

“Walking Humbly?”  
Acts 8:26-39  
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost  
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I spent most of the decades of my thirties and forties struggling with mental illness. This was a tough blow after a very productive decade in my 20s when I played highly visible roles in my communities. All of a sudden I could barely get out of bed. After I had spent a very long time isolating, my therapist urged me to engage with friends socially again. So one Saturday night, I tried just that, and it was horrible. I ran into a large number of people from my “old life.” Everyone was, of course, curious as to why I had dropped off the face of the earth, having heard the rumors that I had “cracked up.” I was lamenting this to my therapist the following week and asked “What am I supposed to tell people when they ask me what I’ve been doing all this time?” He looked at me with deep kindness and said “Tell them you’ve been learning humility.”

And that has become a kind of theme for my life ever since.

We are not a humility-loving people – U.S. Americans. We like to think of ourselves as a step above everyone else. Best country. U! S! A! Best athletes. Best films. Best political system. Best healthcare. (Really? – Have you utilized our healthcare system recently?)

Arrogance, you might call it. We are an arrogant people.

And this leads me to the fifth of six Seattle First Baptist core values – which we are exploring today:

*We will actively work to recognize and change our own biases and to fight racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ageism and other systemic prejudices.*

Recognize and change our biases. This is not a task that lends itself well to being achieved from a position of arrogance.

The assigned Scripture for today comes from Acts 8:26-39. Rather than read that to you, I am going to tell you the story. It takes place after Pentecost when the Apostles are busy spreading the Jesus story from town to town. They realize they need more help, and seven men are identified to assist them. (Of course – it is likely that an untold number of nameless women did the bulk of the work. Just saying!) Among those chosen was a man named Philip – sometimes called Philip the Evangelist – who was highly respected.

In our story today, we’re told that an angel tells Philip he needs to leave at noon to travel on the desert road that leads to Gaza. When Philip does this, he encounters a carriage carrying an Ethiopian eunuch.

Now, given he was a man of his time and place, we can assume that Philip had certain biases about race and gender and culture and education and religion that would have impacted his thinking about this person he was about to encounter... who was Black, who was African, who was a eunuch, who was not Jewish and therefore not educated in the sacred Hebrew texts. (As an aside, eunuchs at that time were males who had been castrated in order to be trusted with protecting a king's harem or finances. They were generally seen as outcasts in the society... as "less than" in every respect... not "real" men. They were maligned much like transgender persons are today, though it is not a direct correlation.)

So why did Philip even engage with this Ethiopian eunuch? He did so, according to scripture, because Spirit told him to. SPIRIT TOLD HIM TO.

Together, the two unlikely allies studied a passage from Isaiah, and Philip told them about the Way of Jesus. And when the carriage later passed by some water, they stopped so that Philip could baptize this person to whom he would not have given the time of day had he not listened to Spirit. It takes humility to hear Spirit's voice, to sense Spirit's nudge, to slow down enough to recognize we are being led to do something that contradicts our biases.

Now, I don't know about you – but for me, confronting my biases is not fun. I'm appalled when I recognize that I have them. But, really, I shouldn't be – because it just means that I am human. Our brains can only handle so much. When our familiar ideas are challenged, we tend to respond defensively – without even thinking about it. We dig in our heels, and become even more firmly attached to those old beliefs that ring true to us because of our life experiences and learning.

Confronting our biases makes us feel vulnerable. That's another thing about U.S. Americans... we don't like being seen as wrong or weak or unknowledgeable. Remember that scriptural admonition about becoming like little children? Children's minds are more open; they hear and accept new ideas every day. But as we age, our minds try to make things easier for us by having us judge all new information against what we already know or believe – what is old and familiar and "right" to us. And the old and familiar almost always wins out. Because to pursue whole new ways of thinking when the old is comfortable is perceived as pain by our brains. And who wants pain?

Father Richard Rohr of the Center for Action and Contemplation talks about a Latin phrase he learned in seminary – a 13th century phrase that speaks exactly to this notion of bias: *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis* which means *Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver*. Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver. In other words, I hear only what I am personally programmed to hear.

Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lawson puts it this way: *I think we are all wired by what we've experienced to gravitate to the stories that make sense to us, stories that fit, that feel like they have a connection to our past and resonate with the trajectory of our lives*. This is bias – a prejudice or inclination in favor of or against something.

So, for instance, when I was growing up, I was taught – by my family and my church – that it was important to stay on this side of the law, to follow the rules. But then along came this young college student named Soren – not much older than I – who spoke to my Baptist Youth Fellowship group one Sunday evening in 1965. He told us a story about a small country on the other side of the globe called Vietnam and what the US had been doing there. He talked about standing with Jesus on the side of peace. He proclaimed himself to be a conscientious objector. That was one of those seminal moments in my life. I knew about Vietnam but didn't realize it had anything to do with me. Soren changed that. Something in me – Spirit? – caused me to listen... and I was able to move past my bias – my inclination to go with what I had been taught up to that point. My bias toward blindly following the rules fell quickly, much to the dismay of my church and my parents.

Then there's racism. My mother frequently espoused her belief that we should love everyone. Long before John Lennon, she taught us that *All you Need is Love*. She also taught us color-blindness – that the color of your skin doesn't matter – that all people are the same. What I had been taught about Jesus reinforced this worldview. Of course, I lived in white neighborhoods, went to white schools and churches and never had a chance to put any of this into practice. But because I was also taught that being – or at least *looking* – good was of paramount importance, I made sure that I spoke up publicly in support of the Black Civil Rights movement so that it would be clear I was on the “good” side of the equation.

