**Don't think of an elephant.**

**Especially a Tai-Chi practicing, adventure seeking blue female elephant answering with a smile to the name of Pickles.**

**Once the image is implanted in your mind, it's even harder to not think about-though despite the story Pickles still might not have been the first elephant to come to mind.**

**In part, that may be because Pickles managed to transcend her identity as just as an elephant, and seen as such much more-an equal companion on life's journey. Clearly, she did so for Pete-though let us not forget Pete's transformation in the story. Pete becomes more than your run-of-the-mill, stick-in-the-mud pig.**

**They both remind us of our own human condition, dealing with life as best we can.**

**Of course, most of us have heard the linguistics at play when we tell someone to not think of something. Invariably, we think of it, whether we want to or not.**

**So chances are each of thought of an elephant. Some of you may have thought of an elephant you saw on tv or at the zoo. Some of you may have thought of Dumbo. Some may have thought of Pickles.**

**I remember the Mary Tyler Moore show, where Chuckles the Clown dressed in a peanut costume meets a rogue elephant that tries to de-shell him.**

**The episode is hailed as the funniest TV episode of all time. The elephant clearly didn't see a human being upon first, second, and probably third gaze.**

**But then each of us is more than the shell we present, the costume we wear. There is more to each of us than others see or know. How often do we look for that?**

**A few years ago when I was living in the Northwest, it was arranged at my tennis club for me to play with one of the better older players at my tennis club. At 68, Bob is in excellent shape, and he regaled me with tales of winning many tennis championships in the state of Washington in his younger days.**

**We played a fun match, which I won to Bob's surprise. As we were chatting as we packed up he asked me how long I had had been fat. I was somewhat taken aback from that question, but answered that I'd had it pretty much all of my adult life. He then told me if I lost a little weight, I'd be a real tennis player. I got a bit of lecture on diet and the need to work out more. He then said he was surprised at how smart I was on the court and how quickly I got to balls.**

**Then he sort of half-realized what he was saying might have been perceived as insulting and he said I probably didn't need a lecture on this.**

**Fortunately, ministry is a good preparation for being thick-skinned and to see insult as an opportunity for sermon fodder. So I just smiled and said I looked forward to playing again, thinking to myself I would now have good motivation to play really well the next time we played.**

**But it also made me think that Bob had a clear picture of what a tennis player looked like-especially one that could beat him-and I wasn't it. He didn't expect me to be faster than him, or smart, for whatever reasons. Clearly, he had made some assumptions.**

**I suspect if I had told Bob, "Don't think of a tennis player," I would not have been the first tennis player who came to mind.**

**But then we all have these preconceptions, these stereotypes, even when we know better.**

**Don't think of a nurse.**

**Don't think of a gang member.**

**Don't think of a genius.**

**Don't think of the person wearing pink slippers sitting next to you on the airplane.**

**Don't think of Santa Claus.**

**If we were honest, each of us had very distinct, and probably stereotypical images, that first came into our head when we weren't thinking about any of these things.**

**It's also quite possible that each of us were able to quickly expand our images to more than one first thought.**

**I know I have stereotypical first images for each of these things, though I can expand these images to more than one.**

**I still think of a middle-aged female as a nurse first before I remember my friends Frank and Edwin are both nurses too, and Edwin is Filipino to boot. I still think of a gang member as a person of color, then remind myself of the stories of the gangs of white girls that exist too. Albert Einstein comes to mind before Marie Curie, George Washington Carver, or Stephen Hawking.**

**The person sitting next to me in pink slippers on the airplane this last summer was a guy. A white guy in his early 20s. He also had no problems exposing his plaid boxers, or his tattoos on his arm that weren't covered by his sleeveless t-shirt. I bet that wasn't the first image that came to your mind when I said pink slippers. It certainly wasn't mine-though I must say it left quite the impression.**

**Recently, I read this account of racial stereotyping in our society from a small town in rural Ohio.**

**Two first grade teachers had agreed to let a professor observe their class for a year. There were 33 students. Two-thirds were white, the other third were African-American or of mixed-race descent.**

**In December the teachers read to their classes, Twas the Night B'fore Christmas, Melody Rosale's retelling of the Clement C Moore classic. As the teachers began reading, the kids were excited by the books' depiction of a family waiting for Santa t come. A few children, however, quietly fidgeted. They seemed puzzled that this storybook was different: in this one, it was a black family all snug in their beds.**

**As the story unfolded and the tension mounted, the teacher turned the page. And they saw Santa was black.**

**"He's black!" gasped a white little girl.**

**A white boy exclaimed, "I thought he was white!"**

**Immediately the children began to chatter about this stunning development. At the ripe old age of 6 and 7, the children had no doubt that there was a Real Santa. Of that they were absolutely sure. But suddenly there was this huge question mark. Could Santa be black? And if so, what did that mean?**

