



It's Not Just About Us. It's About Me.

TEXT
1 Samuel 1:1-18

June 2, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr., and Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Rev. Are

According to *Atlantic Magazine*, there are two types of people in the airport. There are those who know how things can get messed up, so they get there early. Why risk it? I mean you aren't late for a plane. You are either on it or you're not. And there are those who actually choose to arrive at the gate as the doors are closing. Why waste time sitting at the gate? When these two types of people are married, they take separate cars even when on the same flight. There are evidently two kinds of people at the airport.¹

Abigail Van Buren said there are two types of people in the world: those who walk into a room and say, "There you are," and those who walk into a room and say, "Here I am." Some say there are two types of people in the world: those who greet the day with, "Good morning, Lord," and those who greet the day with, "Good Lord, it's morning."

When I was growing up, I was taught there are two kinds of people in the world: those who are prejudiced and those who are not. As a child, I watched my father and others of the church participate in the Civil Rights Movement. So,

I believed we were not prejudiced. No, that was other people. I'm not biased.

I see this differently now. I have a more nuanced understanding of bias. I have come to believe that no one escapes bias. To assume that I can be completely objective and that the particulars of my life hold no sway on how I see the world is self-deceiving.

The truth is, no one completely escapes bias.

Rev. Nishioka

When I was in college, I was dating a young woman of Filipino heritage. She was from Los Angeles, and I went to visit her and her family. I was staying with my grandparents, so of course, they met her. When I got back to their house, my grandmother sat me down and told me I could not be in love with this woman, let alone marry her. When I asked her why not, she told me that being Filipino, it meant her people came from the islands, and it was steamy and hot. Consequently, they were steamy and sweaty, which was not attractive. Then she went on to explain that I could not marry a Korean either, because they ate too much spicy food, and so they had a bad temper. And

then I could not marry a Chinese because they loved money too much, and I would end up poor because my wife would spend all the money. It was obvious to me that in my grandmother's worldview, the only option for me was to marry a Japanese woman. Rest assured, white people did not even make the list.

When I got back home to Seattle and told Dad about what grandmother had said, he asked, "Did she go through her list with you?"

"Yes," I told him.

"Rodger," Dad said, "your grandmother is a bigot."

I remember saying, "You think?" All of us are biased in one way or another.

The story of Hannah and Eli tells us that bias is not new. Hannah is unable to have a child and is so desperate she is in the temple praying fervently — so fervently that her eyes are closed and only her lips are moving.

Rev. Are

OK, one thing must be said about this text. The scripture touches us in tender places, and this story speaks to several experiences. Hannah, like many, is brokenhearted because she wants a child. Many among us

know that grief. Her yearning for a child is a very real thing. And we should talk about that sometime. But today, there is something else in this text that we need to see: an obvious display of bias.

Rev. Nishioka

Eli, the chief priest, sees this woman praying and assumes that she must be drunk. His bias gets in the way of seeing what is actually happening. He misreads the situation spectacularly and scolds her and humiliates her. But Hannah defends herself passionately and calls Eli out. When she says, "I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman," Hannah is naming the chief priest's prejudice, his bias, and he responds by blessing her.

Rev. Are

We tend to think of bias as an attitude. But psychologists are finding a biological component to bias. It shows up in our brains.

Dr. Jennifer Eberhardt, a psychology professor at Stanford, explains the "mechanics of bias." She says our brains are wired to use the tool of "categorization." We categorize food and furniture and animals. These categories hold information, but also feelings, beliefs and associations. So, if you see a cat, you don't have to know the particular cat to know the category. So you might immediately want to take the cat home, or if you are the type, you might think an

exorcism is in order. And if it's the kind of cat that wants to eat you for dinner, you only want to see them in the zoo. You don't need to know the particular animal to know all of this because your brain knows the category.

We categorize people too: Muslims and Catholics; rich and poor; educated and not; Kansans and Missourians. Dr. Eberhardt says, "Whether good or bad ... our beliefs and attitudes can become so strongly associated with the category that they are automatically triggered, affecting our behavior. ... So, for example, simply seeing a black person can automatically bring to mind a host of associations: ... this person is a good athlete, this person doesn't do well in school, this person is poor, this person dances well, this person lives in a black neighborhood, this person should be feared."

Rev. Nishioka

Dr. Eberhardt continues, the process of making these connections is bias ... and this is the important part. ... It can happen unintentionally, unconsciously, effortlessly; it can happen in a matter of milliseconds. These associations take hold of us no matter our values, no matter our conscious beliefs, no matter what kind of person we wish to be.²

Science is teaching us that we are all biased. I think there are two types of people in the world: those who pretend they are not biased, and those who know they are biased, but battle it. If bias is a natural part of human life, then it should not

be a source of shame. We have placed shame in the wrong place. Don't be ashamed that you are biased. But don't let bias result in actions that make you ashamed. We have to battle our bias.

