

Let Your Heart Be Softened
Mayflower Church
Rev. Sarah Campbell
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Listen to the character Lucy in Elizabeth's Strout's most recent novel, Lucy By the Sea. Listen to her thoughts. (page 233,234, 236, 237, 238, 239) "These people", she writes, "they had been made to feel poorly about themselves, they were looked at with disdain, and they could no longer stand it".

We might think of them as "the other", maybe even "the enemy". For some of us, "they" are our sibling, or child, or parent. Usually white, usually rural, usually non college educated, increasingly underemployed, with the closing of factories, increasingly alone, fewer belonging to churches or civic organizations, increasingly overdosing, and increasingly victimized by the 24-hour input of demonically distorting internet. They feel beset by taxes, paying for universities they won't use and public health coverage they don't get and they hear about all the tax evasion devices of the wealthier classes. And their bitterness only grows. To add insult to injury, they feel shamed by the upper middle class that assumes a liberal, holier than thou position. as Saul Alinsky said -- how prescient he was in the 1970s!--, "seeking some meaning in life, they turn to an extreme chauvinism and become defenders of the 'American Faith'." And I would add, which often reeks of white supremacy, misogyny, antisemitism, homo and trans phobia, and climate denial--- really dangerous stuff!

But today I want to reflect less on society and more on the state of our own souls, our hearts and minds. I share my own experience with the hope that it may speak to something in you, for in the particular is often found the universal.

Some call it implicit bias. We all have it. It's baked into us. We're conditioned by the world we were born into. And because we are animals, our first thought, that automatic thought, is usually a defensive one, fear based, alerting us to threat, to "the other". Some call this the reptilian brain. Our second thought can be more rational, more loving, more who we truly are or want, in our deepest self, to become.

How does our religion address our implicit bias? How does our religion wrestle with our reptilian brain? It's challenging! Especially as social media can feed into the implicit bias 24-7.

Facebook, with our kind of friends, reenforces all the social conditioning. The reptilian brain is dancing with devious delight these days. Oh Jesus path, we need you more than ever. Our hearts need to be softened and strong, so that our second thought overcomes our automatic thought, so that our loving heart overcomes our reptilian brain.

But here's the thing... I, as a white American, confess on this day. I wonder if the same is true for many of you. *Some* automatic thoughts, implicit bias, I challenge in myself immediately and vehemently, have been doing so for decades (since a certain exceedingly painful consciousness raising college semester in south Chicago) and the desire has grown exponentially to rid myself of this residual societal racism since George Floyd's crucifixion. But *some* automatic thoughts, I don't challenge. I almost smirk when these come. . Here's what I mean.

So, I'm rushing somewhere in the car, trying to stay close to the speed limit, smack dab in the middle of the too muchness of life, highly strung, not calm and grounded... and suddenly a car near me does some kind of idiot move... and I peer into the window to see the driver and there is a person of color and my automatic thought is racist... that reptilian brain is going to work alerting me to "the other"... but my second thought acknowledges this immediately, bemoans my societal conditioning and I may even forgive, in my heart, the perpetrator of the idiot move. But, if I glance at the vehicle and it's a big pick up truck with a white guy in a sweatshirt in it, I see MAGA, whether or not it's on a bumper sticker or his hat...That's what I see. And my first thought, from my reptilian brain, is classicist, elitist, and mean and my second thought? Reenforces my first thought... I smirk and continue to smolder. Why does *class* implicit bias get a free pass in my mind? How is it with you?

But our faith demands that we challenge the reptilian brain all the time. Our faith asks us to keep growing, keep learning about ourselves, and allowing our hearts to be softened until the day we day.

Yes! Our faith is really demanding. It won't let us off the hook. It knows what we're capable of. It knows what we really desire in our heart of hearts.

In our scripture today, Jesus talks about loving our enemy. It's hard enough to be told not to lose our temper, and to renounce the right to retaliate, but to *love* those who hate or harm us?

To love those whose behavior we heartily abhor? Why does Jesus expect the nearly impossible from us?!

Let's look at this more closely, what he may be saying....

