



Current Events Study

Wednesday, June 6, 2018

6:30pm

St. Mary's Episcopal Church

Starbucks and "Implicit Bias"



This is what happened

On Thursday, April 12, two black men had asked to use the restroom at Starbucks in Philadelphia but were told that the bathrooms are for customers only. They occupied a table without making a purchase and a manager called the police after the men declined to leave the premises because, they said they were waiting for an acquaintance. They were escorted out by police.

On Tuesday, May 29, Starbucks closed its 8,000 stores across the nation for an afternoon of anti-bias training for all its 180,000 employees. Workers were paid their wages while attending.

The employees received training that focused on understanding "prejudice and the history of public accommodations in the United States." Starbucks also said future training will address "all aspects of bias and experience."

The two men involved in this matter later settled with Starbucks for an undisclosed sum and an offer of a free education. The city of Philadelphia gave the men a symbolic \$1 each and a promise to establish a \$200,000 program for young entrepreneurs.

The coffee chain has since made it a policy that people can gather in their cafes and patios even if they don't buy anything, and that store restrooms are available to everyone.

This is what the training session was about

The all-company training session was designed to address "unconscious bias," also sometimes called "**implicit bias**." The intent was to help participants recognize their unexamined assumptions about people who are different from them.

Many people see the training sessions as a good faith effort on the part of Starbucks, though some critics view the undertaking as "virtue signaling" on the part of the coffee chain.

Starbucks developed its curriculum for the sessions with help from the Perception Institute, the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and other social advocacy groups.

Alexis McGill Johnson, Perception's executive director, said the training is about awareness. "The work that we want to do is not say you're a bad person because you have a stereotype about a group, but say this is why your brain may have these stereotypes," she said.

It's All About "Implicit Bias"

Implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control. Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases are different from *known biases* that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness. Rather, implicit biases

are *not accessible through introspection*. The implicit associations we harbor in our subconscious cause us to have feelings and attitudes about other people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, and appearance. These associations develop over the course of a lifetime beginning at a very early age through exposure to direct and indirect messages. In addition to early life experiences, the media and news programming are often-cited origins of implicit associations. [Kirwan Institute] (*italics: mine for emphasis*)

Applying the News Story

1. How would you feel if you were arrested for sitting in Starbucks without ordering anything, just waiting for a friend?
2. Does the experience of growing up in your cultural surroundings automatically equip you to understand the perspective of those who have grown up in other cultural surroundings? If not, what needs to happen for such understanding to occur?
3. How might you become aware of unconscious biases? As a follower of Jesus, is it especially important that you do so? Why or why not?
4. Where do our unconscious biases come from? What can we do to prevent passing them on to younger generations? Is it even possible or desirable? (Implicit bias -- discomfort at the unfamiliar -- is one factor that can cause people to "feel that something's not right" and therefore avoid becoming a crime victim.)

An episode of "bias" in Scripture

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." (John 1:45-46)

Here, Philip, whom Jesus had just called to follow him, goes to his friend Nathanael with the news that "We have found him" (meaning the Messiah) and says that it is Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael replies, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" revealing his bias against people from what he evidently thought of as a town with little to recommend it. When he met Jesus, Nathanael's bias quickly melted away and he became one of the Twelve.

Questions: Name a circumstance when you discovered you had a bias you were not at first aware of. When has meeting someone different from yourself or your group caused you to change your view of persons from another group? What was the outcome?

For Further Discussion

1. If the anti-bias training at Starbucks might be thought of as a good start, what next steps, if any, should there be?
2. Have you ever attended an anti-bias or similar kind of training? Did you wonder in advance why someone like you would need this? Did you feel afterward that the training was useful? Why or why not?
3. Think about the artistic depictions of Jesus in prominent display in our church (on the walls of our building, in stained glass windows). How is Jesus depicted? Is he recognizably a member of one ethnic group? Which one? Does that say anything about implicit or explicit biases you or our parish may have?