

LIKE ME

Mark Twain said, "There are two types of people in the world: those who think there are two types of people in the world..... and those who don't."

To the Mark passage:

After a flurry of hectic activities, including feeding 5,000 people and lecturing the Pharisees, Jesus leaves Galilee for a little rest.

He heads North to Tyre, which is on the Mediterranean Sea; Jesus hopes that no one will notice him there, so that he can be left alone.

But,.... he could not escape notice; his reputation had proceeded him.

A local woman, whose little daughter had a troubled spirit, had heard about Jesus, and she went to him.

The Gentile woman bowed down at his feet, an unusual gesture to do for a Galilean. She then begged him to cure her daughter.

Jesus, perhaps a bit annoyed by the intrusion... or perhaps a bit perplexed at being approached by a Gentile, states, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

The woman knew that the label *children* meant his fellow Jews, and the term *dogs* meant Gentiles. OUCH, ,,what a comment, especially coming from Jesus? ????

Did his remarks come from "elitism" or "racism" or ignorance or misunderstanding his mission, or just errant words from a jaded man???

Or..... a little of all of the above??? ..... who knows, but the words and the meaning is clear: Jesus did not intend to minister to the Gentiles.

Unruffled by the comment, the woman boldly retorts, "**Sir**, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Meaning: there is enough food for the children and the dogs, suggesting these were friendly, pet dogs who are welcome under *the table*.

Credit Jesus for wonderfully adjusting to the woman's confrontation, and we must note how quickly, easily he changed!

Jesus tripped over this brazen encounter with this Gentile woman, but caught himself when challenged, and CHANGED his entire attitude about Gentiles, as demonstrated by his words to her and following actions.

He replied to her, “For saying that, you may go — — — the trouble has left your daughter.”  
And, her daughter was healed.

One thing I find very exciting about this story is that the gentile woman’s challenge to Jesus got him to see his mission in a wider context, .....and if Jesus is prepared to learn in that manner, then, as followers of Christ, so must we.

Also,..... I wonder, are there times when we must play the role of the woman, and not accept the way things are?

Are there times when we must challenge the religious status quo / the ways things are/ the assumed expectations.....to move things / change attitudes to a wider and more inclusive context of understanding?

Sometimes, we must be bold.

This little exchange with the Gentile woman was not just an anomaly; Jesus did not heal her child as a way to dismiss her.

This encounter marked / began a new direction for Jesus’ ministry and Jesus demonstrated this new approach, this new inclusiveness with action!

After leaving Tyre, he went South, on through Galilee, to another Gentile area, known as the Decapolis the 10 city region. He took his ministry to the Gentiles.

This is another challenge for us, which is to put our declarations and beliefs into action. As James frames it: putting our faith into action.

It is easy to affirm equality and inclusiveness; it is much harder to practice it.

For example, I know that many Fair complexion children in the South, during the civil rights era, sang in church, “Red and Yellow, Black and White, they are precious in his sight”, yet refused to swim, use the same washroom or drinking fountain... with those other “precious” people.

It is easy to affirm equality and inclusiveness; it is much harder to practice it.

More often than not, our lives proclaim a different stance. More often than not, how we live states,..... “It is just too bad that everyone isn’t like me.... or like us.”

Have you ever had to confront your own prejudices.. Or ..rethink opinions and assumptions you took for granted?

Has following Christ presented us with new ideas about people different to those we were used to?

*I’ve noticed that in Saskatchewan, racism and prejudice against people of dark complexion is NOT really a issue.*

Yet,.....we often trip over our attitudes, prejudice and assumptions about aboriginals. .... Oh, we’re careful to say we are inclusive, in much the same way that “Yankees” do about African-Americans.

*For example, a good friend of mine at Seminary had very dark skin. She grew up on a cotton farm in Tenn. She told me she'd rather live in the South where racism is at least out on the table, because then she could better deal with it and confront it.*

I asked her what did she mean?

She said, while living in the so called "inclusive" / non-racist North, she would apply for many jobs, but not get hired. Numerous times, she'd call about an apartment availability, and based on her educated, standard American dialect over the phone, was told to "come on over to see it." But, when she arrived, was abruptly informed that it was just rented.

She said to me, "At least the South is honest."

What do we say about First Nation's people?

AND, do our attitudes and declarations match our actions, our neighbourhoods and our social lives?

We affirm that God loves all people, that God's Grace pours out to everyone,..... and that all are welcome to our church, without judgment and prejudice. Yet,.... what about gays holding hands in church?

\*\*....."Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs....."

I don't mean to be harsh or judgmental,..... so I'll do some confession.

I've struggled with a negative prejudice against Southerners. I'm not sure why.

I suppose I was influenced about news reports that showed abuses during the civil rights marches in the South, ....and all the degrading TV shows and Movies about Southerners, that were made in the late 60s, likely had an influence, too.

Regardless, I pre-judged Southerners; I did not respect them.

God does have a sense of humour.

I ended up going to the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.... where over 90% of the students were from Dixie.

I learned my degrading views of Southerners was VERY wrong. They were different, but no better or worse than I was, ... and some of my dearest friends are from Georgia, South Carolina, Louisiana and even Texas.

Nevertheless, I still have areas that need work and I have other prejudices.

Generally, when confronted with our racism and prejudice, ..most of us don't adjust as quick or as purely as Jesus did. In fact, we really don't appreciate our prejudices and favouritism to be exposed / confronted.

