Abraham Maslow posited the “Law of the Instrument,” writing in 1966, “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything like a nail.” For obvious reasons, it is also known as Maslow’s Hammer. We tend to see what we’re looking for, to deal with life according to our own perceptions.

Another, bit more abstract, version is found in one of my favorite jokes: Three engineers are in a car that suddenly stops running. After pulling over to the side of the road, the mechanical engineer says, “Hold on, it’s probably the engine. I’ll take a look and get us on the road again in a jiffy.” The electrical engineer says, “Wait, we stopped all of a sudden. I think it’s an electrical system. Let me have a look-see, and I’ll have us going again in no time.” “Hang on,” says the computer engineer. “Why don’t we all just get out of the car and get back in again and see if it starts?”

We tend to see the world through the lenses we’re accustomed to.

So when Jesus went back to his hometown and taught in the synagogue many of the people, at first, anyway, were astounded. They heard the wisdom and insight he had already demonstrated in other venues. The more they talked among themselves, however, the more skeptical they became. What began as “Wow—local boy makes good!” turned into “Wait a minute: isn’t this Joe-the-carpenter’s son? Don’t we know his brothers and sisters? Come on! What’s going on here?”

This is like the flip side of the law of the instrument—they were unable to see something they hadn’t expected to see.

As a result, and these are the words taken directly from scriptured, “And he could do no deed of power there.” (But he did do a few healings.)

Then it was Jesus’ turn to be amazed—at their unbelief.

Our biases, prejudices, and assumptions are more powerful and insidious than we think. That’s why, I believe, it’s so easy for people to ridicule a whole host of awareness-raising tactics under the banner of “political correctness.” Changing masculine pronouns for gender-neutral ones, for example. I make an effort to avoid using solely masculine pronouns to refer to God, sometimes substituting “God’s” (the possessive, not the plural) for “his” and sometimes substituting a feminine pronoun. I don’t always do this, and I regret it when I allow laziness or inertia to cause me to revert to that male-dominated business.

There was a time years ago when I said, “Yeah, but don’t we all know what God is neither male nor female, and aren’t we smart enough to know that “he” means “he” or “she”? or something like that. It doesn’t matter whether “we” (and that’s part of the problem—how we define “we” in such a statement)—it doesn’t matter whether or not we think we understand that pronoun as shorthand. If we do nothing to mitigate that unconscious knee-jerk, solely male only way of referring to God, we reinforce a tacit implication that women and girls are less-than. There can be little doubt that all the centuries of referring to God as “he” helped to exclude women from ordained ministry way too long.

All right. Back to Jesus and his classmates from Nazareth High. This raises some issues in the area of theology known as Christology. And more.

This passage from Mark’s gospel identifies James, Joses, and Judas (not Iscariot, obviously) and unnamed sisters as Jesus’ siblings. (By the way, there’s another nod in the direction of male dominance, that the sisters are not named.) In this context these details serve to underscore the hearers’ skepticism: “He’s just a regular, local guy—son of a carpenter with brothers and sisters.

Whatever other effect these homely details have on Jesus’ audience at the time and on us as readers 2,000 years later, they must point to this, for us believing Christians: God entered the world as a full-fledged, walking, talking, human being, known to his neighbors and fellow townspeople as such.

God became for us, God’s people, God’s children all, a man like other humans. No halo, no fanfare or elevator music playing in the background to accompany him. The carpenter’s, or mechanic’s, or stockbroker’s, or midwife’s son.

In its devotion to Jesus’ mother the Roman Catholic Church has established doctrines, one of which is her perpetual virginity. They explain away the siblings in today’s reading as cousins, or as Joseph’s children from a previous marriage. While the intention may be to afford well-deserved reverence for the Blessed Virgin Mary, it has the collateral effect of implying that God cannot (or has not chosen to) use ordinary humans to manifests divine presence and love.

There’s more to this scene, especially the temptation to see God’s will and actions only through the lenses we have traditionally worn to see and describe both God and ourselves and our fellow humans.

Maybe today, on this time around in our three-year rotation of reading these appointed passages of scripture, we can take to heart our place in God’s creation. God chose to enter the world as one of us. Though perhaps conceived in a different manner, he was born and grew to maturity finding limitations imposed by others’ expectations and prejudices and by his own humanity.

With this in mind, let us pray, while listening carefully to the words in our Collect for today: “O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

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