**Overcoming Our Bias**

**First Baptist Church, Albemarle**

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 Image is everything. Back in 1990, tennis star Andre Agassi, with his trademark flowing dirty-blond mullet, cut a commercial for the Canon EOS Rebel camera with the iconic tagline, "Image is everything." The spot featured Andre riding in a Jeep, smoothing back his hair and generally looking like the essence of California cool.

Problem was that Agassi's trademark hair was actually, well, largely not his. In his 2009 autobiography, *Open*, Agassi admits that he started losing his hair when he was 17, and was actually wearing a wig during the commercial and on the court. In the 1990 French Open, then 19-year old Agassi was so worried about his hairpiece falling off in the middle of the match; he was unable to play at his best and lost in the finals to Andres Gomez in four sets.

To his credit, Agassi got real about his image after that and shaved off his hair, making his image all about what happened on the court. What he didn't know, however, was that his signature line, "Image is everything," would become the mantra of the 21st century. Our culture does an exceptional job of teaching us that our image is the most important thing and that we need to do whatever it takes to project an image that is acceptable to the people around us.

 If we are truthful with ourselves, image plays a significant role in how we view the world and the people we come into contact. Generally, we are drawn to people who are pretty, handsome, winsome, powerful and wealthy. Our culture’s values shade our eyes to see the world through the lens of what the world defines as success. If given truth serum, we all would have our own biases toward certain people, places and things.

 The hard part is that our biases keep us from seeing the truth. For example, most sports fans are not objective. They are called fans for a reason since “fan” is short for fanatic. Most sports fans are fanatics who only watch the games through the colored glass of their favorite teams. Whenever there is a close call, fans of both teams can watch the same replay and come up with opposite conclusions.

Having been a life-long NC State fan, I have seen bias at its best in our fan base. If you are an NC State fan, we watch our team through red-colored glasses. We are eternally hopeful but live daily with broken hearts. We are actually masochists since we most often experience heartache and pain but yet come back for more the next season. We are the epitome of bias.

Another example of bias can be found in our nation’s politics. Depending on which side of the aisle you might lean towards, we see the world and our nation’s policies from that party’s perspective. We all land somewhere on the continuum of the far left and the far right, with most of us somewhere closer to the middle. However, if we somehow could step back from it all and see ourselves from 10,000 feet above the clouds, we would see how our biases affect the way we view everything around us. Unfortunately, we sometimes miss out on the truth when we allow our biases to color our perspective.

Samuel just about missed the next king of Israel because of his biases. Even though God did not want to appoint a king for the people of Israel, God acquiesced to them because he loved them. God wanted his chosen people to love him and follow him as the king of all things but they clamored for an earthly king. Therefore, God anointed Saul as the first king of the Israelites because he was a man of God. Saul was described as an impressive young man without equal and a head taller than any of the others. Saul had the look of a leader and followed God. However, power and wealth led him away from the Lord and we find one of the saddest verses in the Bible in 1 Samuel 15:35: “The Lord was grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel.” What a sad statement.

Even though Samuel knew that Saul had turned away from the Lord and his ways, he loved Saul dearly. So when he knew that Saul was no longer going to be the king, Samuel went to his hometown and mourned for Saul. He was depressed that the one that he had helped to anoint as the first king had failed in leading the Israelites to follow God. Ultimately, Samuel realized asking for an earthly king was a mistake but there was no turning back. So God had a little pep talk with his prophet and kicked him in the backside to get him going in search of the next king.

God sent Samuel to the town of Bethlehem where Jesse and his family lived. Jesse had eight sons so Samuel examined them one by one starting from the oldest to the youngest. Eliab had the physical features of a king; tall, handsome, confident. Samuel thought, “Surely he is the one that the Lord has anointed to be the next king.” However, God impressed upon his prophet that God does not look at the outward appearance but rather the heart of a person. One by one, the sons of Jesse were passed over. After the first seven, Samuel asked Jesse if there was anyone else. Jesse then called his youngest from the pasture where he was tending the sheep. When David stood before him, Samuel knew immediately that God had chosen David as the next king and anointed him with oil in the presence of his brothers. Scripture says, “From that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power.”

If Samuel had simply gone with what he thought a king should look like, he would have not chosen David. His bias of a king’s image would have kept “the man after God’s own heart” from being anointed as the right person for the job. We have a great deal we can learn from this story but let’s focus on why we need to set aside our own biases in order to authentically follow our God.

First, we need to set aside our biases to reflect the true image of God. Our purpose is to reflect the image of God in us and to live as people who authentically love and are loved. Simply, we need to see ourselves as God sees us. God defines our true identity as his created and beloved image, and then calls us to live out that identity in community for the world to see.

Henri Nouwen, one of the greatest theologians of our days, said, “Spiritual identity means we are not what we do or what people say about us. And we are not what we have. We are the beloved sons and daughters of God.” In a sermon where he expounded on this idea, he said, “Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity, and power can indeed present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking, “Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody.” … [My dark side says,] I am no good… I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned. Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the “Beloved.” Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence.”

Our own biases prevent us from reflecting the image of God in our lives. For many, our identity is defined by what we accomplish, how others see us and what people say about us. However, we need to see ourselves as God sees us. He calls us beloved. God loves us without limits or boundaries. There is no condition to his love. There is nothing we can do to make God love us any more or any less. God is love and we are his objects of affection. In response to his love for us, we simply need to reflect his love to others.

Second, we need to put our biases aside to not miss an opportunity. Scripture tells us over and over again that God does his best work through those whom the rest of the world wouldn't give 15 seconds of attention, let alone 15 minutes of fame: people like this poetic little shepherd, a bunch of working class fishermen and a host of sinners like us. It's through the weakest and least likely that God's glory is able to shine brightest.

Throughout Scripture we find God using the least to do the most for the kingdom. God used: Abraham, a liar, Jacob a conniver, Moses a murderer with a speech impediment, Jeremiah a tenderhearted youth, Rahab was a prostitute, Mary a pauper, Paul was a persecutor of Christians. When Jesus chose his 12 disciples, how many of these men would we have chosen? The three closest to Jesus (Peter, James, and John) were all fishermen, one of the more lowly jobs of that time. Not one of these heroes of our faith would have made the cut or would have been chosen in the first round of the draft, yet God used them to change the world. 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 says,” God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.” God chooses to use you and me to change the world so that no one can mistake that it would be in our own powers. The world will know that it was only the work of God who works in us and through us.

Let us not buy into the lie the world sells us that image is everything. Rather, let us place our trust in the truth that God is everything. God is bigger than our faults, our failures, our limits. God is bigger than our biases and our self-image. God uses people like you and me so that no one can boast that it is through our own powers. More than anything, God is love and he calls us his beloved. Let us live into that identity and see the world as God sees it!