Several years ago, one of my former students invited me to preach at his church outside of Albany, Georgia. It was Martin Luther King, Jr., Weekend, and the pastor asked me to preach on God's call for justice and righteousness. I didn't have a lot of experience in South Georgia, and honestly, I grew more than a little unnerved once I left the interstate because I began to see more and more confederate flags. There were confederate flags in front of homes and even businesses.

I got to the church and, sure enough, across the street was a home with a confederate flag proudly waving in the Sunday morning sun. I commented on it to my pastor, and he said, "That family worships here. You'll probably meet them." When we sat down in the chancel before worship, I looked out at the congregation, and toward the back of the sanctuary was an older white man who did not look happy to be there. I thought, "That's got to be him." He kept his arms crossed the whole service. I avoided looking at him while I was preaching.

After worship, he came up to me, and I remember thinking, "Oh great, here we go." Then he warmly shook my hand and thanked me for preaching such a fine sermon. He told me that he was raised by a beautiful black

woman who had helped him early on to see the wonder of difference. And he said that he was proud that his daughter had married an African-American young man. He told me he was the finest young man he has ever known — and that while all grandparents will say it, his grandkids really were the smartest and best-looking kids in the world. I had let my bias get the better of me. I told him it was an honor to meet him.

Rev. Are

Twelve years ago, I invited a guest preacher to preach for us. You loved him. “Get him back,” you said. I did. That preacher was Rodger. He’s back.

After worship, we went to lunch and laughed and talked about what a great congregation you are. Then somehow the subject of race surfaced. Rodger, you said, at the seminary, often when race was discussed, it was presumed to be a black/white issue solely. As a Japanese American, it left you feeling a bit invisible.

I said, “Well, maybe that was because of history. After all, the World War II detention centers that were so painful, they weren’t in the south, they were out west.” Rodger just smiled. You know that smile that I’m talking about. It’s a smile that lets you know you don’t know why, but you know you are sitting in the stupid chair.

Rodger said, “Actually, Tom, there was one center for Japanese internment in the South. Do you know where it was? It was in Montreat, North

Carolina.” Montreat, as you know, is the conference center for the Presbyterian Church. When the nation decided to hold not German, not Italian, but American citizens of Japanese descent, the Presbyterian Church said, “Here, let us help.”

And then I remembered Rodger preaching in Montreat. I remembered him staying in the same inn, sleeping in the same rooms in which his ancestors were kept. I remembered how he had led youth in prayer on that mountain, knowing that his ancestors had prayed for liberation on that mountain. It takes courage to battle bias. Rodger is one who has taught me that.

Rev. Nishioka

There are two types of people in the world: those who pretend they are not biased, and those who know they are biased, but battle it. Bias is a natural part of human life. I have embodied it. You have embodied it. Even Eli, the chief priest, embodied it. We do not need to feel guilty because we have biases. But we need to be attentive to the consequences of bias. Don’t be ashamed that you are biased. But don’t let bias result in actions that make you ashamed. We have to battle our bias.

Rev. Are

A few years ago, I, along with some of you, worshipped at the Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church, an African American Congregation. It was just after the horrible shooting at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston.

Upon entering the church, I came face to face with a woman about my age. I don’t know her, but her face seemed to register fear. She was afraid of me. Of course, here I am, a strange white man the Sunday after Dylan Roof murders African Americans in Bible study. I was ashamed that I had not anticipated that. Before I could say anything, with anxiety still in her eyes, she pushed forth her hand and said, “Welcome to Metropolitan.”

What I saw was courage, and I witnessed a woman battling her bias. She didn’t know me, and I meant her no harm. But she couldn’t know that because in her brain I’m in the category of folks who have done her harm. But still she battled the bias.

It was an act of courage — the kind of courage that only comes as a result of discipline. We were caught in the American narrative of racism, but she was speaking the language of another kingdom.

Rev. Nishioka

Friends, we titled this preaching series “Why can’t we get past this?” But maybe we have been asking the wrong question. Racism is less something we get past, and more something we battle. We are all defined by the story of America, and racism has been a part of that story from the beginning. But we are also defined by the story of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ. And that story tells us, by God’s grace, we can have the courage to really see each other and see the particularities

that define our experience of the world.

Rev. Are

And by that same grace, we can push against and push back the structural racism that allows oppression and insult, injustice and tyranny to continue to injure people of color, all citizens of this land that we love.

Rev. Nishioka

And by that same grace, we can own our own bias, but battle that bias so that it does not lead us into actions/behaviors that would injure others and make us ashamed.

Rev. Are

Maybe we won't get past this. Maybe God alone can heal that which we cannot heal. But we can get better, for we live to God's promised day when our children will grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed, and racism is something we can battle for the good of all. Until God's grace removes the pain of racism from the earth, we, by the grace of God, can stay in the battle.

¹Amanda Mull, "There Are Two Types of Airport People," *The Atlantic*, May 29, 2019

²Jennifer Eberhardt, *Biased*, New York: Random House, 2019, pp. 31–32

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.