

1 Samuel 3:1-20
Psalm 139:1-5,12-17
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
JOHN 1:43-51

This is the table; we are the dream

Every week, we are given the gift of four scripture readings assigned for our Sunday services, scriptures which often offer a number of possibilities for a preacher who seeks to connect the Bible to our lives here and now *and* to what God wants to do.

After almost 30 years of preaching, today's scriptures are familiar to me, yet always fresh. And today, one theme leaps off the page from both the Old Testament reading and from the Gospel to me: the theme of prejudice.

An interesting theme to reflect on, on this particular weekend and this particular point in our nation's history.

One of the nasty things that prejudice – literally, pre-judging someone – does is it involves someone saying to someone else explicitly or implicitly, “No you can't” *because of who you are regardless of ability*. Another thing prejudice does is sometimes get into the heads of the recipients of prejudice, sometimes so deeply that they don't even realize it, getting them to think, “No, I can't.” We have examples of both kinds of prejudice in these two readings.

The Gospel is more obvious. Philip was an enthusiastic new recruit as a follower of Jesus. “Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph of Nazareth.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’”

Talk about prejudice. Not “tell me about this guy,” or “let me check him out,” but a complete “blow-off” based on the town Jesus grew up in. You see, Nazareth was a very small town so obscure it's not even mentioned in the entire Old Testament, and besides it was in an unfashionable part of the country. Thirty years ago if some Americans said, “Maybe someday we'll have a Polish Pope” or “Maybe someday we'll have a President from Arkansas”, those were punch lines for jokes. It was kind of like that, only more so. Philip's response was simple: “come and see.” Nathanael came, saw, and was conquered, saying to Jesus “Rabbi, you are the Son of God!” but if Nathanael had not first put aside and then thrown out his prejudice, he never would have met Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament reading is more subtle. God calls Samuel to be a prophet. According to tradition, Samuel was about 12 years old when this happened, serving as an acolyte and apprentice to the High Priest Eli – and having a sleep-over in the same room with The Ark of the Covenant – the box in which lay the original autographed copies of the Ten Commandments. Even so, neither Samuel nor Eli thought God would speak, personally, and directly and out loud, to Samuel – didn't that just happen in the old days? It took three tries before Eli got over his assumption that things like this didn't happen

any more – and his prejudice that God would talk to this boy instead of to him, the High Priest. And only when Eli told Samuel how to act if he heard The Voice again did Samuel get over his *own* prejudice – against *himself*, his assumption that God couldn't possibly be calling someone like him. A twelve year old? God can call anyone God wants to.

That is an insidious kind of prejudice, when people *internalize* some “ceiling” on their dreams that someone or the entire culture has taught them exists. It took even God four times to break “the glass ceiling” over Samuel's head, because it only broke when Samuel wanted to break it, too.

Nelson Mandela tells in his Autobiography about an incident when he was in exile from his beloved South Africa as part of the struggle for liberation and he boarded a plane in Zaire. As he boarded he happened to glance into the cockpit of the plane and he writes that he thought to himself, “What's that black man doing in the captain's seat?” and then he realized: that black man *was* the captain. Decades of hearing from so many authority figures in his homeland under the apartheid regime that “people like you **can't** do all sorts of things” had an impact. If the racists had “gotten into the head” of even *Nelson Mandela* for even two seconds, how many other heads did they get into, telling millions of people, “No, you can't.” To his everlasting credit, Mandela's response to all that was “Yes, we can” – and when he said “we” he meant *every one* of all colors in South Africa.

Let me give another example of this insidious kind of prejudice that's more recent and closer to home. Last month, a little girl and her mother were sitting in the cafeteria at the Durham, North Carolina Hospital when the little girl excitedly pointed to a 30ish woman in a white lab coat and said “Look, Mommy, a woman doctor!”

Her mother replied, “Oh, honey, she's probably just a nurse.”

Now, there are a lot of things wrong with that brief statement by her mother. First of all, never use the word “just” before the phrase “a nurse.” *Just* a healing professional who saves and transforms lives? That's prejudice for a start. But the mother shuts her daughter's excitement down with her authoritative-sounding but totally ignorant “probably.” As if her daughter's excitement wasn't even worth exploring. And finally, of course, the mother's statement was factually *wrong*. The young woman in the lab coat already has a Doctor of Dental Medicine degree and is in the midst of a six year program to become a maxillofacial surgeon.

