

Rev. Sharon Smith

Mark 7:1-23

Blindspot: The social laws written on our minds

Sept 2nd, 2018

Objectives:

- To understand the discrepancy between our hearts desire and the social laws written on our minds (implicit bias which often guides our behaviours)
- To pay attention to the pharisaic-like behaviour, blind spots that require our attention
- To explore ways that Christ's light shines into the shadows and transforms us to love our neighbour beyond our biases.

“Take care, watch yourselves closely”. The recorded words of Moses as he passes on the law to the people of Israel.

And then Jesus after him, reiterates his caution: “There is nothing outside of us that by going in can pollute us, but only the things that come out are what pollutes us.”

“Take care, watch yourselves closely”.

Sometimes the things that come out of me, shock me.

And I ask myself, 'self, why is it that you keep repeating the negative patterns of the past, when you know another way?'

When I deeply desire it to be different?

And no matter how sincere my heart, my unconscious has a mind of its own.

It's like the social laws of antiquity have been imprinted onto my mind.

Social laws not unlike the ones existing in first Century Palestine.

Reading Mark's gospel narrative about the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, we can be drawn into this story, reading into it stereotypical action drama categories.

The 'goodies' and the 'badies'.

Both shooting each other down, but we are clear who is good and who is bad.

Mark's gospel is written in a time when a new Christian community was being developed.

Between the years AD 30 and AD 70 the burgeoning early church was in a process of working out its relationship to Judaism.

The early Christians were Jewish, worshiping in synagogues **and** gathering in their homes, struggling with the Jewish laws in the light of the teaching of Jesus.

And in this story, Mark embodies this very real dilemma.

The Pharisees in this narrative are the characters who embody difficult of the laws.

The ones that challenge and were challenged by the teachings of Jesus.

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Mark also seems to use this narrative as a way to sympathise with these early Christians who were experiencing exclusion, often being asked to leave the Synagogues because they followed the teachings of Jesus.

So, it is no wonder, that we read this text and find ourselves leaning into Jesus, the crowd and the disciples. And cheering them on.

Just for a moment.

Let us suppose that the Pharisees were good people, good people like us, like you and me. Let's suppose they meant well.

Living out their faith in the way they knew how – desiring to fill their temples, balance their budgets and preserve the traditions that meant so much to their community.

Let's imagine that the Pharisees were well intentioned people. Completely unaware that the laws of ritual washing and food purification were exclusionary. Let's imagine that they had social blindspots - obvious to everyone else except to them.

And we all have social blindspots.

Harvard Social Psychologist Dr. Mahzarin Banaji describes a time in a 2013 graduate class where she shared that old 1970's riddle. You know the one that goes - a father and his son were in a car accident. The father dies at the scene. The boy, badly injured, is rushed to a local hospital. In the hospital, the operating surgeon looks at the boy and says, "I can't operate on this boy. He's my son." How can this be if the father just died?

And after all the good work of the feminist movements of our time – still more than half of her classes did not get the right answer.

Which of course is: The surgeon is the boy's mother.

(I have a not to leave a pause here, in case the congregation is still working it out).

Social blindspots.

Social laws of antiquity that have been imprinted onto our minds.

Today 80 percent of the entering class of surgeons are women.

And yet our minds are like a computer firewall that prevents us from moving forward.

Even though our hearts desire it to be different.

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Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes a time when he went to Nigeria when he was working for the World Council of Churches. He was due to fly to the Nigerian city of Jos. And so he went to the Lagos airport and he got onto the plane and the two pilots introduced themselves and it became apparent that they were both black Africans. Archbishop Tutu says that he just grew a few inches taller. He was so proud. It was fantastic because he had been taught that black people couldn't do this.

He then recounts what happened during the flight.

He says: We have a smooth takeoff and then we hit the mother and father of all turbulence. I mean, it was quite awful, scary. Do you know, I can't believe it but the first thought that came to my mind was, "Hey, there's no white men in that cockpit. Are those blacks going to be able to make it?"

And of course, they obviously made it. There is no recorded discrepancy between the competency of a Black person flying a plane with any other pilot.

A Social blindspot.

Social laws of antiquity that were imprinted onto Bishop Tutu's mind.

Even though his heart knew that it was different.

In Mark's account, the Pharisees, those well-intentioned people, like us, with blindspots... were criticizing Jesus' disciples, the new and innovative Jewish group.

This time the issue was about purity codes that defined the welcome and decorum of table fellowship. The Pharisees critiqued the inclusiveness of Jesus' followers eating habits.

By reinforcing strict laws of eating, the Pharisees maintained the fence around the Jewish community. This is how they particularly defined who was Jewish and who was not. Those who defiled themselves were unclean, and those who were unclean were not allowed to eat at their table

And Jesus disputes their exclusive claim.

He takes apart the foundation of their claim.

(Ched Myers *Binding the Strong Man*)

Jesus addresses the Pharisees, Jesus addresses the crowd AND Jesus addresses the disciples who still didn't get it.

Three times, he relocates the site of purity: from the body to the heart.
From external to internal things.

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The Heart in Jewish thought – is the moral seat of the person.

Where we act out of what we perceive to be ethically right. Loving God, Loving Neighbor.

There is nothing external that can make you unclean.

There is nothing about one's place in society, nationality, gender, dress or eating habits that makes one unclean. And if no one is unclean, then...

All are welcome to the table.

All are welcome to **this** table. (*The Altar*).

And because of the centrality and meaning of **this** table– all are welcome to the tables in our homes, in restaurants, and all the places where we gather with friends.

Jesus called the crowd then and Christ calls us now to examine the hidden ways that we may exclude.

“Take care, watch yourselves closely”.

Like it or not, we are riddled with implicit biases.

That is, our conscious minds (or hearts) may deeply believe in welcoming all
....but the social law written on our unconscious minds is suspicious of difference.

We still exclude people based on the color of their skin, their gender, their height, or their creed. This may be our bias or blindspot. Even in Canada.
And oh, how our hearts wish it were different.

Stats show that most Professors at Canadian Universities (female or male) are more likely to favor male responders to questions in class.

A Ugandan friend sits in a church in Vancouver. And the well-meaning good-intentioned woman to his left and to his right move their purses to the other side.
Something that never once happened to me after attending for 2 years.

Kathryn Mowry in an article called – do good fences make good neighbors?
writes....

Churches provide food distribution, and housing, and employment programs to reach out to the stranger, but the church continues to struggle at the point of extending community to the stranger.

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Social blindspots. Our unconscious mind is suspicious of difference.
I wonder what we do that we are blind to?

Most often our blindspots can only be seen by those who do not think like us.

And so, it becomes a perpetuating cycle.

We implicitly prefer like-minded people, so we gather them around ourselves, our friends, the books we read, the movies we watch.

But it is only when we invite people - different from ourselves - to interact with us regularly
That we open ourselves up to see differently.

And at first, it may feel uncomfortable...

To be with someone or read a book written by someone...

- From a different generation.
- Who self-identifies as a gender different from your own
- From a more conservative Christian tradition perhaps?
- Who has a different cultural experience of living in Canada.
- Who says they are spiritual but not religious.

And maybe just maybe we could get to the place where this person, now a friend, or this book
or that film may tell us what they see...

And a stranger could become Christ to us. *(Saint Jerome: Letter 52)*

Not in a symbolic way. But in a grounded, fleshy kind of way.

Where this other, shows us something about ourselves we could not see before.

Something that we need to pay attention to. On our journey of following the teachings of
Jesus...

So “Take care, watch yourselves closely”

Amen.