

Unconscious Bias: A (Lutheran) Christian View

The Bible and Racial Justice

Wednesday Meditation | September 9, 2020

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Hello, and welcome to the fourth sermon in our series on *The Bible and Racial Justice*. One of our goals in doing this series is to grab some of the buzz words that are buzzing around these days as people talk about racism, then to slow down, take a look at what they mean, and reflect on them from a Christian perspective – and specifically from a Lutheran Christian perspective. In the next couple of weeks we will talk about phrases like Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter and then the idea of having privilege. For today, we'll focus in on unconscious bias.

I want to start by taking you on an imagination ride.

Imagine that you are in your home congregation for a worship service, and this Sunday you have brought a friend along with you. A friend who kind of knows about Christianity, but has never really engaged with a congregation or the usual topics of the Christian faith. So you sit there with them, excited that they were willing to try something new with you, and ready for them to have lots of questions about the service.

The pastor gets to preaching. And this Sunday she really gets to preaching. She's telling the story about the woman who was caught in adultery, describing with drama how a group of scribes and Pharisees stood her up publicly in front of Jesus and asked him to judge her: *Alright, Jesus, you claim to be this amazing legal expert. The law says to stone her. What do you say?* And Jesus bent down, and used his finger to trace patterns in the dirt. And then slowly he stood up and offered his judgment. "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And one by one the holy men turned and walked away. And Jesus said to the woman: *No one is left to condemn you, and I don't condemn you either. Go on your way, and from now on do not sin again* (John 8:1-11).

And your pastor, she's doing a great job today: tying this story into our modern lives, talking about how people judge us, about feelings of guilt, talking about how we all get tangled up in our own sinfulness, but Jesus comes to untangle us. She rounds it out with another good word from Jesus: "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin...[but] if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:34, 36).

Amen, you think to yourself. That was a good sermon. It was the basic gospel message you've known your whole life, but this sermon helped you think about it a little differently, helped you work through some of the things you're dealing with personally right now. And in the moment of silent reflection after the sermon, you're thinking about how freeing it really is to know that God sees your sinfulness and yet pulls you closer in to relationship with God; God doesn't condemn you but helps you to change; how much you love to hear that old, old story.

And then you hear your friend whisper quietly, "Psh. I'm not a sinner. This is why everybody thinks the Church is so judgey."

Because (1) I am a certified nerd about Church teachings and (2) my internal voice can be kind of snarky, my immediate internal response to that friend would probably be: *Oh, honey. You're missing the point.*

And what is the point of the Church's talk about sin? It's that all people are sinners. Even folks who are good people and who try their best. We all have harmful habits; we all give into temptation sometimes; we are all caught in sinful situations just by virtue of being alive in this world. But God is surprisingly understanding about all that, especially compared to humans. God is wildly merciful. God takes out a machete and cuts a path to forgiveness. God helps us to change for the better.

So we start with that uncomfortable reminder that we're all sinners – but it gets us to a message that is both honest and compassionate – and also helpful and empowering.

Responding to that message with “I'm not a sinner,” just cuts off all the goodness of the message before it can get in. It's a defense triggered by the uncomfortable part that blocks all the forgiveness and hope that come after. That's why it misses the point.

When racism comes up in a conversation and someone says, “But I'm not a racist!” I have the same reaction: “You're missing the point.”

Recognizing the uncomfortable truth of the sin in us individually and in the world and the way it moves is the first step towards the good news that God gives us grace and God gives us the power to change. In the same way, recognizing the uncomfortable truth of the racism in us and in the world is the first step towards the good news that we can do something about it.

The stories of people of color prove that racism is a powerful force in our country today, despite the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and the many laws trying to end racism. I know first- and second-hand stories of black people being stopped on the street and asked “What are you doing here?” in their own neighborhoods; of homes being appraised for \$100,000 less depending on the skin color of people in the family photos on the wall; of black men being followed around stores to make sure they won't steal anything.