**While some of the black children were delighted with the idea that Santa could be black, others were unsure. A couple of the white children rejected this out of hand: a black Santa couldn't be real.**

**But even the little girl most adamant that the Real Santa must be white came around to accept the possibility that a black Santa could fill in for White Santa if he was hurt. And she still gleefully yelled with the Black Santa's final "Merry Christmas to All. Y'all sleep tight!"**

**Other children offered the idea that perhaps Santa was mixed with black and white-something in the middle like an Indian. One boy went with the two Santa hypotheses: white Santa and Black Santa must be friends who take turns visiting children. When a teacher made the apparently huge mistake of saying she had never seen Santa, the children all quickly corrected her: everyone had seen Santa at the mall. Not that that clarified the situation any.**

**The debate raged on for a week, in anticipation of the school party. The kids all knew the real Santa was the guest of honor.**

**Then Santa arrived at the party-and he was Black. Just like in the picture book.**

**Some white children said this Black Santa was too thin-that the real Santa was the fat one at K-Mart. But one of the white girls retorted she had met the man-and was convinced Santa was brown.**

**Most of the black children were exultant, since this proved that Santa was black. But one of them, Brent, still doubted-even though he really wanted a Black Santa to be true. So he bravely confronted Santa.**

**"There aren’t black Santas!" Brent insisted.**

**"Look here," Santa pulled up a pants leg. A Thrilled Brent was sold. "This is a Black Santa!" he yelled. "He's got black skin.**

 **But a black-Santa storybook wasn't enough to crush every stereotype. When the children were later asked to draw Santa, even the black kids who were excited about a Black Santa, still depicted him with skin as snowy white as his beard.**

**But the shock of the Santa storybook was the catalyst for the first graders to have a yearlong dialogue about race issues. The teachers began to regularly incorporate books that dealt with the issues of racism into their reading.**

**And when the children were reading a book on Martin Luther King, Jr, and the civil rights movement, both black and white children noticed that white people were nowhere to be found in the story. Troubled, they decided to find out just where in history both peoples were.**

**That story that I just read to you from an issue of Newsweek some years ago made me think of several things.**

**First it made me think of two Dennis the Menace cartoons.**

**In one, Dennis tells his pal Joey, when they see a store Santa, "And he's got twin brothers all over the place."**

**The other has Dennis sitting in Santa's lap. Santa looks completely dazed and befuddled by Dennis' question. Dennis has asked Santa the multi-layered question, "Do you believe in yourself?"**

**Several other things though jumped out at me. One was how easily the kids talked with each other about race. Trying to do that with adults is much harder.**

**In fact, the article also cites that parents don't want to talk to their kids about race, that most parents hope that putting their children in a multicultural setting, showing them a multicultural tv show, will be enough. But research says differently. The research says kids are more likely to not have friends of different races and to notice their parents racial prejudices.**

**What does make a difference however is when parents talk about race with their kids.**

**But what does seem to be true is that parents are afraid of saying the wrong thing, of making things worse. But what it does instead is teach kids it's not ok to talk about race-at least with their parents, and often, also, others.**

**Or rather, that's what white parents too. People of color are more likely to tell their children about race and racism, including that they will likely face discrimination-though it seems to work best when talked about but not dwelled on.**

**However, look at what a conversation about a Black Santa Claus can do to a classroom of first graders in rural Ohio. What would happen if we could have conversations like that all the time? Like we did yesterday in the BCT workshop.**

**Who was there? Please raise your hand? I gave them the recommendation to continue the conversation with those who weren’t able to make it. So some of you have the opportunity to “help them with their homework.”**

**I think one of the reasons why we don't speak up because all too many people are afraid to reveal their biases, or to discover biases they didn't think they had. Yet we all have them.**

**And people have biases toward us.**

**As a person from Appalachian East Tennessee, I notice that people tend to assume I am poor, less educated, very conservative theologically, and in some way related to Dolly Parton. They are surprised to learn my family had no Dollywood connections, but did live on the same mountain as Alex Haley, the author of Roots. People are even more surprised that my East Tennessee Southern Baptist family on my mother's side is more liberal and less freaked out about their gay UU minister cousin/nephew than my father's Connecticut Congregationalist family who seem to idolize Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, and our current president.**

**As a person introduced as a UU minister, people are surprised that I come from East Tennessee and several people over the years have credited with me for being smarter than they expected.**

**But then, often when we know a piece of a person's identity, biases come to mind.**

**Don't think of a minister.**

**As you begin the work to look for a settled minister, let me tell you a story about how culture is so important. This is the story of one of our congregations in Vermont.**

**The small congregation in Vermont had a track record. They would call a minister who they would find quickly didn't fit for them. It never lasted for more than 2 years. They went through 5 ministers. There had to be something wrong with the congregation, a colleague told me.**

