

41 bullets and a wallet.

February 4, 1999. A 23-year old immigrant from Guinea was shot at 41 times by 4 white officers after they mistook him for a suspected rapist, after he pulled out his wallet for identification. 19 shots tore through his flesh, ripped through his arteries, and left him dead in a pool of blood after returning home from a meal. Amadou Diallo, an immigrant with no criminal record, who sold goods on the NYC sidewalks in the day and studied for assimilation at night, was fatally killed because he was an “other,” because he looked “suspicious,” because his skin was black.

“All blacks are criminals.” “All Muslims are terrorists.” Unfortunately, these are quotes taken from the comment sections in response to the recent Boston Marathon bombings.

The officers, by the way, were charged with second-degree murder and reckless endangerment. And of course, they were acquitted of all charges...

Amadou Diallo’s death, and the officers’ trial and verdict contributed to demonstrations against police brutality and racial profiling as well as several experiments in the field of social psychology. In the book, “Beyond Common Sense: Psychological Science in the Courtroom” one such research study is outlined. The participants in the experiment were both non-law enforcement volunteers and police officials and the apparatus was a video game. The parameters of the game were that participants had to decide whether or not to shoot or holster their weapon when confronted with black and white targets. Across the board, participants (both black and white) were quicker to shoot at an armed black person than an armed white person and slower to holster their weapon when confronted with an unarmed black as opposed to an unarmed white. These results suggesting that at some point and place in our society we are learning and becoming biologically conditioned to associate “black” with “criminal.”

Similarly and perhaps more disquieting, Siri Carpenter writes that in a 2004 study at Ohio State, a team of psychologists found that when showing pictures at a speed of 30 milliseconds (a speed too fast to *actively* register a facial description) the amygdala, the part of the brain where fear usually stems, displayed greater activity when participants were looking at black faces as opposed to white; thereby suggesting again that racial biases had become implicit and deeply rooted in the subconscious fiber of our collective mind.

Finally, a 2008 study by Jens Agerstrom and Dan-Olof Rooth on “Implicit Prejudice and Ethnic Minorities,” found that words and names alone can trigger these implicit biases which condition how we respect and consider our religious other. Rooth and Agerstrom submitted 193 identical and fictional applications to major and minor corporate employers. The only difference being that half of the applications had Swedish names and the other half had Muslim names. Surprise, surprise, guess who got called for an interview and who didn’t?

Now are blacks criminals? Are Muslims terrorists? Yes. But so are whites, browns, greens, yellows and Christians. Even still, all too often we make one-sided generalizations and complacently allow cultural and self-serving stigmas to dictate opinions of our other. But

perhaps more profound than that rather obvious point... consider the implications of these three studies: if biases against our racial, ethnic and religious other are being implicitly learned and thereby externally conditioned into our subconscious, are we then morally responsible if bigotry ensues?

The short answer: yes. At least that's what I believe and what we'll eventually get to. But for the sake of our earnest integrity, let's further examine what certain experts have found which could allow someone to speak to the contrary. To wit, Carpenter writes, "a Harvard University experiment found that white preschoolers tended to categorize racially ambiguous angry faces as black rather than white; they did not do the same however for happy faces. Moreover, a 2006 study by Andrew S. Baron showed that implicit racial bias emerges by age six—and rarely retreats. 'These filters through which people see the world are present very early,' he states."

Learning then from our parents, peers and society, it is argued that we form distinctions between black and white, female and male, gay and straight, fat and thin, Republican and Democrat, Christian and Muslim... before we can even understand fully what those terms and designations mean. There's clearly something wrong here. A six-year old can barely spell banana and yet they are already formulating their social convictions -- a word of warning to parents in how you behave and speak around children if there ever was one. And because these distinctions develop so early in our lives, Carpenter continues, they tend to morph into implicit associations whose influences we are often unaware of and by result are virtually impervious to change.