When like these stories are gathered into statistics, the truth hits us in another way. For instance: according the U. S. Department of Justice, in both 2017 and 2018 the number of hate crimes motivated by race was far bigger than the number of hate crimes for other reasons. Hands down, no contest, not even close. The number of race-based hate crimes was larger than all other categories of hate crimes combined.¹

Living in a society with such strong racist patterns, we really can't help but soak up some racist ideas ourselves. Even if our parents taught us to treat all people equally. Even if we have always done our best to love everyone. We can't avoid racism, because it's in the air we breathe in every day.

This is true even for people of color. One of the most heartbreaking forms it can take is as internalized racism, where people of color live with the sense that they are inferior because that's what society has taught them.²

1 “2018 Hate Crime Statistics,” The United States Department of Justice, <https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/hate-crime-statistics> Accessed 8 September 2020.

2 Donna K. Bivens, “What is Internalized Racism?” in *Flipping the Script: White Privilege and Community Building*. Online: https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/What_is_Internalized_Racism.pdf Accessed 8 September 2020. “Internalized Racism,” Re-evaluation Counseling, 2 July 2020. <https://www.rc.org/publication/uer/InternalizedRacism> Accessed 8 September 2020.

The fact that we soak up biases from our culture and then carry them around inside of us – even when we really do believe that all people are equal – that’s what unconscious bias refers to. We are exposed to racist ideas so often that they take root in our minds, and sometimes, despite our best intentions, we act out of those biases.

One common unconscious bias among us white Christians is that we tend to associate “people of color” with “unchurched people.” Even though we know it’s not true and would never say that, it hangs in the background. And sometimes that assumption slips out, even when we are doing our best to be kind. Like a Christian woman on a plane who was so excited to hear that the Ethiopian man sitting next to her was a pastor. “And when did the gospel come to your people?” she asked joyfully. The pastor replied, “The first century, madame,” then gently explained to her that there have been churches in Ethiopia since the very beginning of the Church, and the Book of Acts even tells us the story of an Ethiopian man coming to be baptized (see Acts 8:26-40).

Another example is a fairly recent story from a white ELCA congregation. A church member came to worship, picked up the bulletin, saw on the cover a picture of a little black girl and a little white boy holding hands, and threw it on the ground, yelling that it was unacceptable.

Now that was a conscious bias. The unconscious bias was in the people all around him, who did not say a word about his behavior. They had the unconscious bias that many of us have: that when someone says something overtly racist, it is better to keep silent than to stir up a conflict and make everybody uncomfortable.

But imagine if this man had bonked his knee on a pew and yelled “F---!” in the middle of the organ prelude. I bet at least one sweet church lady would have said something. Maybe a mom would have gasped and covered her child’s ears.

But even though F-bombs don’t usually cause real harm, whereas bigotry feeds a system that hurts people emotionally, financially, physically, mentally every single day – I tend to hear more Christians speaking up about swear words than I do about racism. That’s an unconscious bias that many of us have – a bias about which problems are worth addressing.

Other examples of unconscious bias might include being afraid to ask a Black man for directions; or being surprised when a person of color speaks so articulately; or thinking that people who speak with an accent are less smart; or not believing the stories that people of color tell about their own experiences with racism.

Like I said earlier, recognizing our unconscious biases is important not because we ought to be wallowing in guilt – it’s important because it’s the first step towards healing and changing for the better. Only when we realize that we have these unconscious biases can we start undoing them.

And here’s the part that I think is really exciting:

Our Christian tradition gives us so many gifts to offer in the work of recognizing and undoing unconscious biases. We are equipped to be leaders in this work at a time when our society so needs help. Here’s why I think that:

What does it take to recognize and undo unconscious biases?

It takes humility and vulnerability to be able to set down our defenses, really take a look inside ourselves, and see the bad stuff going on in there. It takes a sense of conviction that that stuff is wrong in the first place, and a desire to change it. And then that humility comes back again to open us up to learning to be different.

