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The Perils of Prejudice

John 1:46

Is there prejudice in your mind, or prejudice in your heart? Is there prejudice in the way you regard or respond to other people, other groups, other races? Is there prejudice in our world? In our nation? In our local communities? In our church? Is there prejudice in you?

Did you notice any prejudice in our Gospel story for today? Believe it or not, it was directed against Jesus himself. A man named Nathanael, when he heard that Jesus was from Nazareth, scornfully muttered, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael apparently thought that all Nazarenes were worthless.

Now, I have to admit that I have a prejudice in my heart against a particular group of people. Can anything good come out of Columbus, Ohio? Having grown up in Michigan, I’m rather deeply prejudiced against Ohio State fans. So I had to grit my teeth, and dig down deep into my Christian heart, to congratulate some of our Buckeye-loving church members this week after their national championship win on Monday night! That was hard for me, let me tell you.

I’m prejudiced against Ohio State people, but I’m trying to get better. In our Bible story, Nathanael was prejudiced against Nazarenes – even Jesus!

Prejudice is when you have a “preconceived judgment or opinion” about someone. It’s an “irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics” (Webster’s Dictionary).

Prejudice is a pointed and unpleasant topic for a sermon, I know; but prejudice is a sad and constant reality in our world, and in our lives. Prejudice didn't end when Lincoln freed the slaves. Prejudice didn't fade away when LBJ signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Prejudice is alive and well in our society, seen and unseen, sometimes expressed overtly and often harbored secretly in our hearts.

Prejudice is not a godly thing, though. Prejudice is not Christ-like, or Spirit-sparked. Our God created an incredibly diverse box of crayons in the human family. And God would have us look upon his whole human family as he does, with love and caring. God would have us be tolerant, equitable, and even appreciative of the diversity of his creation, as he is – not prejudiced.

Prejudice is a by-product of sin, after all. The weight of our original sin bears down on us every day, doesn't it? It affects you, it affects me. Sin affects your families, it affects my family. Sin affects the way you think about and treat others, and sin affects the way I think about and treat others. Sin causes us to prejudge others, to form unwarranted generalizations, to maintain those "irrational attitudes of hostility" toward people, or groups, or races.

We all have our own struggles with prejudice, don't we? Buckeye fans, people who dress funny, parents who raise their kids a certain way, people who live on the streets, those who listen to certain kinds of music, people from other faiths or races.

All of our prejudices, though – the little ones and the big ones, the ones we joke about, the ones we rationalize, and even the ones we are deeply ashamed of -- are not pleasing to God. Our prejudice is a by-product of our sin. God wants to uproot all prejudice in me, in you, in his people.

He calls us today to repentance. Stop resisting God's way of living. Believe in his mercy and grace. Receive his forgiveness. Then turn to his plan of equanimity among the races, tolerance among all peoples, respect and dignity afforded to all our human brothers and sisters.

But that's awfully hard, isn't it? How can we do it? How can we get better? How can we Christians keep prejudice out of our minds and hearts, out of our neighborhoods, out of our church?

I have a friend named Adam. He served on the pastoral team at my former church up in New York. Adam's now pastoring a church in Black Jack, Missouri. Black Jack is a suburban community in North St. Louis, immediately adjoining Ferguson, Missouri. Adam and the members of his congregation have been caught up in the tense, volatile, violent aftermath of the Michael Brown grand jury decision.

Adam, along with other local pastors, was out on the streets, talking and praying with protestors, community residents, and people on both sides of an explosive and racially-charged issue. I asked him how he handled it, and what his aim was. "All we can do, Wayne," he told me, "is try to bring Christ to our community. Christ, and his love for sinful humans, is the only solution, the only answer."

And my friend Adam is right, isn't he? Christ, and his unbelievable love for sinners like us, is the only answer for the prejudice in our hearts. Christ's love is the only thing that can change a person's heart! Christ's forgiveness, won on the cross, is the only thing that can heal a sin-warped heart. Christ's grace is the only real antidote to the poison of our prejudice.

Remember Nathanael, in our Bible story? He was prejudiced against, and looked down upon, people from places like Nazareth. He prejudged Jesus, and formed an opinion of Christ based on what he thought he knew about people from Nazareth.

But notice how Jesus responded to Nathanael. He didn't explode. Jesus didn't start protesting, or even harboring a grudge in his heart. Instead the Lord reached out in love, and in divine power, to connect with Nathanael. He got to know Nathanael; and, little by little, Christ and his love changed that man's heart, and changed that man's prejudice.

Christ can do that for you, too. Get to know him better. Let him into your life more and more. Read his words, study Christ's teachings every day. Talk to him in prayer daily, honestly, openly. Allow Christ's Spirit to go to work on your spirit, and invite his Spirit to lead and guide you in your words, actions, and thought. Only his love can change our hearts; and only Christ's love can change our world. As sinners loved ourselves by Christ, we Christians can reach out to others – whomever they may be – with the divine power of his forgiveness and mercy.

Will you please pray with me?