
Is Jesus Post-Bias?

Luke 6:20-36

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 6, 2016 by the
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Jesus is biased. We do hear that the Most High is “kind to the ungrateful and wicked” and elsewhere that God rains on the just and unjust (Matt 5). This may rub us the wrong way because we want the unjust and wicked to get what they deserve so we can dance on their grave. We feel it’s so unfair that God kisses both of our foreheads with kindness, so we throw a temper tantrum, jumping up and down in the corner of our religious room, acting as if we’ve just lost our spiritual minds or Game 7 to the Cubs in the World Series. But you can calm down because Jesus isn’t unbiased.

There’s lots of discussion these days on college campuses and elsewhere about bias and sometimes you’ll hear about so-called bias incidents. Duke defines a bias incident as “an act or behavior motivated by an [actor’s] bias against the facets of another’s identity.” It can be intentional or unintentional. Last spring semester, I served on what was called the Task Force on Hate and Bias that was formed after numerous incidents of hate/bias against individuals on this campus. I served on a sub-committee that was charged with going around to various student groups to listen to their experiences of hate and bias. What became clear from those sessions was the desire from many to decouple the terms “hate and bias” because although bias could lead to hate, it did not necessarily have to. Bias doesn’t have to be hateful. Bias doesn’t have to be negative in fact. Perhaps we are always biased in some way, always prejudiced toward something, always leaning in a direction because we are human.

Harvard professor Mahzarin Banaji and University of Washington professor Anthony Greenwald, wrote a book called *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*. In it, they reveal how many of us have unconscious or hidden bias against all sorts of groups, no matter how unprejudiced and egalitarian we strive to be in our actions or conscious thoughts. This implicit bias is at work whether we own it or not and it can impact who we hire at our law firms, the treatment of patients of all ages and races in the medical field, the selection of witnesses and jury members, along with many other items. If we are honest, we all have biases and they impact our choices in life. And though using the prefix “post” may be en vogue—postmodern, postcolonial, postracial, postliberal—while on earth we will never be post-bias, just as we may never be post-barbecue or post-Duke/Carolina rivalry, or post-God, because you can’t be post-Someone who is the beginning and the end. So, is Jesus post-bias, with no biases at all? Is he beyond that? No.

Jesus is biased because is *for* something. Just because you are for something or someone, doesn’t mean you automatically have to be *against* something or someone else. If you don’t know what you stand for, you don’t know what you live for and are willing to die for. This isn’t the case with Jesus who expresses his explicit conscious bias. “Blessed are you who are poor...Blessed are you who are hungry...Blessed are you who weep...” Jesus is for the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the suffering, the oppressed, the victimized, the one whose backs are up against a wall, the least, the last and the left out. When he

proclaims his thesis statement of his earthly mission it is “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4). This diverges from the Gospel of Matthew where we hear “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Here, it is “blessed are the poor,” the materially poor, which is a refusal to allow us to be so spiritual we neglect material realities on the ground in our communities.

Why are certain people considered to be saints? I believe it’s connected to how they’ve be immersed in the ministry of Jesus among the oppressed—St. Mother Teresa, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Paul. Jesus is for those who have no voice and many times are overlooked.

In his poem, “All Saints: A Last Beatitude,” Malcolm Guite writes,

*And blessed are the ones we overlook;
The faithful servers on the coffee rota,
The ones who hold no candle, bell, or book
But keep the books and tally up the quota,
The gentle souls who come to ‘do the flowers,’
The quiet ones who organize the fete,
Church sitters who give up their weekday hours,
Doorkeepers who may open heaven’s gate.
God knows the depths that often go unspoken
Amongst the shy, the quiet, and the kind,
Or the slow healing of a heart long broken,
Placing each flower so for a year’s mind.
Invisible on earth, without a voice,
In heaven their angels glory and rejoice.*

Although Jesus speaks to the disciples and the great crowd, notice to whom his words are directed when he says, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt...” It is an address to the victimized. He’s for them and they are his focus for good reasons. Justo and Catherine Gonzalez, studying Jesus, say, “The word of the gospel ... comes to us most clearly in the painful groans of the oppressed. We must listen to those groans. We must join the struggle to the point where we too must groan. Or we may choose the other alternative, which is not to hear the gospel at all.” Blessed are those who weep, who cry, who groan, the ones we overlook, without a voice. There is a blessing for those bruised and beaten under the hands of a mighty empire.

Jesus is biased not because of the oppressed’s accomplishments or pedigree or vision for the future. The underside of society is not usually thought to have anything to offer anyone. Jesus is biased because he loves. He's not asking why they are poor or hungry or excluded, he just knows that they are and desires to do something about it. He doesn’t blame the victim for sexual assault or being shot in a

neighborhood or for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. He just loves, no questions asked, revealing his bias for love, particularly love of enemies. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.” In the West, historically, the golden rule of doing to others as you would have them do unto you was considered a natural law ethic, forming the foundation for the modern social contract of Western society. However, Jesus isn’t interested in what is natural. He’s interested in what is of God because he is God. Jesus teaches in such a way that what he urges can only be done in and through his power. Loving your enemies is anything but natural. It is supernatural, above and beyond our natural tendencies. Loving without expectations of anything in return.

In the crucible of the Civil Rights Movement in this country, I think of the saints who struggled against racial discrimination, economic disparities, and political disenfranchisement. There were some saints of God who fought, put their life on the line, for voting rights. It is a privilege to vote so make sure you do it, but what these 1960s saints endured is almost indescribable and unbearable to imagine. One civil rights era poet put it this way:

brought here in slave ships and pitched overboard.