[Can you tell that I was a Psychology major? This is fun stuff, yes... maybe not for you or on a Sunday morning no less, but hang in there! Interesting side note which some of you already know: can you believe that I finished my first year of college as an Accounting major? Accounting! Can you actually see me in a cubicle!? Praise be to God]

Now, let us rest here for just another moment and understand this. As opposed to an explicit bias which is formed out of an active and participatory response to some type of experienced event, person or group, an implicitly formed bias suggests that our ideas and conclusions have arrived in our minds via subliminal persuasions, and that through a confluence of ignorance our interpretations of the environment have therefore been coerced, shaped and determined. And it is these kinds of implicit biases, some psychologists argue, that are more dangerous to us and our other, for they are harder to identify and be aware of, and are typically more emotional and less rational when employed and expressed. "Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than it does knowledge: it is those who know little, and not those who know much, who so positively assert [their position]." – Darwin.

And so back to our question: if there is ascribed governance to these implicitly learned biases, are we then morally responsible for the prejudices that follow? Yes. In fact, I say that we are even more morally responsible than previously thought and that our principal task in life must become to ask of ourselves with greater determination why it is that we think what we think, why it is that we do what we do, and why it is that we are who we are so as to better understand who we actually are, as well as the forces that surround and tempt us, ultimately to prevent injustices of ignorance from reoccurring against our other.

But, you may now be asking... okay, even if we become so self-aware so as to know exactly why we think the ways that we do, how then, practically speaking, are we to change these social and religious biases, that are said to be virtually impervious to change, and that also dwell in the largely unseen and unknown basements of our souls? Well, as they taught us in Seminary, when confronted with such a huge question without an easily discernible answer, the most likely solution is definitely Jesus. And so Jesus it is! ...though this time with an assist from Peter. [How about that by the way... a paragraph before we were talking Darwin and now we've evolved to Jesus! Remember too that "virtually impervious to change" does not mean impossible to change.]

Lest we forget, our texts from today offer a window into a world not terribly unlike our own. There were clear distinctions in Biblical times: Jew and Gentile; Man and Woman, Levites and Samaritans, etc. and of course prejudices that followed. Even amongst Christ's own disciples there were implicit biases that needed to be examined and broken. One only needs to recall the story in Matthew and Mark on the Syro-Phoenecian/Canaanite woman to acknowledge that. And here in our text from Acts, Peter is coming up against a similar implantation of a traditionally accepted bias. Namely, that the circumcised believers thought it wrong and shameful that he shared a meal with the uncircumcised. Yup, just what he was thinking?

Peter responds to this charge with a fantastic retelling of a vision he had, which is really just a paraphrase of a lesson he learned from Jesus in Mark 7 – a parable about all foods being declared clean, and thus all those who eat, regardless of observance to dietary laws are also thus inherently clean. Additionally, Peter declares that God, through Christ, has given the same gifts of life and redemption to all those who have faith, irrespective of circumcision, color or ethnicity. And it's at this point that his adversaries are stunned, shamed, corrected, and subsequently healed.

But just how did Peter come to this remarkable revelation? After all, wasn't he the one who denied our savior, not once but thrice? How did he become aware and rid himself of the implicit biases of his religion, which by its rules and regulations tried to coerce him to avoid his other and consider him with disdain? Indeed how can we? It's called perception. Perception comes from the Latin *perceptio*, and implies the organization, identification, and interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand one's environment (Wikipedia). True perception is thus a complete and thorough mental processing, not just some whim observation made in haste built on an explicit or implicit preconception. One's perceptive quality thereby comes from being exposed to and immersed in the world, not from being stowed away somewhere whispering private judgments. And thus, it must have been because of this worldly quality that Jesus laid the foundations of the church at Peter's feet. For it was due to Peter's perceptive skill, that is, his proper interpretation of Jesus' Gospel when others continued to not understand it, that he was prompted to meet his other across the table and to treat this other as an equal without bias or cruelty. And therefore, just as he did 2,000 years ago, he is educating each of us about the environment, indeed the kingdom of God in which we must live.

Now having said all that, being like Peter certainly won't be easy. For as Ms. Carpenter leaves us with this morning: "Growing up in a culture [like this one] where some people are valued more than others is likely to permeate our private orientations, no matter how discomfiting the fact." If

we accept this tenet of the human condition, then we have a choice about how to respond. We can respond with sadness or, worse, with apathy. Or we can react with a determination to overcome bias. “The capacity for change is deep and great in us, but do we want the change? That’s the question for each of us as individuals—individual scientists, and teachers, and judges, and businesspeople, and the communities [especially the religious communities] to which we belong.”

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Amen.