I know this because the woman in the lab coat is my step-daughter.

I'd love to go up to that cynical, prejudiced mother and say, “Don't put a ceiling on your own daughter's dreams. Becoming a nurse would be a great, great thing. But women *can* be doctors. In fact, women *can* be surgeons too. Yes, you can.”

Sometimes people may get told “No, you can't” by authoritative studies, statistics and all that. I'm sure there are studies about the odds of safely landing an airplane with 155 people aboard which has *no engines* left with no fatalities and with no life-threatening injuries to anyone on the plane or on the ground in the largest metropolitan area of the country. The studies probably said, “No, you can't.” “Not humanly possible.” And I am so grateful that Capt. Sullenberger ignored any studies that said, “No, you

can't" and instead insisted, "Yes, we can." And now pilots all over the country will study this incident, and what's "possible" has grown. "Yes, we can" can save lives as well as transform them.

And "No, you can't" can end lives as well as limit them. The deep viciousness of prejudice is exposed when it goes from "no, you can't" to "no, you won't" Anybody ever hear of a lady named Rosa Parks? (Responses.) What did she do? (Responses.) Did what she did take courage? (Responses.) I myself never realized how much courage Rosa Parks had until I heard the story of Thomas Edward Brooks. Anyone ever heard of him? His story is not so well known. He was a 21 year old soldier in the then-recently integrated U.S. Army who made the mistake of getting on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1950 by the front door. That was against the law for blacks. The rule was, "if you're black, stay back." The bus driver called the police, all of whom of course were white. When the first police officer arrived, he didn't arrest him. He bludgeoned him with his nightstick, and then shot him dead, in front of all of the passengers.

Thomas Edward Brooks, U.S. army, had lots of company as a victim of racism. Lots of company. Let me mention just four others – four little girls who were in their Sunday school classroom in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama one Sunday in September, 1963. They had just completed their Sunday school lesson on "Love thy neighbor." A bomb was thrown out of a car by a white man (who was not prosecuted for decades). Those four little girls died in the blast and 21 others were injured.

One of their classmates was not with them that Sunday and so she lived. Maybe she was home sick; I don't know. Another little black girl, same age, same city, same church. Anyone know who that was? (Responses.) Condoleezza Rice. That's how she happened to live to grow up to become Secretary of State of the United States of America.

What might her classmates have grown up to be? We'll never know . What might Thomas Edward Brooks, and far too many others, have grown up to be? We'll never know. How many other lives are being lost, right now, by subtler forms of prejudice – after all, anything would be subtler than what happened to them!

What we do know is that prejudice is sin, and sin is like toxic waste: it stays in the soil, in the water, in the air unless it's dealt with. It's not enough to stop creating more toxic waste because the after-effects in the ecosystem can be long-lasting. That's true of sins that impact the social system and impact people spiritually as well. You have to acknowledge them, dig them up, and de-tox the soil and our spirits, with God's help.

Anybody ever done research on their ancestors? (Responses.) It adds vividness to history, doesn't it, to know what your own flesh and blood were doing back whenever. Of course, part of the deal when you research is you have to admit the reality of what you find – even if it's toxic waste.

These [I hold them up] are photographs I have of oil portraits of my great-great-great-great grandfather, and grandmother, Daniel and Mary Hubbard. The originals were painted in 1765 by John Singleton Copley, the premier American portrait painter of the late colonial period, and now hang in the Art Institute of Chicago, where I've seen them.

Now, getting your portraits painted by Copley was not like going into CVS and getting a passport photo. This was an expensive luxury. And these clothes my ancestors have on were expensive threads. So I looked at these and said, “Who were these people, and where did they get all this money? And where is it now?” Well, I found out.

