

February 21, 2016

I Have Sinned: Prejudices

John 1:43-50

Opening words: One of our basic human spiritual needs is for forgiveness. It is one of the things that draw us to Christ. Jesus did not come into the world to be our role model. Jesus did not come into our world to be our teacher. Jesus did not come into our world to entertain us. Jesus came into the world to save us from our sins. Never forget, Jesus is our Savior. Colossians 1:13-14 says, "*He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*" Lent is a time to confess our sins and repent. Today, I want to look at our prejudices. Our scripture lesson is John 1:43-50.

John 1:43-50 The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

⁴⁴ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

⁴⁶ "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

"Come and see," said Philip.

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

⁴⁸ "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

⁵⁰ Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that."

Jesus of Nazareth once said, "*Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By doing this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*" (John 13:34-35) If you have heard these words before, say, "**Amen!**"

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days, he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus, he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. So one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with "his own people". Gandhi left the church and never returned. "If Christians have caste differences also," he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu." That usher's prejudice not only betrayed Jesus, but also turned a person away from trusting Him as Savior. Every church struggles with their own prejudices. We are no exception.

Several weeks ago, our country celebrated Martin Luther King Day; a day to remember the life and spirit of the Civil Rights activist. It is a national holiday, and it has become my custom to give a little history on each one. I will admit, I did not do my homework for Martin Luther King Day. Speaking off the cuff, I asked the congregation, "How long have we been celebrating Martin Luther King Day?" Do you remember what happened? One of the saints here yelled out, "Too long!" Some of our white faces giggled at that comment, and I was uncomfortable. Those two words, and our response to those two words, did more damage than we will ever know. Several days later, I found an opened letter on my desk. It was written by a woman who was visiting us that day. She told me she was relocating from the south and was looking for a church home. She was upset that in church of all places, someone would yell out such a thing. She was shocked that some thought "too long" was funny. She was appalled I didn't reprimand the congregation. She may be right. It is safe to say, she will not be back. I wonder, how many Christian people she will tell about her time with us? Every church struggles with their prejudices. It is even found in the scripture lesson for today.

We are in the first chapter of John. It is early in Jesus's ministry; he is still collecting his disciples. In the story prior to our reading, Jesus welcomed Andrew and his brother, Peter. The next day, Jesus invited Philip to be one of the fold. In verse 44 we are told the original three disciples, Andrew, Peter and Philip, were from the town of Bethsaida, a town on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. Philip told Nathanael about Jesus. At first he is not impressed. As a matter of fact, he is really quite cynical. The source of his doubts came from Jesus's hometown, Nazareth. He assumed Jesus was like everyone else in Nazareth—second-class citizens. Everyone at that time knew the truth about the citizens of Nazareth; they were a little less intelligent and less attractive than average people. Rooted in this first-century prejudice, Nathanael says, "*Nazareth! What good can come from there?*" It wasn't until he met Jesus that his mind was changed. You know the truth. We have no problem understanding verse 46, because our society is filled with prejudiced behavior. Have you noticed our society is filled with racial tension? That tension is rooted in our prejudices.

When I was in college, I took several sociology classes. One of the things we looked at were our prejudices. I remember three things about our prejudices; I remember them clearly. This is what I remember: 1.) Everyone is prejudiced. 2.) Our prejudices are learned. 3.) Our prejudices reveal our fears. I don't pretend to be an expert on prejudiced behavior. However, I will admit it is one of my great challenges in my discipleship. I live in a white world and have very little interaction with non-white people. Everyone I know is just like me, socially, economically and politically. I struggle relating to how others live. It would be easy to ignore this topic, but I won't do it. We are disciples of Jesus Christ and the Master expects more from us. We are supposed to be a little more like Jesus every day. Jesus loved everyone; we don't. We love selectively. If you can agree with that, say, "**Amen!**" Let's look at those three statements.

Everyone is Prejudiced

This is sociological fact number one: everyone is prejudiced. There is not a single person in this world that escapes. Sociologists tell the reason we are all prejudiced is the numbers. Did you know, the United States Census Bureau estimates the world's population is more than 7.3 billion? It is impossible to know everyone. Did you know, the United States Census Bureau estimates our national population is more than 323,000 million? It is impossible to know everyone. Did you know, the population of the state of Ohio, according to the United States Census Bureau, is more than 11.6 million people? It is impossible to know everyone. How many people do you know? In 2013, the New York Times reported the average American knows about 600 people. That figure seems high to me. Do you think you know 600 people? Why are those numbers important? They reveal to us why everyone is prejudiced.