Humility. Vulnerability. Self-reflection. Recognition of wrong. Desire to change. Openness to learning and to living differently. What does that sound like? It sounds like repentance!

For Christians, that process to repentance is central to our faith. It's something we've been taught, it's something we've practiced. And we have even trained in repenting of unknown – or unconscious – sins.

Repenting of unknown sins is in the Bible. In fact, according to Old Testament laws, sin offerings were basically for unintentional sins – the whole community was even told to make sacrifices for unintentional sin (see Lev. 4 and Numbers 15).³

In the New Testament, we see the struggle between our good intentions and commitment to God's will versus our own habits and temptations depicted in the words of Paul: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom. 7:15).

Traditional Lutheran worship services begin with self-reflection, confession, and repentance. And sometimes the confessions also give us the opportunity to admit we may have done wrong things without realizing it. In the words of one of the confessions from our hymnal: "In your compassion forgive us our sins, known and unknown, things we have done and things we have failed to do."⁴

So as Christians, we already see the importance of recognizing wrongs; of asking for forgiveness; of asking for help from God and other people to change. We have thousands of years of traditions and tools and teachings to help us recognize our own biases and to share with others in the same struggle. We have a lot to offer – we just need to start with ourselves.

And we Lutheran Christians have a teaching that could be super helpful here. There's this weird but very common logic that goes like this: "He can't be racist; he's a good person!" But we know that you can be a good person in many ways and still have unconscious biases – or commit more blatant sins. In fact, we say, all Christians are simultaneously saints and sinners.

Luther wrote that many folks in his time (including himself) were trying so desperately to become righteous that it was driving them to despair. But, he wrote

We...teach and comfort an afflicted sinner in this way: "Brother, it is impossible for you to become so righteous in this life that your body is as clear and spotless as the sun. You still have spots and wrinkles, and yet you are holy." But you say: "How can I be holy when I have sin and am aware of it?" "That you feel and acknowledge sin – this is good. Thank God, and do not despair. It is one step toward health when a sick man admits and confesses his disease." "But how will I be liberated from sin?" "Run to Christ, the Physician, who heals the contrite of heart and saves sinners. Believe in Him. If you believe, you are righteous, because you attribute to God the glory of being almighty, merciful, truthful, etc...And the sin that still remains in you is not imputed but is forgiven for the sake of Christ, in whom

3 Tracey R. Rich, "Qorbanot: Sacrifices and Offerings," *Judaism 101*. <https://www.jewfaq.org/qorbanot.htm>

4 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 95.

you believe and who is perfectly righteous in a formal sense. His righteousness is yours; your sin is His."⁵

We are simultaneously saints and sinners; at the same time people who do wrong and who are made right by God as we admit our sin and trust God to forgive us.

We can simultaneously have unconscious biases and work for racial justice – as we recognize those biases and make them part of our work.

So let's do the humble work of self-reflection, of seeking out our own unconscious biases. And when we find them, let's hand them over first to the forgiving and transforming power of God. And then let's offer them up as part of our commitment to work to build a better world for all people – the work that we must start within ourselves.

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another.

God of all mercy and consolation, come to the help of your people, turning us from our sin to live for you alone. Give us the power of your Holy Spirit that we may confess our sin, receive your forgiveness, and grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, Amen.

Gracious God, have mercy on us. We confess that we have turned from you and given ourselves into the power of sin. We are truly sorry and humbly repent. In your compassion forgive us our sins, known and unknown, things we have done and things we have failed to do. Turn us again to you, and uphold us by your Spirit, so that we may live and serve you in newness of life through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, Amen.

*God, who is rich in mercy, loved us even when we were dead in sin, and made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved. In the name of + Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. Almighty God strengthen you with power through the Holy Spirit, that Christ may live in your hearts through faith. Amen.*⁶

5 Martin Luther, Lectures on Galatians (1535), collected in *Luther's Works* vol. 26, ed. J J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), pp. 232-236. Online: <https://silverdalelutheran.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Same-Time-Saint-Sinner.pdf>

6 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pp. 95-96.