In 1775, Daniel was a Tory, meaning someone who supported the British side in the brand-new American Revolution. In fact, he was on the short list of Bostonians to be “dealt with” (after a presumed British evacuation of Boston) by a group called The Sons of Liberty, the same guys who put together “The Boston Tea Party.” Well, Daniel had a pretty good idea of what *that* might look like, and he resolved to leave town if the British Army and Navy did. When General Washington brought the cannons captured from Fort Ticonderoga down to Dorchester Heights and was able to fire at will on the British army and fleet – anybody study this stuff in school? – the British admiral said, “Time to go.”

So Daniel probably said to his wife, “Dear, we’re going.” To which she replied something like, “No, dear; *you’re* going. We are Americans.” All but one of the children stayed with her in Boston – which is why my family grew up there. She got most of the kids and he got most of the money (not the last time a settlement like that was arrived at).

The point of history is that when Daniel left Boston, he went to his *plantation* on St. Croix. A plantation in 1775 in the West Indies means only one thing: he owned slaves.

This toxic waste story gets even more personal than that. The one child who went with him later died on *his* plantation in what was then British Guiana. Which is now the independent country of Guyana...where, among others, members of three different families in our parish were born.

[I turn to Jonathan Pitt.] Jonathan, this means our ancestors may have known each other under very painful circumstances – a lot more painful for your ancestors than for mine. [Response.] There are no adequate words to express the shame I feel. But by the grace of God, we can dig up toxic waste, acknowledge it, and work to get its effects out of the world we live in today. Especially because this particular toxic waste called slavery is poisoning the land to this day, and the “crops” we still raise reflect that.

But the grace of God is more powerful than toxic waste – it was in fact a former slaver *trader*, John Newton, who wrote “Amazing Grace” in his amazement that God had given him a chance to change after the awful things he had done.

I could quote his words, but I’d rather quote some other words. Better yet, let’s quote them together, one sentence from one of the most famous speeches in American history, words many of us know, words that still give me goosebumps when I hear recordings of that voice saying them.

Just repeat after me. “I have a dream” (“I have a dream.”) that one day (“that one day”) the sons of former slaves (“the sons of former slaves”) and the sons of former slave-owners (“and the sons of former slave-owners”) shall sit down together at the table of brotherhood [I touch the altar] (“shall sit down together at the table of brotherhood”). I have a dream today! (“I have a dream today!”)

This [I touch the altar] is the table, and **we are the dream**. Every week here, this part of Dr. King’s dream comes true. It’s routine *and that’s the best part*. Not once a

year at some self-conscious “brotherhood service” but every week. Sunday dinner with the family which we are. But it helps to remember how unusual we are in the history of the world. We are making history every week.

But this just gives us a foundation upon which to dream bigger dreams. This Tuesday, we will be witnessing what President Bush and many others have called “an historic event”: the inauguration of the first black President of the United States, held at the U.S. Capitol, which had 600 laborers involved in its construction, *400 of whom were slaves*. He and his family will move into the White House, which was also built in part by slave labor. How many people are there who never thought they’d live to see this day? That glass ceiling is shattered. Gone. And so are many peoples’ excuses, as I heard a black man interviewed in a barbershop two days after the election say to CNN: “Now, some guy says to me, ‘I can’t do “whatever” because my father left me when I was two” and I’ll say, “Yeah, that happened to the President, too. You got no excuses.””

And there are no excuses for any of us to think that one mortal man, no matter who, can change everything by himself, or that the government can or should fix *everything*. A President and the government can and should help. But we the people have unfinished business to attend to.

Let’s start with our parish’s four mission priorities. All addicts will not magically be healed by next Friday. *Can we* continue to do our part as a church in the struggle against addiction? (“Yes, we can.”) Domestic violence will not end on Thursday. *Can we* continue to do our part as a church in the struggle against domestic violence? (“Yes, we can.”) Hunger and homelessness will not end on Wednesday. *Can we* continue to do our part as a church in the struggle against hunger and homelessness? (“Yes, we can”) and no, despite this historic event, racism will not end at 12 noon on Tuesday. *Can we* continue to do our part as a church in the struggle against racism? (“Yes, we can”)

Let us pray. “God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power. Help us to lift up those who have their spirits quenched or their lives shattered by prejudice of any kind, and help us to work together as one church family for your glory and for the well-being of **all**; through Jesus Christ Our Lord, Amen.

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