Love your enemy

language taken away, culture taken away

Love your enemy

work from sun up to sun down

Love your enemy

Last hired first fired

Love your enemy

Rape your mother

Love your enemy

Lynch your father

Love your enemy

Bomb your churches

Love your enemy

Kill your children

Love your enemy

Forced to fight his Wars

Love your enemy

Pay the highest rent

Love your enemy

Sell you rotten food

Love your enemy

Forced to live in slums

Love your enemy

Dilapidated schools

Love your enemy

Puts you in jail

Love your enemy

Bitten by dogs

Love your enemy
Water hose you down
Love your enemy
Love,
Love,
Love,
Love,
Love, for everybody else,
but when will we love ourselves? (Yusef Iman)

It's hard to love an enemy if you don't love yourself because you are called to love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12). The same love you give is what you desire to receive. If there is no self-love, there can be no true love of the other. This may be why we see such fierce resistance to oppressiveness at times—one loves oneself or the community so much that one refuses destructive powers while still attempting to loving the other and not do the same damage that is being done to you.

The devastation of war and its result in hunger among the people of Syria is such a crisis that the New York Times headline read, "I dream in fruit." It is a mere dream because of the real lack of food. In that context, love your enemy takes on a real challenge. For those impacted by lead poison, including the families of those who died because of the water contamination in Flint, Michigan, love your enemy is a real challenge. Those enduring the conflict over the installation of a pipeline at Standing Rock, North Dakota, know the challenge of love your enemy when you are the victim. Right here in Durham during the 1960s, there was the so-called 'urban renewal' program that resulted in the building of highway 147 through the Hayti community. Those who lived in that historic, predominantly black community whose neighborhoods would be forever changed, referred to it not as the 'urban renewal' program but as the 'urban removal' program. When you are the one who endures forced migration, when you are the one who is poor and hungry, love your enemy is a challenge. Then maybe all who are affected can only say, "I dream" because the realities are so different. I dream in truth. I dream in justice. I dream in love.

Bryan Stevenson, the brilliant lawyer, author of *Just Mercy*, who spoke during Duke's orientation for first year students, defends the poor and wrongly condemned in our criminal justice system. He, who was born during the Jim Crow era, tells a story of how he "was preparing to do a hearing in a trial court in the Midwest and was sitting at counsel table in an empty courtroom before the hearing. [He] was wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and tie. The judge and the prosecutor entered through a door in the back of the courtroom laughing about something. When the judge saw [him] sitting at the defense table, he said to [him] harshly, 'Hey, you shouldn't be in here without counsel. Go back outside and wait in the hallway until your lawyer arrives.' [Stevenson] stood up and smiled broadly [and] said, 'Oh, I'm sorry, Your Honor, we haven't met. My name is Bryan Stevenson, I am the lawyer on the case set for hearing this morning.'" The judge and the prosecutor both laughed and Stevenson forced himself to laugh because he didn't want to jeopardize his young white client by having a conflict with the judge before the hearing. He was disheartened and writes, "Of course innocent mistakes occur, but the accumulated insults and indignations caused by racial presumptions are destructive in ways that are hard to measure." Stevenson could say, 'I dream in racial harmony and understanding' but it would

just be a dream, for the reality is that our biases can perpetuate injustice and false stereotypes of varied kinds without even being conscious of it; biases don't have to do this but they can.

Yet Jesus' bias for love goes to another level because in his teaching to love enemies, he encourages a particular posture, that is, one of nonviolence. "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Respond to hate with love. Jesus is biased. He is for nonviolence. For him, a loving end will only be reached through loving means. In 1960, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote an outline on the philosophy of nonviolence and writes that "the means represents the end in process." Jesus wouldn't urge hateful actions in order to reach love! Loving means is the path to a loving end or as King defined nonviolence—it is "a relentless pursuit of truthful ends by moral means." This approach of Jesus is not about "physical might" but "moral right." It is the way of love in the face of cruelty. No lashing out at the other even if one suffers because this would do injury to the other but also to the self. Violence begets more violence, internally and externally. If the oppressed did what the oppressor did, they would experience the same violence they received. But the teaching of Jesus aims to allow the victims to keep their dignity in tact as well as affirming the dignity of the enemy. This is radical love and as one scholar wrote recently, "Throughout the history of the church, Christians have keenly desired to believe that the New Testament affirms the kind of people we are, rather than—as is actually the case—the kind of people we are not, and really would not want to be" (David Bentley Hart). Love your enemy? This is not our first inclination when hurt.

Swedish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard affirmed the relationship of means and ends when he writes, "He is not, therefore, eternally responsible for whether he reaches his goal within this world of time. But without exception, he is eternally responsible for the kind of means he uses. And when he...only uses those means which are genuinely good, then, in the judgment of eternity, he is at the goal." By inhabiting the love ethic of Jesus you reach the goal of living in Christ. When your means matches your end, you share in the life of God in Christ.

His bias for nonviolent love was not just an end for Jesus but the means by which he drew the world to himself. Jesus wasn't just for the oppressed, he, too, was oppressed as a poor, Palestinian Jew, who had nowhere to lay his head. Ultimately, he's a death row victim on the ancient torture tool of a wooden cross. If we saw his appearance, our biases may be at work thinking he belonged nailed to the cross and was guilty because "he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him," wounded and crushed, looking like he was right where he was supposed to be. But he was silent, never lashing out, but always extending his innocent love to the world, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" or promising a criminal, "Today you'll be with me in paradise." The oppressed one becomes the redeeming agent for the oppressors. The outcasts may be the very ones who are vehicles of salvation in your lives and in this nation, just as Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers was their path to salvation in the end. The stranger might be your angel from God. If you follow Jesus, follow him all the way—for the oppressed, for love, for nonviolence—but be aware that it may kill you like it did him. We're all biased. Are you for Jesus? If you are for Jesus, then you should also be what Jesus is for.