

“Moving Past *Us* and *Them* Thinking”
Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35
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I have shared the following bit of humor with some of you before.

“Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, ‘Don’t do it!’
He said, ‘Nobody loves me.’
I said, ‘God loves you. Do you believe in God?’
He said, ‘Yes.’
I said, ‘Are you a Christian or a Jew?’
He said, ‘A Christian.’
I said, ‘Me too! Protestant or Catholic?’
He said, ‘Protestant.’
I said, ‘Me too! What franchise?’
He said, ‘Baptist.’
I said, ‘Me too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?’
He said, ‘Northern Baptist.’
I said, ‘Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?’
He said, ‘Northern Conservative Baptist.’
I said, ‘Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?’
He said, ‘Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region.’
I said, ‘Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879 or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?’
He said, ‘Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912.’
I said, ‘Die heretic!’ And I pushed him over.”

It is a humorous way of underscoring a long-standing human tendency that has developed into a critical concern. Whether we are

talking about religion, politics or anything else, we divide the world into categories of *us* and *them* and then proceed to do everything we can to demonize *them*, even if we don't push *them* off a bridge.

In the realm of religion, Christians today are so divided between a certain kind of evangelicalism that only seems to care about a few hot-button issues and a more progressive mainline perspective that focuses on matters of justice that we not only don't see eye-to-eye on many matters of faith, we speak of each other as not really being Christian.

Beyond our faith, particularly post-9/11, Muslims fall into the dreaded other category for many people, and thus billions of peace-loving people are lumped together with a very small percentage of terrorists who distort a noble faith. Efforts are made to keep *them* out of *our* country, and we just assume they are out in eternity.

Yet again this year, racial injustices have not only created tension, they have divided people between those who think systemic racism is tearing the nation apart and those who deny its existence, between those who stand with persons of color who have been oppressed and those who stand with law enforcement unequivocally. There is no room for compromise, you cannot fight for justice and stand with noble police officers. You have to pick a side; it is either *us* or *them*.

And to state the obvious, not to mention utterly terrifying for those who understand what is at stake, permeating all of these issues is a more basic division that is political in nature. You are either one of *us* or one of *them*, in terms of party affiliation, which presents a challenge for many people under 30 who would be happy to do away with both parties... and there is no room for compromise or befriending the enemy in this battle. There have always been differences and divisions, but not like this, perhaps not since the 1850s. In November, there will be winners and losers. How will the losers handle defeat?

Scripture offers a different perspective on how we might deal with our differences. Writing to the church at Rome, the Apostle Paul calls a diverse body of believers to welcome each other as God has welcomed each of them. The specific difference concerns dietary habits, what people eat and drink, which may not seem like a big deal. But the

underlying issue is that some believers have a Jewish background while others have a Gentile background. Thus, the tension is not only religious, it is cultural and ethnic — in other words, it is a very big deal!

Yet across all of these differences, Paul calls the church to live as one community and extend hospitality to all. There is to be no *us* and *them* in the church, he says. There is to be no judgment of each other because we are all accountable to God. In other words, judgment belongs to God and God alone! So, we are to live with our differences, especially when they concern matters that are not essential to faith.

In the reading from Matthew, Jesus provides a way to deal with a significant challenge that often grows out of our differences — conflict. His solution is the way of forgiveness. There is to be no limit on our forgiveness, he says, as he tells Peter we should forgive not just seven times but seventy-seven times, and then tells a parable about a forgiven servant who refuses to forgive. He does not end well.

Forgiveness is necessary if diverse people are to live in peace. There will always be conflict. The only question is whether it will be resolved. As a character in Alan Paton's novel *Cry, The Beloved Country* says, "The tragedy is not that things are broken. The tragedy is that they are not mended again (p. 56)."

Even the reading from Exodus which seems like a clear case of *us* and *them* thinking — the Israelites are the good guys and the Egyptians are the bad guys — points beyond such thinking. The story is more complicated than it appears. The Egyptian soldiers who drown are victims of Pharaoh's obsession with power just like the Israelites. Oppression diminishes the oppressor and the oppressed.

And there is a Midrash that complicates matters even further (b. Sanhedrin 39b). It says that when the waters poured over the Egyptians, the angels offered to sing a song of praise to God, but God replied, "My handiwork (the Egyptians) are drowning in the sea, and you are reciting a song before me." In the short-term, action may be required to stop oppression, but the would-be enemy is also a child of God. From the broad perspective of eternity, there is no *us* and *them*.

So, the biblical calling is clear. We are called to move past *us* and *them* thinking and embrace all people, not only in the church but in the

world around us. The rationale is theological. We are welcomed by God; so, we are called to welcome each other. We are forgiven by God; so, we are all called to forgive each other. We are all children of God — Israelites and Egyptians, Jews and Gentiles, Democrats and Republicans, citizens and immigrants — so, we are called not to rejoice at the suffering of others but to claim them as brothers and sisters.