Jesus is not talking about warm, fuzzy feelings, but rather about how we act; and how we think, how we shape our second thoughts. Rather than allowing hatred to continue or indulging in classist, elitist thinking, while looking at the person driving fast by you in a pickup truck with a MAGA bumper sticker; instead, endeavoring to see him from God's point of view, acknowledging our common humanity, remembering that he is created in the image of God, knowing that the blessing of the sun rises on everyone and the refreshing rain is bestowed on all.

And I wonder if when Jesus says "we are to be perfect as God is perfect", he is saying "you are to be all embracing in your love, in imitation of God, whose love embraces all." (Interpretation Bible Commentary (John Knox Press.)

If anyone thinks this Jesus path thing is a breeze, think again! "Our religion goes deep down into the roots of personality and how the brain works, and produces a different behavior all together." (N.T. Wright) It's a rigorous life. It's a meaningful life.

Now, you may still be troubled by this commandment, that we love our enemies but Jesus, as our messenger from God, is not suggesting that we condone evil or appease bullies. Never that! look at the whole of his teachings and of the prophets. We know that loving also requires doing justice, reckoning with our racist foundations, eliminating the billionaire class, freeing trans or non-binary children from oppression, and fighting like hell for health care coverage for everyone, including that guy who just bolted in front of you in his pick up truck, and Lucy's family of origin, and the farmers whom Rev. Lippert preached about a few weeks ago.

So I was in Rome on sabbatical all fall, no rushing, no too muchness, very little anxiety, also very little news from the states, a bit of a sabbatical from America too, and I was able to sink into a deeper prayer practice and a deeper, more immersive reading practice. The day I finished Lucy By the Sea, and was really impacted by the passage Sarah Agnew read earlier, I also read a chapter in a book my husband is writing. And I was so struck by this too! Robert Bly, one of the greatest American poets and translators, chose to live not on either coast, but rather back on the farm where he grew up in the middle of Minnesota. He spent hours and hours alone in a converted chicken coop reading and writing and he didn't have his Harvard diploma hanging on the wall. He also engaged with his community. He was not a distant, smirking scoffer. Rather he helped start rural poetry readings around the state, believed to be the first of its kind in the nation, which continue to this day. He shared his craft with his neighbors, as they shared theirs as carpenters and farmers with him. Once he offered a five lecture course called "The Ideas of Freud and Jung and How They Apply to Life in Madison, Minnesota". And his neighbors came.

There may have been differences of opinion, but they respected one another. And most beautiful of all, at these greater MN poetry readings, the locals were encouraged to write their own poems, about their own lives, and to read them aloud. Which they did!

So I'm immersed in all of this reading and reflection, and determined to change my ways, my second thoughts about the other, the white truck drivers in sweat shirts...

That evening after waiting in line for 90 minutes we finally get seated outside at the wonderful little restaurant in Trastevere, Da Enzo. (Waiting in line was actually fun, speaking English for a change, talking to some "interesting" Americans about their travels.) Finally, we're seated, orders taken, and the courses begin to arrive. And then the *voice*, I look over my shoulder, a few tables over, everyone's looking at him, he's so loud. Speaking midwestern English, wearing a sweatshirt, a white guy... Are all of the rest of us Americans thinking the same thing? oh no..."an ugly American", maybe MAGA, and we're ashamed and try to shame him with our shaming energy. He was loud through *primi piatti*, *secondi*, not saying anything bigoted just loud and stupid. Finally, he got up to leave. People rolled their eyes. Someone said under their breath... "good riddance", other subtle jokes ensued as we ate our dessert and had an espresso.

Later, upon leaving, I bumped into the person with whom I had had a great conversation during that 90 minute wait before being seated. A young American academic who was a congressional advisor in D.C., he was also a church guy, a unitarian. I muttered with derision about that loud American. "OMG", I think I said, thinking he'd jump in and commiserate. But he didn't. Instead, he said, kindly, *he's just so excited to be here*.

This is hard work, what we're about as people on the Jesus path.

Let us pray,

Oh God, keep softening our hearts.

Forgive us our lapses, and our unexamined prejudices.

Give us life energy to keep growing and learning.

In Jesus name, we pray.