

January 17, 2021

Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

John 1: 35-43

Project Come and See
The Reverend Melissa Anne Rogers

In the words of Charles Dickens: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.” Friends, I stand in this pulpit on a Thursday evening, not knowing which way we will be going come Sunday morning, or next week when a new President steps up to put his hand on the Bible. But I know we are living a tale of two nations — a country that just elected our first black and South Asian Vice-President, a country that saw Georgia, one of the seven original slave states of the Confederacy, bring their first black Senator from his pulpit at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, as well as a young John Osoff, their first Jewish Senator. On that day of racial progress, a mob of white supremacists took over the U.S. capital, killed a policeman, and threatened the lives of our congressional leaders. America leads the world in the number of our loved ones we have lost to Covid-19. Yet we have produced a life-saving vaccine in record time to help save people, some of whom are still arguing about whether to wear masks. Here, we can’t know the burdens you and those you love will carry tomorrow, much less on Sunday. But we know we are in a period now where change, hope, and decay swirl around us at dizzying speed. The best and worst of everything co-exist. Until we move to live-streaming in a few weeks, our worship comes with this caveat. I pray God’s Spirit will move my words into Sunday’s hearing with grace and care. For the safety and security, health and well-being of our members, of our democracy, and our leaders, we ask the blessing of Christ’s surpassing forgiveness, wisdom and grace. May that be our unceasing prayer.

I moved to this Maize and Blue city from the crimson tide university that rolled over the Buckeyes on Monday night. *You’re welcome.* I’d traveled extensively, and lived in other cultures. I’d encountered bias rooted in region and race and gender and religion. I was a young, southern woman with a hot-roller hairdo arriving at a smart collegiate church in the Midwest, a place I assumed cared about credentials as well as appearances. Even after I lost my southern drawl and took the word “ya’ll” from my vocabulary and decreased the size of my curls, I wondered if this Bama Belle would be accepted. My mother had given me a framed copy of my college honors, but displaying them seemed haughty and pretentious, so I tucked them high on a shelf in my new office,

almost out of view. It wasn't long before a beloved older member stopped in for an introductory chat. Before leaving, this keen-eyed man quickly scanned my shelves and congratulated me for being a member of Phi Beta Kappa, something he had achieved at Dartmouth. "Where'd you graduate?," he asked. "Bama," I said matter-of-factly before the awkward pause. "Well... Roll Tide!" he said. Our chat disclosed one of the deep assumptions he carried — something akin to "Can anything good come out of Tuscaloosa?" It was neither personal nor mean-spirited. It was human. The stereotypes about the south are what they are. I had just been introduced to this man's implicit bias — and perhaps he met mine.

Every time I read this passage in John, I remember that conversation with gratitude, for it helps me explore my own implicit bias, the unconscious assumptions, attitudes, and judgements that lurk inside me. All of us hold stereotypes and judgements that subtly guide our decisions and choices. Our unconscious assumptions don't make us racist or sexist, or *whatever-ist* — they make us human. Bias comes out of our experiences, and thus those biases tend to favor us, our "in" group, our way of life. What we explicitly say we believe, what we outwardly endorse, rarely cleanly aligns with our unconscious attitudes. If we can get in touch with our implicit biases, if we become conscious of them, they can be unlearned, rejected, changed, disempowered from directing our actions. Unburdened of that bias, we can get closer to the sweet spot of discipleship. To feel the burden of our unhelpful unconscious attitudes is to begin to change for the better. To recognize them is to grow more into the image of Jesus, who loves all people no matter who they are, where they are from, their size, their dialect, their pedigree, their gender or sexual identity, or their history of lousy choices. How can we love like that, too? What is embedded in us that makes a tough task — loving our neighbors as ourselves — even harder?

In the days since George Floyd's murder and our racial reckoning, many have renewed conversation about the power of implicit bias, and the way it deeply damages those on the receiving end of it, as well as we who carry it. To uncover and dismantle it takes courage, self-criticism, and work. It may not be your idea of fun on a Saturday afternoon, but I encourage you to visit the website *Project Implicit* — a Boston-based organization whose website offers free tests you can take in minutes that help uncover the biases you hold. It is a small but helpful thing you can do in the movement to end patterns of oppression and abuse. Especially now — just at this incredible moment when those patterns are finally breaking down. White privilege and power are on their last gasp, trying to surge and survive, still finding enough oxygen to drive recent events in our history. People of faith must reckon with our history and our current role in it, and too often, our silence in the face of it. We are living with a proliferation and power of wild conspiracy theories that are strangely attractive, even to particular Christian people, especially some of our more extreme Evangelical brothers and sisters. These destructive beliefs guide their actions. They have fashioned a Jesus who wants the world they imagine, a world with them at the center, where they are the ones chosen to guard, defend, and keep it. We are on the brink of a new America, one that celebrates our many colors with real opportunity for all and is focused on eradicating our long-entrenched inequalities. We are deciding, in the words of the Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry, "what shall we be." Sometimes we feel helpless. We are not. Change starts with each of us who want to live the true biblical faith authentically, to know that what we are teaching our children about Jesus comes from the purest place possible, and to ever reform ourselves and our churches to build a beloved community that does not tolerate discrimination but is defined by mutual love. Jesus did not discriminate. His life calls us to look for what is inside us that we tolerate or even unknowingly cultivate that is not aligned with his life. We are called to this

helpful, but hard step of faith, a spiritual practice of trying to really see who we are and who Christ calls us to become.