Sociologists tell us everyone is prejudiced because there are so many people we do not know. With so many unknown people, we gather groups together to gain some sense of control. It is impossible to know every individual; it is much easier to know the stereotypes of various groups. Look at the text with me. Nathanael did not know Jesus personally, but he did have some preconceived opinions about Nazarenes. The stereotype broke down once he met Jesus. Just admit it, you are prejudiced! You will always hold a certain amount of prejudices, because it is impossible to know everyone. Our prejudices fool us into believing that we have some control. If you can accept that sociological fact, say, "**Amen!**"

Our Prejudices are Learned

This is sociological fact number two: our prejudices are learned. Next Saturday morning, I have a private baptism scheduled. I am looking forward to that baptism because I officiated at the baby's parent's wedding over two years ago. It is nice when I can maintain a relationship with a couple beyond the wedding. Baptisms are important for two reasons. The first reason is spiritual. We deal with the original sin, inherited from Adam and Eve. The second reason is practical. The parents are promising they will raise the child within the Christian faith. That promise is important because no one has a greater influence on the baby than the parents. If the parents make this promise with a sincere heart, then it will be life altering for the child. If the promise is made lightly, then it will have very little influence on the baby. The greatest role model in a child's life is the child's parents. Have you ever stopped to consider how much you learned from your parents?

Parents are not just biological parents; parents are role models. So whatever you want your child to be or do, then you must be or do it. If you want your child to be hard working, then you must be hard working. If you want your child to be kind and compassionate, then you must be kind and compassionate. If you want your child to vote, then you must vote. If you want your child to drink milk, then you must drink milk. If you want your child to be a Christian, then you must be a Christian. Being a good role model in life is so important. Our children can learn so many good things

from us. The problem is, sometimes they learn negative things from us, like our negative prejudices. If you want your child to not be a prejudiced person, then you must not be a prejudiced person. Nathanael did not enter this world instinctively knowing there was something wrong with the citizens of Nazareth. It was something he learned along the way. It may or may not have been his parents. Regardless, our prejudices are learned. Would you like our world to be a better place? Then answer this question: What prejudices are you passing on to the next generation? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Our Prejudices Reveal Our Fears

This is sociological fact number three: our prejudices reveal our fears. Sociologists say the group you hate the most, frightens you the most. I know that is true because I have seen it countless times. I have lived it. Years ago, I was out at the mall with Vlad. It was Vlad's first trip to America. You know Vlad, he was the first Russian orphan we brought to America to get prosthetic legs. Vlad was in his wheelchair; I sat on a bench watching people pass. Everyone looked at Vlad because they noticed his stumps. Everyone looked, but only one talked to us. I really didn't want to talk to him, but I had no choice. He was a young black man, wearing a baseball cap that hung to the side. He had gold in his teeth and around his neck. His oversized leather coat promoted his favorite NFL team, the Oakland Raiders. His old jeans were faded and riding low. When he started walking our way, I tried to ignore him, but it was impossible. When he started talking, his diction was poor; I could hardly make out his words. I will admit it, I was intimidated. I thought he was going to ask me for money, so I grew defensive. I couldn't believe what he was saying. He didn't ask me for money. Instead, he wanted to know about Vlad. He wanted to know what doctor was helping him. I could not have been more surprised. He pulled out a business card and handed it to me. He said, "This is my doctor; he is the best." Then, he pulled up the legs of his faded jeans and exposed his prosthetic legs. As he walked away, he said, "If you need any help, call me, my number is on the back of the card." I have never been more ashamed of myself. I had to admit it, I am a prejudiced person. That is one of the things we have in common.

Several years ago, I was sitting at Hospice House next to a man who was near the end. The disease was winning. When I arrived, I was surprised to find him alone. I was shocked that his mind was so clear. He was one of the finest men I had ever known. I knew his end was near, so I gave him ample time. We talked about many things; his family, his work, his childhood. He lay in that bed and reviewed his life. He told me things that he had held secret for years. He told me about visiting his grandparents as a boy. Out of the blue he said, "Russ, did you know my grandparents were members of the Ku Klux Klan?" I said, "Seriously?" He said, "Yes! The group would meet at their house because they owned several acres. I remember everyone was nice to me, but I had to leave once the ceremony started." He added, "They stored their hoods and robes in my grandparent's basement. There was a safe in that basement which held the group's treasury and a list of all the names of all the members." He was being so

honest, I had to ask him the next question, "Did you ever join?" He said, "No!" I said, "Why not?" He said, "I was too young; I was just a boy." I said, "No, later. Why didn't you join when you became an adult?" He ended by saying, "Russ, by then, we all knew better." Can I ask you this question?

Do you know better, or are you holding tight to your prejudices? You may think you are making that other group look bad, but you are only damaging yourself. How foolish have you made yourself look lately? Maya Angelou once said, *"Prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future and renders the present inaccessible."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**