Then, my freshman year at Linfield, I registered for the school's first course on Black History. I remember being so proud of myself... which should have been a warning sign that I didn't have the whole picture. One day a man from the fledgling Black Panther organization in Portland spoke to us. I remember this like it was yesterday. He was introduced, took the podium, moved his gaze slowly across the class, and said “Brothers and sisters... and if you're white, I ain't talkin' to you!” My heart stopped. I sat silently for the remainder of class and don't remember a thing he said after what felt like his unfair rejection of me. I don't remember talking with anyone about this after it happened. I felt ashamed. And for several years I played that tape over and over in my mind. My bias had had its feet knocked out from under it, and I had no idea what to do. Eventually I came to see that man as a prophet who called me to sit up and pay attention. To question everything I thought I knew about race, and to look at oppression from different angles. Because of him I read more, asked more questions, listened more. And I changed.

Fast forward 50 years. Several years after I retired I got an email from a LatinX man whom I had supervised during the latter part of my career. He described being oppressed in the climate of our workplace and quite angrily accused me of being racist and failing to support him. I was hurt. I was appalled. I was embarrassed. I knew I needed to listen to him and respond somehow, but every fiber of my being just wanted to defend myself. Again with the how could he not see that I was a good person? But my goodness had nothing to do with it. That's the thing. This was about his experience – not my ego. I knew that, but I felt frozen and ashamed.

Shame is our way of holding onto our biases instead of growing through the pain of confronting them. I must credit the SFBC Brave Space Group for standing with me through this situation. (And as an aside, I encourage anyone who identifies as white to try this group when it reconvenes in September. It's a perfect place to work on confronting biases.) Anyway, it took me two years before I was ready to respond to this former colleague. To apologize. To agree with him that our workplace culture was white supremacist – that this was the bias of the totally white administration and the largely white staff. To thank him for confronting me because it pushed me to take a long, hard look at my part in that culture and my continued part in supporting the larger white supremacist culture. I told him I was working – alone and with others – on further educating myself about racism and antiracism and was committed to continuing to grow in this. I now feel resolution and growth, not shame.

Then there's what happened right here at SFBC... when younger leaders in our congregation started speaking out about the murder of George Floyd and racism in our society and institutions – including here at our church. They were using a language that was largely foreign to me and to many of us in the older generations. *White supremacist*, for instance. In my life experience, *white supremacist* had referred only to horrific and violent bigots like the KKK and white nationalists – not, as it does now, to the reality of white privilege and how it serves, even unconsciously, to lift some up by keeping others down. It was hard to hear the term used to describe our culture at large and the church we loved. I wanted to be seen as a peer by these younger people I loved and admired – while at the same time feeling like I couldn't keep up with all the changes in how racism was being talked about. There was an ageism piece in here too but that will have to wait for another sermon. Generational biases.

Thankfully, this was not my first rodeo. So I knew to LISTEN, to educate myself, to be willing to grow through the pain of change. This is why community is so important. When we already care about one another, we have a foundation for listening with respect.

That is the path of humility.

First – Listen for Spirit and follow its call.

Then – Listen with curiosity and wonder to the voices of the oppressed, even when they make us uncomfortable. Listen to learn!

Then – As we are confronted about mistakes we make, ways we hurt others, be willing to apologize, to thank them for bringing this to our attention, and to commit to educating ourselves and doing better in the future.

And – as we do this, we take a hard look at our biases, which make us want to reject any story that doesn't match our own.

In the process – we learn more about the new story. We educate ourselves. We admit we are human – that we make mistakes, that we don't know everything. That we are capable of change.

And finally – We commit to remaining open to new ideas, new ways of talking about oppression and injustice... new ways to do justice.

That's the path of humility.

One more story from my life.

There was the time when a young trans man – an intern under my supervision – confronted me in public about using a term that was offensive to him. I knew enough to apologize on the spot. But honestly, I was confused. I had been an activist in the LGBT community for many years – starting before he was born. (Can you hear the ageism here?) I considered myself well-educated. And I had been – at one time. But times had changed. As they do. And vocabulary had changed. Self-identities of transgender persons had changed. The whole conversation about gender had changed. And I was woefully out of date. I wanted just to brush his complaint aside. But something wouldn't let me. Spirit! I began to read current books and articles by trans authors. It was tough to hear them talk about how my generation had gotten it all wrong. But I kept going. And the new ways of understanding gender are natural to me now.

Those of you of a certain age will remember that verse from the Bob Dylan song:

*Come mothers and fathers throughout the land  
And don't criticize what you can't understand.  
Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command  
Your old road is rapidly agin'  
Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand,  
For the times they are a'changin.*

If you can't lend your hand. But we CAN lend our hands. We can lend our hands to those whose frame of reference is different than ours – IF we are willing to humble ourselves – to confront our biases, to listen, to recognize that, as we heard last week, Change is the only constant. And it is our biases that keep us from changing.

You may remember the character of Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof*. When his first daughter wanted to marry for love, Tevye was sure he could not make that shift from his tradition – his experience, his bias that that papa must choose the husband. But he did. And then when his second daughter wanted his blessing to marry a revolutionary, Tevye was adamant he could not make that leap – but he did – despite his bias to the contrary. And then when his third daughter wanted to marry outside the faith, he became rigid. He said *NO! If I bend that far I will break*. I've heard people say that. I've said it myself – “I'm too old to change now.”

We are never too old; we are just too stuck in our biases and not wanting to face the discomfort of change. Understandable. But not compatible with following the Way of Jesus.

Finally, I want to point out that I really think Micah put the cart before the horse. *What is required of you but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God?* I would suggest that we cannot hope to do justice without first learning to walk humbly. Many of us have tried. And when we do that, we become patronizing – approaching justice from our own

experience and biases and needs instead of from the experience and needs of those who live with the oppression. Arrogance. So let's turn it around.

What is required of us?

To walk humbly with Spirit.

To love mercy.

And to do justice.

May it be so.