

Parochial Haze
Reading from the Gospels: John 1:43-51

Confession. Though I have lived in North Carolina for over 30 years, I have never been able to attach myself fully to a regional team, amateur or professional. I am basically wearing the colors I came with, living and dying with the teams of my childhood, sporting the merchandise of the same team from whom my dad bought me one of those plastic replica batting helmets fifty years ago. I bleed Cardinal red and cry golden Mizzou tears and I am not above rooting fervently against Cubs and Jayhawks, who ironically both sport the same colors, now that I think about it. So unoriginal.

I do not harbor negative feelings against the local teams, except when the Panthers kick-off at 1:00 pm uptown, leaving us here feeling like the guy left holding the flowers when he sadly realizes his date has stood him up yet again. “But I got all dressed up and everything.” I can enjoy a Hornets win and appreciate ACC basketball, but a loss doesn’t send me reeling as it did when eventual champion Colorado defeated Mizzou by scoring on 5th down. That’s right, 5th down!

So, for 30+ years I have had the opportunity to be more observer than fan, which is to say I have become quite familiar with a basic characteristic of the human condition that psychologists refer to as *Implicit Bias*. To be clear, you would observe the same in me were we to take a road trip to Busch Stadium.

Bias. I like cheeseburgers, peppermint ice cream, and bananas, though not at the same time. I do not like coconut, onions, or creamed beef on toast ... at all. We all possess biases to which we will readily confess and eagerly speak whether anyone wants to hear it or not. We have a **bias** when, rather than being neutral, we consciously have a preference for (or aversion to) a person or group of people, a place, item, or icon. (*Perception Institute*)

Additionally, we each possess all manner of biases that we do not acknowledge, very often because we are blithely ignorant to the fact that we hold them. The term “**implicit bias**” is used to describe when we have attitudes towards people, places, and things, and associate stereotypes with them without our conscious knowledge. (*Perception Institute*)

Case in point? ACC basketball season has begun, and of three things, I am certain: 1) students will camp outside Cameron in Krzyzewskiville; 2) Roy Williams will make an unfortunate wardrobe selection; 3) I will hear a number of you making sweeping generalizations about the fan base of a rival school with such surety you would gladly submit to a polygraph test to claim such statements as gospel truth. I once heard a Clemson alum recount his experience at South Carolina's Williams-Brice Stadium as if he had been thrown into the middle of a Mad Max movie. And let's face it, there is about as much objectivity in the UNC – Duke rivalry as there is nutrition in a fried Twinkie. And yet, even in the face of a firing squad you would never cop to the charge that your opinions are anything but fair-minded.

Collegiate allegiances aside, the more dangerous and destructive forms of implicit bias are discovered in the areas of race, culture, gender, and religion. More often than not, our anxieties and convictions about anyone who is different from us have little to do with them and a whole lot to do with us, specifically our insecurities and our lack of self-awareness. The consequences include prejudice, division, brokenness,

violence, and death, not to mention spiritual poverty and a debilitating blindness to what could be daily encounters with the very grace of God.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” As ridiculous as Nathanael’s question may sound to all who gather before the cross of Christ, if we do not hear the sound of our own voices in Nathanael’s suspicion, we are not paying attention, for he is only mimicking the intolerance of which we are regularly guilty and blissfully unaware from day to day. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Here, in the gospel of John we are observing Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry. Unlike the other gospels, John has presented a profoundly esoteric theological portrait of Jesus before we even meet the man. John tells us this Jesus is the pre-existent Word of God, the very Word that brought all things into being, without which there would not only be no *we* here, there would be no *here* here.

This Jesus, John has told us is life itself and as such is the light and life of all people. The light of this Jesus is such that no darkness, no matter how deep and profound the darkness is, can extinguish it. This

Jesus, John tells us, is the source of all grace and all truth. And at this point in John's Gospel, we haven't even met Jesus yet!

In this Gospel, a prophet named John the Baptist is the first to see and recognize Jesus. "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Seeing Jesus, John the Baptist proclaims, "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

So, here at the very beginning of the fourth gospel, the reader knows that in Jesus, we are dealing with the very presence of God.

