bias keeps us from seeing that every human being ever created is loved equally by God. And it is our job and the job of the Church to teach that and to live that. As followers of Jesus, we must know that the one we follow was always doing and saying things that included people who had been kept on the outside. Because he did this, he was in trouble most of the time. But through his vision for a world in which those who had never mattered did matter, all kinds of people began to see themselves as part of God's story. And who wouldn't want to be part of that story?

So now let me answer the question, "What is the sermon asking me to do?" First, do the "inside work." Spend time reflecting on how your experiences impact how you think about people who are different. What and how did your parents teach you? Have you since learned something different for yourself? Do your choices or actions reflect bias that negatively impacts marginalized communities? Do you understand the ways

in which all white people benefit from systemic racism? Be self-reflective and self-aware, not because you should feel guilty, but to help you seriously commit to being part of writing a different future story for our children, our community, and this nation.

After the “inside work” comes the “outside work.” Pay attention to and notice situations in which people racism is at play. And after you notice them, don’t immediately jump to accusation and shame; be like Ted Lasso...curious. Ask questions. Don’t be afraid to learn, even from people with whom you disagree. As followers of Jesus, let us be a light that helps others see the damage that racism is doing to our neighbors and to all of us, even when the damage is being done by us. Those “be the light” moments are scary because people don’t like to be told they are doing something wrong.

I will end this morning with this: You’ve probably heard the quote by activist and founder of the Gray Panthers, Maggie Kuhn, when she said, “Speak the truth even if your voice shakes.”

I wonder if you’ve ever heard the whole quote,

“Leave safety behind. Put your body on the line. Stand before the people you fear and speak your mind – even if your voice shakes. When you least expect it, someone may actually listen to what you have to say. Well-aimed slingshots can topple giants. And do your homework.” Admittedly, the most inspiring part of these words is the “speak your mind---even if your voice shakes” part. That part is etched permanently in my brain and is accessed often. But probably the most important part of the quote is the “do your homework” part. So don’t forward posts on social media without reading them and checking the source. And realize that social media posts, no matter how well-worded or how well-researched, are unlikely to change anyone’s mind. It is relationships and real conversations that will change people. And talk to people like you believe God loves them because that’s the truth. Be brave. Amen.