**Then they went against standard advice and took a risk on someone just out of seminary.**

**She stayed 8 years before moving on. The congregation loved her and doubled in size. They added on a new wing to the church.**

**What had changed? The congregation called a minister who had been born and raised in Vermont. She knew the culture, the way people did things and what they responded to. She expected the congregation to act like Vermonters and they did. It was a good fit.**

**They understood each other. They had a common bond. The congregation understood that the minister knew where they were coming from and the minister understood the ways of the congregation.**

**One of your challenges will be to be clear to any minister who might be interested about what Arlington VA culture is and the culture of the congregation. Another challenge will be to see if you can find a minister who likes this culture.**

**What kind of minister would be a good fit for Arlington?**

**We all have biases. We need to be aware and talk about these biases to begin the real conversation and work of living our values.**

**All too often our congregations get involved in other kinds of biases, biases they aren't aware of, biases they don't realize they have but are perfectly obvious to others.**

**One story that stayed with me is the story that comes from a congregation that had invited a guest minister to speak. The minister was African-American. He arrived on Sunday morning, in a suit, with a folder. He was greeted by the greeter, who asked him, "Are you here to clean the building this morning?"**

**Having visited over 450 UU congregations in 24 years now, I can't recall ever showing up somewhere and asking if I were there to clean.**

**I worked with a congregation last year that insisted it needed a minister to attract young families. Well, most congregations say that actually.**

**However, this congregation was sure that the only kind of minister who could do that was a younger white straight man who was married with kids.**

**And once where I was a guest preacher, the congregation had two visitors who were using electronic scooters to get around. The worship leader asked all visitors to stand. There were no gasps, no conversation after the sermon with the person who said it, no apologies to the visitors.**

**There was denial when I asked someone if they had heard it too. "Oh, she didn't mean that. She'd never say something to hurt people," is what I heard one person say. Another said, "Oh, I'm sure she didn't see them." A third person said, "We all get flustered from time to time and misspeak." When I asked if anyone would say something to the worship leader, the response that it was not a good idea to make the worship leader upset.**

**Our ministers of color, our bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender ministers, our ministers with disabilities still encounter prejudice as a part of the search process. Most of our ministers with disabilities either hide their disability or figure out a way to downplay it..**

**Sometimes the prejudice these ministers face is obvious. Sometimes it's subtle. But if often keeps a congregation from finding its best match. The Vermont congregation that called one of its own, were able to see that calling a minister who knew Vermont culture mattered more than any prejudice they might have about her being bisexual.**

**Where I continue to see successful matches is when a congregation is able to say who it is, what is about, and what it wants, and where it hopes to go. It doesn't have to be a uniform voice at all, but it does have to be a clear one. The minister either has a clear sense of what the culture of the place that he or she is coming to, or is willing and open to learn.**

**All assume good will and good intentions-and when there is disagreement, they are able to talk about it. They are like Pete and Pickles able to see and appreciate the gifts the other has and allows these to benefit both. And when it does, it's magical.**

**This is your challenge. As Dennis the Menace asked Santa, "Do you believe in yourself?" Santa Clause can take many forms.**

**As you begin this process, I want to ask you a couple of question I ask when I teach workshops on the enneagram. It's a self-awareness set of questions. I want you to think of it both for yourself and for this congregation.**

**The first two questions are easier than the third.**

**1) What are you like at your best?**

**2) What are you like at your worst?**

**The third question is perhaps the most challenging.**

**3) What are you like on an average day? When you are on autopilot?**

**I think of the greeter who asked the minister if he were there to clean the building as what many of us can be like on autopilot. I have no doubts when the greeter learned that the man in the suit was in fact the guest minister that she or he were appalled at themselves, embarrassed, and given what I know about how racism works among liberals, already making excuses for herself.**

**I'd encourage you to think about how you might-at your best, at your worst, and on an average day, have responded to the greeter if that had happened here. I know some people would want to brush it aside, some would get outraged at the greeter, some would want to apologize, some would want to make the greeter feel less ashamed, and perhaps a few would say, "we have work to do. Let's figure out how we can consciously be at our best and learn from this."**

**Make the most of the opportunities and use them for the greater good.**

**Each of us has the capacity to become aware of who we are, what we can do, and change the world.**

**It can be as simple as being willing to talk about our biases with others like we did yesterday, of seeing gifts of the Pete and Pickles of our lives.**

**There's a little bit of Bon, the greeter, Pete and Pickles in all of us. Know you are and know your culture.**

**None of us are so exceptional that we can't do harm. None of us are so insignificant that we can't make a difference. Believe in yourself.**

**Don't think about elephants.**

**Just live your values. Stay engaged and in conversation. Work to make a difference.**