When we are forced to see our prejudices and racism, we tend to get defensive and even angry. I imagine, the disciples with Jesus struggled over Jesus' new acceptance and expanded ministry. And, likely the early church struggled with the words of James..... as we do.

When we turn to James, we learn that the ostracised are not necessarily someone of a different race. James writes about how we can be exclusive towards people of a “lower” socio-economic bracket. Or... to put it differently,... we tend to be MORE open and accepting of people with money. One of James’ assertions, which sounds remarkably contemporary, is his recognition that those who possess wealth are often part of the system that keeps the poor in poverty. The affluent must share what they have.

THE BURDEN FOR CHANGE IS ON THOSE WITH POWER AND MONEY!

And sadly, as reported in the Star Phoenix this past week, during the past 25 years, the gap between rich and poor in our province has widened. That means our system is Not fair.

Racism is not based on reason,... and along with destructive, negative prejudice .... both are usually founded on greed, ignorance and fear.

Racism and negative prejudice are NOT innate / we are not born with those destructive attitudes. They are acquired/ learned, and they can be reversed. We can become aware; we can change. But, like any bad habit, it can be difficult.... and a process,... because it may mean exposing and dealing with the underlining reasons.

Some unfounded bias are merely simple prejudices we learned as a child, and those usually can be easily removed. I said “simple”, but not innocent or harmless. I know someone who simply doesn’t like French people. Harmless,.....??? Who knows how it plays out and who is hurt?

As mentioned, racism and negative prejudice can come from ignorance, greed or fear.

Ignorance because we don’t know better, we haven’t experienced awareness or... we’re too lazy to do the research.

For example, typecasting / assuming African-Americans make better basketball players is Not true. People thought that about the Jews, when they tended to dominate the game in the 1930's. Assumptions get us in trouble almost every time.

Examples based on fear and greed are more obvious. Fearful people, in power / in the comfort zone.... don’t like change, so those how threaten the status quo / the current system are devalued and objectified.

Debasing the “enemy”....which is done while at war so they can be more easily killed, is a combination of ignorance, fear and greed.

**We know** the Taliban are bad people .... because.???? they don’t like equality and democracy??? Or because..... they are the enemy.

They are against us / they want to take what we want..... they are bad. Yet, I’ve never met one. We can’t judge a person based on a label.

An aside, in 2001 a group of Taliban were invited, honoured quest in Texas to learn better farming skills in arid regions. They were all well behaved. That was before the war. Who / what changed and why?

Racism and negative prejudice comes in many forms and flavours.

Sometimes our arrogance and disregard is blatant racism, manifesting in overt exploitation and persecution, more often our exclusiveness and prejudice is a subtle as a homogeneous neighbourhood.

The subject of our negative prejudice can have many faces:

- of those in another province,
- of those from a different culture or country or region of our country,
- of those who are more liberal or more conservative.
- of those who support redemptive violence.
- of those who never imagine a reason for violence.
- of those of a different religion and different customs
- of those with more money or.... with less money.
- of those who are counterculture or of those who toe the line.
- of those with a different sexual orientation.
- of those who are large in body or of those who are thin
- of those who do sports or of those who disdain sports.

You get the point. It basically comes down to those who are NOT like me,.... not like us. It is ....**Us verse them.**

This is all very sad.... because it is pointless, hurtful and destructive.

We Mennonites know this. Persecution is part of our heritage. At times, we've been labelled, pre-judged and ostracized.

Moreover, I dare say, we each know this on a personal level, too.

It happens on the playground..... It happens at work and even with friends.

We all know....whether we admit it or not is another thing, but we know, we prefer to be in the group picking on a weaker person or group, than being the victim. Yet,..... why..... Why the prejudice, bigotry, elitism and exclusiveness?

Why,..... especially when it is more than just ignorance???

Why the fear? Why do we seek to isolate ourselves from those who are different. Are we afraid of people who are different because they may change our world or we may lose what we have if they are allowed in? Are afraid we will lose control if we are inclusive?

Is racism and prejudice a form of self preservation, but why are we so afraid?

Is what we hold dear that fragile? **Are we that fragile?**

Are we that insecure, and why?

??????

I wonder if the fear and insecurity that feeds racism and prejudice is less a statement of “BE like me” and more a cry to..... **LIKE ME?**

Scott Peck, in his book, *The Different Drum*, reflected about the daughter in the Mark text. He asked, “what if her ‘demon’ was the demon of self loathing or depression?”

Seems we often think of healing as being of a physical nature, but what of the person who has hated himself or herself for so long, who suddenly and miraculously understands how much God loves him or her.

Maybe it was love and acceptance that healed the daughter.

Maybe what healed her was Jesus’ grace of considering her important, .....or maybe it was her mother’s intense love for her, demonstrated by her passion to stop at nothing for her daughter’s healing?

And, maybe Jesus also grew in grace and wholeness by being open and gracious?

Maybe it is love that saves us?

Maybe if we understand that we are loved, in spite of our faults, mistakes and weaknesses, we won’t be tempted to pre-judge, stereotype or put down others. ?????

I think being loved, knowing that we are loved takes away the fear of change and the insecurities that feed racism and destructive prejudice.

We can be part of the problem.... or part of the solution.

We can be part of the destruction or... the healing.

God loves us just the way we are.

Do we believe that?

Can we strive to be that Grace?