Have you ever thought about what your perspective is when you think about race?

We may not realize it, but I think this is about to become an even more important question than it has been, in a quote-unquote post-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) world. I think that striking down DEI is the beginning of an attempt to be more blatant in attempts to use our differences to divide us. So how we think about our differences is more important than ever.

On February 12, I attended the annual boundary training that the synod asks of us. This year, we participated in anti-racism training, led by Rev. Dr. Jia Starr Brown, an ordained Disciples of Christ minister.

She asked us in the morning to think about the racialized mental model in which we were brought up – in other words, how we were brought up to think about race. She presented three options for us:

* Color blindness: the notion that race should be removed from consideration, not talked about at all. It just doesn’t matter. (Racism used to exist but then Dr. King marched on Washington, so now it doesn’t, is an example of this thinking.)
* Racial awareness: the notion that there are racial differences – racism exists, but there’s no framework for what to do with that fact or how to engage with racist behavior/attitudes when they occur
* Racial consciousness: the conversation around the dinner table teaches kids to be aware of nuances, patterns, and impacts. Families have real, in-depth conversations about what’s happening in the world and how different people in different parts of the country of world are impacted.

We were broken into small groups on Zoom to have discussion about how we were brought up. I shared with my small group that I was brought up in an attitude of racial awareness; my parents were certainly aware of racism and made sure that we were aware of it and its effects, but growing up rural without having many, or sometimes even any, Black people in the communities where I lived, meant that we didn’t necessarily have an opportunity for a nuanced understanding. As I’ve gotten older, I’m aware of the importance of progressing from racial awareness to racial consciousness, finding ways to learn about the nuances and patterns of racist behaviors and attitudes and how that impacts primarily Black and Brown people, but also the rest of society in a negative way.

I invite you, as we did, to give some thought to how you were raised, and to have some discussion in your homes or at church about what racial mental model you were raised with, and where you find yourself now, and why you have changed (if you have).

The other big learning that I took from our training, that I’m still chewing on in a big way, is about diversity. Dr. Starr Brown pointed out that we have been socialized to believe that we are “all the same on the inside,” but this isn’t true at all. We tend to expect, as members of the dominant white culture, that everyone else will be like we are, but we shouldn’t expect that, and we have to find a way to get past that.

Those of you who heard my sermon on the 16th, in which I talked about Kendrick Lamar’s halftime show and the invitation into the Black experience. One of the things that struck me was that, just before launching into the song “Not Like Us,” written as a beef song in his feud with Drake, he rapped, “40 acres and a mule, this is bigger than the music!” And I think that’s worth paying attention to. How can we recognize and celebrate our differences, instead of writing them off or minimizing them?

Dr. Starr Brown shared a graphic in her slide show called a “diversity iceberg.” I would encourage you to go out and look for this graphic. It’s really startling. The thing about an iceberg, of course, is that we see very little of the actual iceberg above the waterline – most of it is hidden.

What we see in the diversity iceberg – what we think about when we think about diversity – are things like art, food, how we dress, our literature, what languages we speak, what our music sounds like, how we dance.

But what lies beneath the water level – the things that make us different that we don’t recognize – and therefore the things that we discount as unimportant or just plain wrong when we say “we’re all the same on the inside” are things like:

* Concepts of courtesy, how we handle emotions, personal space, non-verbal communication, touching, eye contact
* Concepts of beauty, courtship practices, whether extroversion/introversion more highly valued, nature of friendships, notions of modesty
* Status mobility (can someone’s class change?), ideas of leadership, tempo and patterns of work, incentives to work
* Ideas of adolescence, attitudes toward elders, patterns of group decision-making, concept of “self,” attitudes toward dependents
* Definitions of sex, class, kinship, occupation
* The list goes on…

This is a LOT to be mindful of when we think of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and when we think of racism and the work of antiracism.

I’m aware of how much of the time I still expect that people are going to think like me and emote the same way I do, even if they don’t look like me or sound like me. This training makes me more aware that that’s not the case. Not everyone is like us. And that’s a good thing!