

COME AND SEE . . . *REALLY* SEE!

I grew up in northern New England, hundreds of miles north of the Mason-Dixon Line in New Hampshire. Whenever census reports are issued Vermont and New Hampshire are neck-in-neck when it comes to racial demographics. One or the other of them is always the state in the Union with the smallest minority population in the whole country. 95, 96, 97% white. And that was certainly true in my hometown. I only remember one black kid in my high school of eleven hundred students—and no Hispanics or Asians. We were—to use a phrase—white as the driven snow.

That said, our school lunchroom was as segregated as any lunchroom in Alabama or Mississippi. You see ours was a regional school. We drew students from four different towns. Three of them, Hampton, North Hampton and Hampton Falls, were virtually indistinguishable. All small, middle-class towns on the New Hampshire seacoast. But the fourth town, Seabrook, was another story.

In the Seventies Seabrook gained a national reputation as the site of a very controversial nuclear power plant. And in time it became much more sophisticated, with a great influx of folks from Massachusetts. But when I was growing up, folks who lived in Seabrook were much more provincial. Everybody seemed to be related to everybody else. Family incomes were lower than in the other three towns. It was a somewhat rough and tumble crowd.

By the time we reached high school we had all heard from older brothers and sisters about our “backwards” neighbors. We had been fed all sorts of nonsense. There were rumors of inbreeding and other sordid things. And we believed them. Before we had even met anybody from Seabrook, we had judged them all to be inferior. While most of us wouldn’t have dreamed of referring to a black kid as a nigger, we didn’t think twice about using our own epitaph. For anybody from Seabrook was immediately labeled a Brooker.

And so our lunchroom was segregated. We clustered around our tables, while the kids from Seabrook were relegated to several tables on the periphery of the cafeteria. And we were sure we knew all about them—those stupid Brookers!

Our attitude towards the kids from Seabrook was rooted in that which always breeds prejudice: we were ignorant. We really knew almost nothing about our neighbors from the next town over, because we didn’t know *them*!

This is, of course, nothing new. Prejudice is probably as old as the human race. And our lesson from John provides a classic example of it—as well as a clear solution.

It happens near the beginning of John's Gospel.

A few verses earlier John narrates the story of Jesus' baptism and John the Baptist's testifying to Jesus' role as Messiah. All this commotion at the Jordan River draws the attention of a man named Andrew. He is so impressed by Jesus that he goes and tells his brother Peter all about him. And together Andrew and Peter decide to follow Jesus as his first disciples, his first students.

With Andrew and Peter apparently in tow, Jesus decides to leave the river, and head back towards home. Along the way they run into Philip, who came from the same town as Andrew and Peter. He too decides to follow Jesus. In fact, he's so impressed, he decides to go get his friend Nathaniel to introduce him to the rabbi from Nazareth.

So, understand the scene. Philip hunts up his friend Nathaniel, who has never met Jesus, never even heard of him. And Philip excitedly tells Nathaniel: "We've found him—the promised Messiah—his name is Jesus, son of Joseph, and he comes from Nazareth."

But without a moment's hesitation, Nathaniel prejudges him: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

Come on, Philip, he's a Nazarene—how could he be Messiah? Everybody knows those Nazarenes are no-account low lifes!

Chances are, of course, Nathaniel may never even have known someone from Nazareth. Chances are his father hated Nazarenes. Nathaniel had heard all about them from his big sister or the kid next door.

The Messiah a Nazarene? Give me a break!

But, as scholar William Barclay writes, "Philip was wise. He did not argue. He said simply: 'Come and see.'" (*Daily Study Bible: John, I: 108*)

Philip understood. Philip understood that the causes of prejudice are usually ignorance, misinformation and lack of relationship. And the cure rests in knowledge and personal experience.

Come and see. Come and know. Come and enter into relationship. Come and break bread together—share breakfast or lunch or dinner. Stop eating at separate tables. Eat together.

