

*Prejudice and Discrimination*

Maybe you haven't noticed but our new President, Barak Obama, is part of a much disadvantaged minority. That's right, he's left handed. We right-handers might not think of being left handed as a cause of discrimination, but it most certainly is. Ask any left handed child in nursery school when they give out scissors for cut-and-paste and there are no scissors for left-handers. Or ask any student in elementary school when they teach cursive writing with ink pens. Left-handers' hands drag their hands over what they have just written, smearing the ink going right to left, unlike the right-handers whose hands lead the way. Even sports has its biases; you cannot be a catcher or shortstop in Little League baseball if you're left-handed.

Obviously, left-handers are not the only people discriminated against. We are all too aware of prejudice based on the color of one's skin. Undoubtedly those of African descent in our country's history have suffered the worst because of racial discrimination. It is also true that, in various times and places, other ethnic and cultural groups have also suffered including Asians, the Irish, Roman Catholics, and, of course, Jews.

Most of us are familiar with how some Japanese Americans were placed in interment during camps World War II. The U.S. government has apologized for that. But did you know that some German Americans were also similarly interred? It's true. There is documentation of this, and the U.S. government has never officially recognized or repented of that.

The inauguration of President Obama, whose father was a black African and whose mother was a Caucasian American, is undoubtedly a sign that the times are changing in regard to racism, especially when miscegenation, the fear of biracial children being born, was the big concern of segregationists. Things are also improving in regards to sexism. Again, an example from politics, three of the last four Secretaries of State have been women, the other was Colin Powell. Hilary Clinton was almost the democratic nominee for President, and another woman, Sarah Palin, was the Republican nominee for Vice-president. We've come a long way.

While we applaud that our society has made major strides in granting equal opportunity and affirming the self-worth of all people regardless of race, gender, or nation of origin, we have to point out that this is how it has always been in the church. Or, at least, that is how it always should have been, because the church, by its very nature, should not discriminate against anyone. Jesus' Great Commission to us was to preach the gospel in all nations. St. Paul reached out across ethnic and national lines, and brought the Good News, first delivered to the Jews, to the gentiles. No doubt Christians have been complicit or even active in various forms of oppression based on race or other factors, such as Apartheid in South Africa and slavery in the United States, but that is not how it should be. God's grace is for everyone. The church loves everybody. All are welcome in this place.

With that in mind then, I would like to share my critique of some other places where bias and prejudice today exist in society and even in the church. I know a person who applied to a graduate school and was told by the admissions director that his grades would be good enough for admission

to that very competitive program if he was a woman or minority candidate, but he was being held to another standard. I also knew a pastor who was told by a call committee that “We wanted to call a woman to make a statement, but will try not to hold it against you that you’re a man.” I know these stories are true because in each case I was the person discriminated against. I’m not asking for your pity; I just want to point out that the sins of prejudice and discrimination can take many forms, not just the ones we’re grown accustomed to. All prejudice and discrimination is wrong.

History has taught us that very quickly the oppressed can become the new oppressors. The violence going on in the Middle East, and that has gone on in Northern Ireland and the Balkans and in so many other places, can be traced back to a long list of grievances by both racial or ethnic groups against the other, both seeking what they feel is legitimate vengeance for past transgressions and insults. The proverb you learned as a child is still true: Two wrongs don’t make a right. Peace and equality ultimately cannot be achieved by force, but only through love and forgiveness (the values Jesus taught).

In my ongoing lover’s quarrel with the institutional church, I feel the need to critique the church on some points regarding its biases. Our national church body had the worthy goal of making its decision making assemblies intentionally diverse. But to achieve that it imposed a quota system that forces us to elect a certain number of male voting members and female voting members and a certain percentage of people who are “persons of color” or whose first language is not English to our assemblies. The church is asking us to divide people along gender and racial lines, and. I believe

doing that increases, rather than decreases, sexism and racism. In a church that says it believes St. Paul's dictum that in Christ there is neither "Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" dividing people by race and gender is a subtle and insidious form of prejudice. We are not living into the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King who looked forward to a day when people would be judged by the content of their character not the color of their skin.

What does skin color or gender have to do with character or beliefs anyway? Absolutely nothing! Hilary Clinton and Sarah Palin are both women, but at opposite poles politically. We certainly can't say all women think alike. In a similar way, I don't think the Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton have much in common with Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas or perennial presidential candidate Alan Keyes. To say all black people think alike would just be wrong.

More and more I am convinced that it is what cannot be seen that divides us more than what can be seen. Race and gender are easily observable, but they actually tell us little about any individual. The traditional assumptions made about people belonging to certain racial and ethnic groups no longer apply, if they ever did. There are other more subtle factors that play into our biases and prejudices today, and we need to concern ourselves with them as well and root them out.

The things that divide us today are economic and social. Growing up poor in America is a disadvantage whatever your race or gender, as is a lack of education. America says it has no royal families, but time and time again the sons and daughters and spouses of presidents, senators, and governors

get elected or appointed to high office. That kind of bias happens in other professions too. To be physically handicapped, even to be just physically unattractive, is a characteristic that invites prejudice. Studies have shown that taller, more attractive people generally get special treatment from others. Commentators have said that Franklin Roosevelt or Abraham Lincoln could never get elected today -- they wouldn't look presidential enough! And when you turn on the TV, where are the average looking people; people that are heavy, or skinny, or don't look like a Barbie Doll? Nowhere, except on Jerry Springer!

Perhaps without even realizing it we have been complicit in all types of discrimination and prejudice. We need to recognize these failings and repent of them individually and institutionally. We who have been blessed with so much have a responsibility to act toward others with justice and kindness, as does our heavenly Father. Race or family should never be a factor in who we vote for. Gender and attractiveness should play no part in who we hire. We should stretch ourselves to reach out in fellowship to the real outcasts, not just whatever subculture happens to be the new popular in-crowd.

When God looks at us he doesn't see black or white, or yellow or brown, or fat or thin. He sees sinners in need of forgiveness. God doesn't see us as representatives of our race or gender; He sees us as individuals enveloped by the righteousness of Christ. Our prayer should be that we might have our Father's eyes and be truly colorblind, seeing all people as fellow human beings in need of our love and service. That's the Christian thing to do. Amen.