

“If you are the messiah, tell us plainly.”

I heard about an interesting study¹ conducted by a Harvard research team the other day. The study was about bias shift in our culture: bias against old people, blacks, those with darker skin tone. One of the most significant findings that the researchers discovered is a major cultural shift that has happened in recent years regarding bias against gay people. In the last decade, there has been a precipitous 33% drop in antigay bias. Yes, there is still a long way to go, but that is remarkable! If you step back and look at the larger picture, after thousands of years of homophobia, the gay rights movement started not that long ago.² And according to this study, at the current rate of shift, it will take only nine more years before anti-gay bias achieves neutrality. If we use the Stonewall Riots of 1969 as our benchmark, in a period of less than 60 total years, there will have been a complete societal attitude shift.

This is in stark contrast to the trends regarding discrimination based on race, skin tone, and age. The shift in these areas, according to the same study, have been glacially slow. At current trend levels (and across all socio-economic and age levels as well as geographical areas), it will take another 60 years or so before racial bias of whites against blacks will reach neutrality, 138 years until bias regarding light skin tones against darker skin tones will reach neutrality, and bias against old people will take a shocking 150 or more years to reach neutrality.

It was noted that over the course of the same decade, biases against those with disabilities and those who are overweight have been “stubbornly persistent” or on the rise.

And researchers are asking: why the difference? What is it about bias surrounding sexuality that has led to such a drastic cultural shift toward neutrality while the others are diminishing at such slower rates or not at all?³

¹ NPR's Hidden Brain: **Radically Normal**, April 8, 2019 found at <https://podcasts.google.com/?feed=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cubnByLm9yZy9yc3MvcG9kY2FzdC5waHA%2FaWQ9NTEwMzA4&episode=YmM0ODgxMTAtNDk1OC00MGQ3LThhNGYtNWRhOWJlNzNhOWJl>

² Stonewall Riots of 1969

³ <https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2019/01/11/implicit-bias-gay-black-weight>

The answer seems to lie, according to research, primarily in relationship. Our culture endorses, however actively or passively, self-segregation based on race, age, educational attainment, geographical upbringing, physical ability, creed, and a whole host of other characteristics that are used to define various groups of people.

At the beginning of the study some 20 years ago, researchers recognized a cognitive dissonance between a person's deeply held convictions regarding sexuality and their affection for a loved one who was gay. Over time, as more individuals have felt safe to be public about their sexuality, as people grew in their awareness of their many connections with gay men and women, this cognitive dissonance has given way to changing attitudes. In addition to other influencing factors, despite generational lines, socio-economic strata, and educational attainment levels, attitudes have shifted primarily because our gay brothers, daughters, parents, colleagues and next door neighbors have been significant individuals in our lives.

For me, this is but one example of the power relationships have in changing the world.

In John's Gospel, everything he writes points us back to the prologue: ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

God's Word is God's action. This duality of Word and action is the generative force that created relationship with and among you, me, and all of humanity.

For John, Word and action are inextricably linked: they are two parts of the same deep love God has for God's people. One is not independent of the other. After all, "God so loved the world that he gave (action) his only Son (the Logos, Word)..."⁴ Sound familiar?

In this morning's reading, Jesus points out that his divine actions speak louder and clearer than any human words ever could. He says, "the works I do in my Father's name testify to me." His works (action) testify to him (incarnate Word).

⁴ John 3:16

Jesus goes on to say, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” I love that our Lord implicitly acknowledges that there are multiple voices calling out to us, seeking relationship with us. There is the voice of God, surely, but there are other voices, too, that invite our responses both in word and action.

And so I’ve been listening over the last several days for the voices I’ve been hearing. There’s the voice of my children, with all of their hopeful idealism, their clear sense of justice, and trusting acceptance that they don’t have all of the answers.

I’ve heard the voice of my family of origin, loaded with assumptions that I do ‘all the things’ with grace and aplomb so the menfolk can return from work or play to a clean home, a hot meal, and the children bathed and behaved.

I hear the voice of teachers in our community, run ragged with increasing demands to teach far more than the school standards, to serve as surrogate parents for those children who do not have stability and support outside of school; I hear them when they say their paychecks do not reflect increasing class size, little to no budget for necessary classroom supplies, and increased risk to their personal safety from unstable individuals.

I hear the voice of the South, with its norms and expectations of me as a white woman of a certain social class ~ my linen dresses and white pumps can be freed from their winter banishment now that we have reached the Easter season.

I hear the voice of our country, as we’ve more or less normalized sexual assault, fake news, and political scandal.

But the voices I’ve heard most clearly over the past week are the voices I’ve heard from you: voices that have said things like, “it’s too much and too hard and I’m not sure I can take it.” Like “how do I care for my loved one when I cannot take care of myself?” Like, “how do I say goodbye when my entire life I’ve woken up every morning eager to say hello?”

I have also heard voices that have said, “I want to show this person a measure of the love that they have shown me,” and “I feel a spiritual high when I see good things happen to good people,” and “it’s okay, I’m here ~ you are not alone.”

Word and action ~ blending together and uniting in incarnate love. Relationship born of God.

Each of these voices have been voices from people who have been formed in and changed by relationship. These voices have spoken words of heart-wrenching pain and generosity of Spirit that have come out of an abiding affection for those they've loved and who have loved them in return. To a person, these words were spoken by people who love God, and who stepped up and stepped out in faith to respond to God's invitation to relationship. Even when it's hard, and scary, and perhaps even lonely. These voices are those of people who show up and embody the incarnate love that God has for all of creation.

Faith isn't easy. Life can be noisy. Sorting out Jesus' voice among the many others is often difficult work. Following that voice is even harder.

Jesus, the very Word of God, the clearest manifestation of God's voice, embedded himself in a community of people who wanted nothing to do with him. Even today, through the power of the Spirit, he establishes relationships with those who are open to his words, to the gift of his actions, regardless of sexuality, race, age, or any other way we choose to define one another. Through his commitment to these relationships, because of God's commitment to us, the world has changed, and continues to change.

Jesus' actions testify to who he is. His actions testify to who we are. In a world that is broken and biased and in need of reconciliation and restoration, God's Word gets translated to the world through our actions. As such, our actions bring it all full circle and testify to who we believe him to be.

If you are the messiah, tell us plainly, they demand. I have told you, Jesus replies. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.