James Meeks, a pastor in Chicago, is convinced this is literally true. "Most black children," he says, "Grow up never having had dinner with white people. Most white people grow up never having had African-Americans in their homes. So we

view each other as 30-second sound bites on television.” (Bob Smietana, “MegaShepherd,” *Christianity Today*, February, 2004)

So who have you prejudged? Who do you find unacceptable, even though you don’t really know them? Who are the Nazarenes in your life? Who are the Brookers? Who do you need to have over for lunch?

It may indeed be persons of color. Or it may be folks of a different religious persuasion. Or people who don’t speak English very well. Or gay men or lesbian women. Or folks who are politically conservative—or those who are liberal.

I recently discovered author Donald Miller. He is an essayist who comes from the theologically conservative wing of the Church. He writes, though, in a rather irreverent style—and has no trouble poking fun at himself. One of his books, *Blue Like Jazz*, has chapter titles like “Romance: Meeting Girls is Easy,” “Money: Thoughts on Paying Rent,” and my favorite, “Church: How I Go Without Getting Angry.”

Miller has wrestled long and hard with all the prejudices he learned in church, and part of how he has done that is by taking classes at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Reed is a bastion of ultra liberalism. There he shared many meals in the cafeteria with folks whose beliefs were quite unlike his own. And there he learned to love his neighbor. He sums up his learnings by referring to the understandings he took to Reed: “The churches I attended would embrace war metaphor. They would talk about how we are in a battle Only they wouldn’t clarify that we were battling poverty and hate and injustice They left us thinking that our war was against liberals and homosexuals The truth is we were supposed to love the hippies, the liberals and even the Democrats, and that God wants us to think of them as more important than ourselves. Anything short of this is not true to the teachings of Jesus.” (*Blue Like Jazz*, 132)

Of course it cuts both ways! Liberals, too, are called to give up their prejudiced thinking and hateful thoughts.

Donald Miller has been compared to writer Anne Lamott because of their quirky styles. Lamott though, came from a thoroughly liberal background. She was challenged to change her thinking when she began to attend a largely African-American church. Not only her thinking about race, but also conservatives.

Lamott is very opposed to the war in Iraq. In her hatred of the war, though, she has found herself caught up in very strong hatred towards the president.

In her book *Plan B* she writes, “Lately our pastor has been urging us to act more like Martin Luther King I wondered whether I could try to love my president as Jesus or Dr. King would, without having to want to have lunch with him. But if you refused to even entertain the idea of having lunch with a person in the distant

future, would Jesus consider that you'd really forgiven him? Still I know Jesus would eat with my president He'd do it because he is available to everyone. His love and mercy fall equally upon us all I know the world is loved by God, as are all people, but it is much easier to believe God hates or disapproves of . . . the same people I do" (219-221)

Sisters and brothers, who do you need to come and see, really see? Who do you need to invite to lunch or dinner—or even breakfast? Who do you need to learn how to love?

There's ample evidence that our prejudices and hatreds often grow out of ignorance—and love can flourish when we take time to learn about the other. When we take time, as the old spiritual says, to break bread together, humbly, on our knees. Not just when we share the cup and loaf of communion, but all the time.

Nathaniel did go to meet Jesus. And he ended up being one of the earliest of the disciples. He let go of his prejudice and really saw who Jesus was.

By the time I had entered my senior year I'd already had a couple of close encounters with kids from Seabrook, and the stereotype was already falling away. But that year I met a guy in one of my classes named Eric. And the prejudice was completely shattered.

Eric and I shared a mutual love of music, and in time, over pizzas and burgers, we became very good friends. And I realized he wasn't a Brooker, he was just Eric. Eric, my friend who drove a Suburu, and would always give you a lift when you needed one. Eric, my friend who dated another good friend named Anne. I never did figure out his fascination with Dean Martin (he had all his albums, which trust me, high school seniors didn't have back in 1970)—but I knew him to be a fellow human being, a good friend, a child of God. And for the rest of that year Eric sat at our table in the lunchroom. All because we were willing to come and see—both of us willing to really see.

On this Martin Luther King weekend, let me ask you one more time: who do you need to have over for lunch? Who needs to sit at your table? Who do you really need to see?

Amen
John H. Danner