

Cultural biases block our path to universal holiness

04 OCTOBER 2016 / HITS: 316

JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

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It was Monday before Thanksgiving. I was a parish faith formation director, but also a part time student in theology.

Now within the larger University, the school of theology had many resident students and a family like atmosphere. It had been the custom on Mondays that each of the professors took a turn having their class sponsor “entertainment” at a community lunch in the great hall.

That Monday I arrived for my 1 p.m. class to find the place in an uproar. Huddles of students and of professors were everywhere in excited and tense conversation. The noon entertainment had been a skit about the Indians and the Pilgrims. Something in it offended the Native American theology professor. He walked out followed by many of his students.

After much angst, the student governing council and the theology faculty found what they believed would be a healing action. They invited a Native American healer to conduct a prayer service for peace and reconciliation later that week.

At the appointed time we all gathered in the great hall. That gentleman, robed in his traditional attire and accompanied by professors in their gowns, entered and mounted the stage. The healer uttered a lovely greeting and then said: In order to respect my tradition, before we begin this ceremony, I must ask all women with a flow of blood to leave. Whereupon, of course, all the women professors and students exited in protest.

I have often reflected on this funny but painful episode. These good and holy people hurt one another because they came from different perceptual fields rooted in different cultures. And even a huge degree of education and worldly sophistication wasn't enough to prevent that!

In the Gospels a rich young man asks Jesus: Master, I have kept all the commandments since my youth. What more must I do? If the

path to holiness is closer imitation of Jesus, then getting beyond our own cultural biases is part of what we must learn to do. Jesus did it so well. He got beyond his Jewishness and maleness and economic class to include gentiles and women and rich and poor and soldiers and temple officials and criminals — inviting them all into the kingdom. It is hard to do this “getting beyond” our cultural biases.

Culture, it is said, is like a fishbowl in which I swim. It's my environment, even more mental than physical. The boundaries of the fishbowl are fixed and I am so used to them that I don't notice them. If I look out of the fishbowl and see someone else, I see them distorted, as though through the curved glass of the fishbowl. I don't see them as they are but through the biases of my fishbowl lens. So I may tend to judge them unfavorably. It's what we humans do.

I think of this at election time. Politics as we experience it invites us to fortify our fishbowls. It invites us to demonize those who don't swim in our bowl. If you are a Democrat, there is nothing good coming out of the mouths of Republicans. If you are economically challenged, it is all the fault of the people in the “rich” fishbowl. If you are a true American, those immigrants are dangerous and not to be trusted. If you are religious, there is nothing moral about that one candidate. Political party, class, nationality, and even religiousness are biases that may prevent me from hearing and discerning truth, and the voice of God in that truth.

The journey to holiness, the “what more must I do,” calls us to bring to consciousness everything that is in us so that Gospel light can fall upon it. Biases are not sins, but they can lead us away from that universal love that God wants to see in us and in the world. During the frenzy leading to our elections God is calling us to stop, look, and listen — not only to what is being told to us but to what is being awakened in our souls.

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