A few months ago as a part of our anti-racist training, our staff took one of the implicit bias tests on racial bias and discussed our results. But being more than a little bias-curious, I dedicated the better part of the next afternoon to take all their free instruments. Remembering the people and experiences that have shaped me, I wasn't surprised to learn that I have a slight preference for white people, progressive people, and those in the liberal arts. Had they asked about it, I'm sure the test would find my implicit bias for short people, runners, those who love beer and spicy food, and those who drive Subarus. Knowing my implicit biases, I try to ensure that they do not affect how I do ministry among you, and find the help I need to transform them. They surely affect other things. My choice of language, maybe. My discomfort in certain settings. My oblivious committing of micro-aggressions against those unlike me. What would *Project Implicit* help you to discover?

In today's Gospel story, Jesus is hunting for his new squad of disciples and finds Philip. Overjoyed and overwhelmed to be a new follower, Philip goes to tell Nathanael. He's not interested. He knows about that poor, run-down, nothing-special town in Galilee. And he knows that the Messiah they wait for will come from Judah, and from Bethlehem, the birthplace of David — not Nazareth. You and I know how Jesus came to "be" from Nazareth, but Nate doesn't know the story. *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?* It's a little funny, and a little harsh. He's not openly racist or close-minded or stupid. Jesus himself says that there is not a false bone in Nathanael's body. He's not ushering a dog whistle to people who think folks from small towns can't possibly be chosen by God to save. He doesn't start a birther conspiracy. He isn't being smart or cunning or even curious — he's just being real. Nathanael is speaking from the assumptions he's formed and the experiences that have shaped him. *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*

Philip counters with three of the most important words in the bible, words that cut to the quick of Nathanael's implicit bias. Come and see. Look for yourself. Don't take my word for it Nathanael, check it out for yourself. Where had Philip gotten such a wise reply? From Jesus, and from his friends who had met him a few days before. Philip had come and seen. He believed. He followed.

Like most new believers, Philip was passionate, not pushed away by Nathanael's prejudice. But he was not there to persuade, over-articulate, indoctrinate, or sing Jesus' praise. Philip, a quick learner, repeats his teacher's lesson. Come and see. Don't trust me, trust yourself. Open your eyes. Look deeper. Jesus' movement to gain followers would be borne by those who would "come and see." It would be grown by those willing to see beyond appearances, to look deep into their own hearts, and to follow.

Nathanael, a young man, knows so little. He barely knows himself. But he knows that he trusts his own judgement. Sounds like us, doesn't it? From Philip, he hears an offer he cannot refuse. Come and see. See for yourself. And he does. But sight is not enough. It is the insight that follows that leads to Nathanael upending his life to follow Jesus. Not surprisingly, Jesus has already "seen" Nathanael, something which perplexes him. "How did you know me?" Being in Jesus' presence, hearing his voice, Nathanael gains insight. Beyond the sight to the insight that comes from this authentic moment with Jesus — comes his confession, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God!" When Nathanael sees Jesus, he moves into the presence of the one who sees him — and he is given insight — in the form of his Lord. From sight, to insight, to action. Nathanael's implicit bias about Nazareth does not create guile in him. It does not make him false. And it does not keep him from following. It does not prevent him from being a part of the greatest story of love God has sent to this world. And neither should ours. Never should our biases serve to hinder us from genuine encounters with Christ who comes among us in many forms. Never should our prejudices, no matter how unconscious, work against the way of Love in this world.

What can we do to counter our unconscious assumptions and our self-serving judgements? We can come and see. When we hear or sense those attitudes in others, we must invite them to come and see, too, and offer to go with them. If we are not curious, even courageous, we cannot change, and we cannot encounter Christ wherever he chooses to appear.

I was disturbed watching those white men with zip ties rappelling down the sides of the house chamber. I was also mystified. A daughter, a son, a grandchild, a veteran, a patriot, all loved by someone. How did those people become that? How did they get there? Had anyone ever invited them to come and see? Was there anyone there when they were introduced to harmful assumptions about others? How does a rotunda that months ago was filled with mourners honoring John Lewis find itself filled with insurrectionists trampling on his commitment and desecrating the memory and ministry and work of Lewis, and King, and Cummings, and so many others? It had to start somewhere. Closed eyes, closed minds, bias, and fear.

We who have come and seen Jesus are grateful for those parents, Sunday school teachers, and pastors who invited us. We must be grateful for those who invited us to a brave exploration of our biases. We know we have encountered people we have failed to invite to see themselves, or to know Jesus who will show them who they are. May the events of these days encourage us to never fail again. On this weekend in which we honor the great Dr. King, let us remember his journey from sight to insight to action. Let us remember that he was one, like Philip, who invited us and our nation to come and see.

The Christian Century wrote in their editorial last week, "Last Wednesday was the Feast of the Epiphany, and for many Americans the insurrection at the Capitol was an epiphany: an unveiling of the sins that brew underneath our institutions and within our hearts." Friends, Epiphany is more than a day — it is a season. It is a season of seeing, not just our sin, but our potential, and our calling beyond this moment, of moving beyond sight to insight, and the action that is bearing witness to that light, and speaking truth about what is darkness.



The great African-American poet Lucille Clifton wrote, “If I should enter the darkest room in my house and speak with my own voice, at last, about it’s awful furniture, pulling apart the covering over the dusty bodies... if I should walk into that web, who will come flying after me, leaping tall buildings, you?”

When we are brave to come and see, the light is there in the darkness. The Savior will leap every building and cross every bridge to meet us there. Our Savior. The Savior of us all.

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