

The 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 6. June 14, 2015. St. Augustine's, Freeland.
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. 2 Corinthians 5:6-17 Mark 4:26-34

Kamilah Brock is an interesting woman. Only 32 she an up-and-comer. Now working for Astoria Bank she had begun her banking career with Citicorp. She is followed on Twitter by President Obama. The future is hers to grasp. So what happened to her on September 12, 2014 is almost unbelievable.

On that day she was driving her BMW through Harlem, NY when she was pulled over by the NYPD. As she later said, she had done nothing unusual or illegal; she was driving carefully under the speed limit, wasn't on her cell-phone, didn't have any tail lights out, didn't make any illegal turns – nothing.

Finding nothing else, the NYPD officers accused her of being high on marijuana and impounded her car. No weed was ever found in the vehicle, and the fact that she was not charged with anything but instead told to 'walk away' suggests right way that all was not quite right.

The next day, Brock went to Public Service Area 6 station house in Harlem to retrieve her car. She was not surprisingly angry and upset at her treatment the previous day, and made a point of describing who she was and what she did - including referring to being a banker, and being followed by the President on Twitter - to establish her personal credibility.

As the New York newspapers describe the incident at the station house, she was arrested, handcuffed, and put in an ambulance to the local psychiatric hospital because she was – it was claimed – delusional. No way, they reasoned, could any of this stuff be true!

For eight days, she was drugged and forced to undergo all sorts of therapies, including the demand that she admit she wasn't a banker, and that the President didn't follow her on Twitter. The hospital records show that she attended group therapy, endured injections of sedatives, and was forced to take lorazepam and lithium. When she asked doctors to validate her identity, they refused. They just couldn't believe any of it was true - even though a simple Google search or accessing her public Twitter account would have confirmed her claims. Her family was desperate – they had no idea where she was.

The doctors at the psychiatric hospital established a master treatment plan for her. Here's what it said: "Objective: Patient will verbalize the importance of education for employment and will state that Obama is not following her on Twitter."

After eight days, and with no explanation, she was released....along with a bill for over \$13,000 for her "treatment."

How could this happen in America? What, do you suppose, was the main factor in this unholy experience? Cam Brock is black.

No doubt there were a number of factors that contributed to this torturous story, but the main one

is based on the assumptions that both the police and doctors made: an African-American woman could not possibly be a banker who was being followed on Twitter by the president. Therefore she must be delusional. No doubt they'd had some experience of delusional people. But if a white person driving a BMD had claimed to be a banker, who was followed on Twitter by the president.....?!

In England last week, a famous Nobel-laureate scientist resigned over public comments he made about women scientists: that they were no good – or not as good as men – because they “cry when criticized,” and “fall in love with male counterparts.” From his perspective this was obviously true – or he wouldn't have said it; he had to have had at least one experience of one woman who cried when he criticized her, and another who fell in love with a co-worker. ‘Course, men fall in love with co-workers, and sometimes respond emotionally to criticism too! How come they didn't come in for having their abilities criticized?!

In life we all make assumptions. Life would not be possible without them. And we make those assumptions from our own perspective. That means we're operating with only a part of the picture. In the case of these two examples the assumptions were false. What was missing that led them to be made?

In both cases, these false assumptions came from being a part of the dominant culture – and I suppose you could say (to paraphrase a familiar aphorism) that “The road to hell is paved with false assumptions”

Most often, the most damaging cultural assumptions are made by the people who populate dominant culture: in these two cases whites over blacks, men over women. Those of us who live in the dominant culture (in the case of race that's pretty much all of us here, in the case of gender - well, you do the math!) can easily make similar false assumptions because we have no experience of what it's like to live in a sub-dominant culture. It's pretty much a given that none of us will be stopped solely for “driving while white.....!” And few men experience the gross levels of discrimination that pretty much every woman has experienced and can identify.

When I think of myself, I know I'm multi-privileged within dominant culture: I'm “white,” “straight,” and “male.” And within the Episcopal Church you could add “ordained” and “English” to that list.

For me, and, I believe, for all of us, the way we live within our culture requires constant attention. It requires of me being on guard for those times when I unconsciously allow that dominant culture perspective to squeeze itself out – because our faith calls us to live in a different way.

That's true inside this institution we call “Church” and it's true outside it – out in the rest of the world.

Paul absolutely understood that “dominant/sub-dominant culture” perspective. He was a member of a highly educated religious group (the Pharisees), he was a citizen of the Empire, and he was a

man – all three placed him within the ranks of the elite.

And he lived there – as a citizen and a respected religious figure and a man – until one day on the road to Damascus he had an encounter with the risen Christ, and his whole world was turned upside-down. It called into question everything he had lived for and the very way he lived. And the consequences were radical.

The first and most obvious is presented metaphorically, namely that he came to see - quite literally. The Damascus Road experience left him blinded, and he only began to see again when a follower of Jesus helped him to do so.

What he saw was that the way he'd been living – out of that dominant culture – was not the true way of faith.

Self-awareness is a challenging thing!

Everything Paul writes (that's authentically his) reflects this vision – most obviously in those places where he describes a body that's radically equal, such as in 1 Corinthians 12.

And it led him to re-define what he understood as the Common Good. We hear some of that in today's Epistle. The vision of radical equality led Paul to re-define how he understood his world, and as a consequence he talked about something that today we refer to as the "Common Good." We are, Paul says in today's reading, to defend boldly the common good – the radical equality of God – in the face of powerful detractors concerned solely with their own interests and agendas.

And part of that defense involves speaking the truth about what needs to be done in specific circumstances, but doing so with the love and forgiveness needed to bring about the justice we're calling for. It's only through love and forgiveness, in other words, that justice is possible.

In all of this, the most fundamental change is in us – in our own self-awareness and consequent actions, particularly in the assumptions we make about others, and the way we respond to them out of our own dominant cultural perspective. This is the starting place, and it affects every facet of our lives

"We walk by faith, not sight" Paul says – fleshing out the consequences of that Damascus Road experience. Our "seeing" and "being transformed" is into Christ's image, and away from the images our world wishes to sell us, away from the false assumptions that so easily come with being a part of dominant culture. And that seeing and transformation takes place not in some ethereal experience but in every aspect of our lives where we need to rely on, or put our trust in, God's grace. So it is, for people of faith!