However, Nathanael is not privy to John the Baptist's theological treatise. John the Baptist was working, baptizing and prophesying way down south in Bethany, outside of Jerusalem. Nathanael lived in Bethsaida up on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. John was a whole lot closer to the Dead Sea than the shores of Galilee. Not only that, but Nazareth was on the other side of the mountains from Bethsaida, so when Philip approaches Nathanael all jazzed up over the arrival of Jesus, probably all Nathanael had to go on was that his cousin Jackie's brother-in-law, who nobody liked, was from Nazareth.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Well, apparently ... yes. Granted, nobody with Messianic hopes would have figured on a tool belt wearing Messiah from Nazareth Vo-Tech. They would have expected someone from the Hahvahd campus down in Judah, Jerusalem, Zion. And yet, from Nazareth Jesus arrives bearing the resume John has given him – Word made flesh, light of life, conqueror of darkness.

Can anything good come from Nazareth? Philip doesn't take the bait of Nathanael's sarcasm, nor does he hand him a tract and attempt to convert him. He simply offers the invitation, "Come and see!"

How often do we miss an encounter with the presence of God because our biases, our parochial prejudice, and our arrogance combine to cloud our capacity to witness the glory, grace, and favor of God when it is right there in front of us. One of the major obstacles hindering our capacity to see what God is doing is our refusal to countenance the idea that our worldview is anything less than objective. We are continually trolling those people, that crowd. The problem with those people, whoever those people are in your eyes, most often isn't their problem,

but yours. Our bias blinders are regularly shielding us from encountering the goodness of God.

Harvard came out with a landmark study utilizing a series of tests that at least partially reveals the extent to which our implicit biases hinder our relationships with basically anyone. Now, I have to confess, I tried to take their test on attitudes about age, and I couldn't make it past the second question. I mean, the first question asks, On average, how old do other people think you are? ... I don't know. I'm not in the habit of introducing myself saying, "Hi, I'm Matt. How old do you think I am?" And I don't think I want to know, particularly given the fact that when I was 36, the bag boy at the Food Lion thought my wife was my daughter.

So, I went to the second question which asks you to declare if you prefer young people or old people. And I thought, "Well, it depends. Are we talking about preschoolers at a Halloween party hyped up on candy, or are we talking about a seniors group at a restaurant where the service is slow?" I gave up, and yes, my wife is a saint and it ain't easy being me.

But I don't need Harvard to tell me how regularly we miss encounters with the holy because we're too biased to notice. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Nathanael is you. Nathanael is me. Barbara Brown Taylor said, "The problem is, many of the people in need of saving are in churches, and at least part of what they need saving from is the idea that God sees the world the same way they do." She also said, "Whoever you are, you are human. Wherever you are, you live in the world, which is just waiting for you to notice the holiness in it." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*)

Whenever I feel in need of wisdom, all I have to do is find my friend Hilreth Dyce. When Hilreth came to the U.S. from Jamaica, she had a heart more golden than Fort Knox, but as a young, widowed single mother with two young children, she had very few resources. Arriving in Hempstead, NY on Long Island, she hadn't realized that the only apartment available to her would be in a building notorious for the presence of drugs, prostitution, and crime. She hardly knew anyone and the people she met could not believe that she would live in such a place. Though she met all the requirements, the bank wouldn't give her a credit card when they learned her address.

Needless to say, her young children weren't real thrilled with their new environment. So, Hilreth sat them down and she asked them to remember something about life in Jamaica. She reminded them of their many journeys along Junction Road. It's the shortest route that spans the island north to south (approx. 30 miles). They lived in Kingston which is south, but they traveled home to the north to see family. Hilreth describes this road as hilly, narrow, and winding. Often when two vehicles encountered each other one had to stop or reverse to allow passage. The side of the road was frighteningly rocky, but along the way they would notice here and there these brave little plants struggling to push their way through the rocks in order to bloom, thereby dotting the unfriendly terrain with beautiful colors.

She then explained their current situation to Orville, now a surgeon, and Denise, now an attorney, who we've learned has the voice of an angel. She told them, "I don't like this place any more than you do, but this is not our destination." She said, "Like those plants on Junction Road in Jamaica, we are going to bloom where we are planted and we're going to look for all the blooms we can find right here. She said,

“Though we don’t know where God will take us, this experience will be the refining fire that will transform us into burnished gold.”

They were determined to be open to the ways God would be present right where they were. And anyone who knows this family knows that they managed to notice the blooms of grace whenever and wherever they appeared. Why, Hilreth even managed to offer the same invitation that Philip offered Nathanael to a woman whose life to that point had been a history of addiction, prostitution, and crime, “Come and see!” Hilreth drew her neighbor into the community of the church where the woman experienced an amazing transformation. Hilreth’s new and unlikely friend became a most significant leader in the church’s prison ministry.

May God remove our blinders of bias, so that we, too, may discover what Hilreth has known all along: Yes, something good can indeed come from Nazareth. Amen.