But the truth is we know our calling. We often lament the poor witness division gives to the world. And we realize the dangers our nation is facing because of division. Yet rarely do we do move beyond *us* and *them* thinking? How can we alter this reality?

We begin by genuinely wanting to embrace our differences and not just tolerate them when we are in the mood. One of the covenant principles we have used in building multicultural and interfaith relationships through various studies, worship services and other endeavors is the basic assertion that we have much to gain by building and maintaining relationships with people who are different from us. It is a noble concept... but do we believe it?

Do we really want to befriend the liberal or fundamentalist, the Muslim or Jew, the immigrant or refugee, the passionate member of the other party? Set aside the most extreme and frankly dangerous alt perspectives on reality. In the realm of reasonable diversity, do we really want to understand the other and have them understand us? That is what we have sought with Temple Beth Or, numerous Mosques, and the other half of FBC Raleigh. And we have been enriched by these experiences. But across any set of differences, some of which create great discomfort, it begins with a willingness to build relationships.

I think of the year Will Campbell spent drinking bourbon with Ku Klux Klan members, trying to get to know them as human beings past their biases that he not only disagreed with but found disgusting. How could he do that? Anyone who knew Will realizes it was partly the bourbon... but it was mostly the deep conviction that he had a calling to build bridges with people who were different from him, and as a front-line civil rights activist, he realized that Klan members presented the greatest challenge. I'm not sure I could have done it, but I respect

Campbell for this, and I know we need his desire to know and understand the person most different to move past *us* and *them* thinking.

It also helps to realize how critical it can be to build bridges. In addition to the theological rationale we have as Christians, there is a practical reality here. We may not want to relate to some people, but often we cannot resolve a problem until we do.

Consider the issues related to race and law enforcement. Most people support either the protesters or the police officers and the two sides of a raging argument never speak to each other, which means there is no solution. The only way we can move forward is to build bridges across our differences and work together to find a solution.

Toward this end, I participated in a prayer vigil at Moore Square a few weeks ago. Its focus was on racial justice but its goal was unity. So, while it was led by the Dean of Shaw Divinity School, it included the mayor and the police chief as well. In contrast to the *us* and *them* thinking of our time on this issue, it sought to address racial injustice while including the key community leaders who need to be and want to be a part of constructive change.

It seemed like a prudent strategy, but not everyone understood it. During the vigil, a group of young adults walked up in front of the platform, held up signs, and protested our vigil, calling for the abolishment of law enforcement and the resignation of the police chief. They were peaceful, it only lasted a minute, but what they proposed didn't seem practical. Yet, rather than chastising these young people, the Dean found a way to hear their dissonant voices, not agreeing with them on specifics, but affirming their right to protest and their yearning for justice. Building bridges with dissonant voices is important too.

Yet while we begin with a desire to embrace differences and are helped by an awareness of the practical benefits of building bridges, at the end of the day what we really need is nothing short of the transformation of our very being, a renewal of our hearts and minds.

Earlier in his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul put it this way. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2)." When we think

about the ways of the world we are not to conform to, we need to include the tendency to demonize the other. We are to pursue a different way, a good and acceptable and perfect way, God's way of moving past *us* and *them* categories. That requires more than a few simple strategies. It requires a renewal of our minds which is something we cannot do alone but must allow the Spirit of God to do within us.

Yet if we will allow God to change us, there is hope — for a different kind of church, community and nation; for a new way of being together wherein our differences become a strength; for a time when even the most dissonant voices can be woven into our shared song.

Robert Galinas' book *Finding the Groove* includes a story about renowned trumpeter Wynton Marsalis that illustrates this reality.

On a Tuesday evening late in August 2001 at the Village Vanguard in Greenwich Village, he was playing 'I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You' on his trumpet without accompaniment. As he neared the end of the song, the sound of a cell phone intruded into the drama of the moment. A jazz critic in the audience scrawled on a sheet of notepaper, 'MAGIC, RUINED,' and people began to chatter. Marsalis improvised. He played the notes of the cell phone ring tone - slow, fast, and in different keys - and when all ears were back on him, he seamlessly transitioned the silly cell phone tune back to the ballad and finished the song. In the words of the jazz critic, 'The ovation was tremendous' (pp. 33-34).

Only a musical genius like Marsalis could have pulled that off, but the God we serve has the genius necessary to weave in every voice and sound we have and make something beautiful. Our calling is to participate in that great work, quit tearing each other down and start building each other up, move past *us* and *them* thinking to shared song.