



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
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The Damning Culture of Us Versus Them

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Christianity

Luke 9.51-62

When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead to prepare the way. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have dens, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But that one said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another one said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Islam

Qur'an 60.7

It may be that God will ordain love between you and those whom you hold as enemies. For God has power over all things; and God is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.

I have found over the years that if you listen carefully you will find as much good theology in secular sources as you do in the scripture. God is still speaking, which means God isn't limited to our ancient scriptural texts. Here's an inspired text from that great theologian Oscar Hammerstein in his play on race relations *South Pacific*.

*You've got to be taught to hate and fear
You've got to be taught from year to year
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear,
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made
And people whose skin is a different shade
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught before it's too late
Before you are six or seven or eight
To hate all the people your relatives hate
You've got to be carefully taught.*

I suspect that if Jesus had known this play in his day, he would have quoted it to James and John here.

The story in Luke's gospel begins with the decision Jesus made to go through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem. Samaria being the despised arch enemy of the Jews for a thousand years, the itinerary Jesus proposed is like saying today, I think we should go through ISIS territory on our way to do good things in Syria. James and John are flabbergasted as well as being scared out of their minds. Are you crazy? they ask Jesus. They suspect he's been nipping at the sacramental wine a bit too much, and they try to talk him out of this nonsense. And it isn't as if Jesus is actually going to go with them right now; he wants THEM to go ahead of him to pave the way, to negotiate a peaceful journey through that country.

Nonetheless, deciding that Jesus has done crazy things in the past that have turned out ok, their conscience and sense of duty compel them to go. So go they did, only to be rebuffed at the outset by the Samaritans who were as disinclined to welcome them as they were to go. Since Jesus wasn't a Samaritan like them, they had no need to associate with him. So they return to Jesus to report that the Samaritans treated them badly and wouldn't allow them to travel through their neck of the woods. Jesus, surprisingly, changes his mind, shaking the dust off his sandals and consulting his recalculating GPS, charts another route with less hostile traffic.

Now one might think that James and John would be elated that they had been rejected by the Samaritans since they didn't want to go there in the first place. But instead of letting things be, they became indignant with the rejection, and asked Jesus if he wanted them to rain down fire on the Samaritans for their inhospitality. What a pair of two-faced hypocrites they were. "We don't think those Samaritans are worth our effort, but how dare they think we're unworthy of entering their territory. We're sure God would agree with us, Jesus, and would be glad to damn these arrogant sinners to hell with a well-placed lightning bolt."

This response from James and John stokes the fire of Jesus's righteous indignation and they find themselves on the receiving end of a holy rebuke for their haughty, despicable, and inhumane bigotry. If you want to follow me, Jesus said, you have to move beyond binary thinking of us versus them and start living as us and them.

It's amazing how an ancient text like this can be so contemporary in its insight. The more things change, the more they stay the same: violence stemming from hatred, prejudice based on ideological and religious beliefs, vitriolic retribution spewed out against the enemy, a blasphemous assumption that God hates the people we hate enough to bring fire from heaven upon them. Can we see Orlando in this story? Can we see Minneapolis and Dallas in this story? Can we see France and Turkey in this story? Can we see racial profiling, on both sides of this story?

In one way it's nice to know that Jesus's disciples were no better than we are, though that's little consolation, given the nasty, conceited, inhospitable response they demonstrated. Here is entitlement in the extreme. Here is religious and ethnic superiority expressed in the most damnable way, with Jesus holding an ancient mirror so we might see the damning culture of us versus them in our world. And, while a mindset such as this might be innately imbedded in the human psyche, its development comes from social conditioning and subtle innuendo from our earliest years. You have to be taught to hate and fear, you have to be taught from year to year...to hate all the people your relatives hate.

In the culture of hatred, however, there is a way to move forward with hope. It isn't an easy way, but it is a redeeming way. If you want to make the world a better place for everyone, Jesus said, then you have to be willing to make a radical change. You have to be ready to sacrifice your ego, You have to be willing to die to your false sense of entitlement. You have to be willing to hang on the cross your self-righteousness and your prejudices and your vile retributions. You have to learn to defend the rights of your enemies, even though you hate the very air they breathe. You have to even learn to love your enemy if you want to be a card-carrying follower of me, Jesus said. You have to be ready to protect even the people you despise and be willing to forgive the people who despise you. The world as God would have it is about something greater than you. Jesus went so far as to say it isn't even about himself, or even about appeasing God, or about religion. It's about treating everyone as if they were your most favorite person in the world for whom you'd bend over backwards or give the shirt off your back. It's about treating everyone as if they were God's daughter or son, which they are, of course. That's the kingdom of God, the way God wants to world to function.

As we know, however, that's unrealistic for most human beings. We can never achieve utopia or go back to the Garden of Eden. What we CAN do is live into the life God would have for the world, and do our best to strive for it. God calls us to rise above the animal, reptilian survival instinct in order to behave as higher beings created in God's image. Jesus modeled for us what it means to admit when we're wrong; he modeled what it means to be humble and proud at the same time; what it means to be confident and meek in the same person; what it means to be angry at what is evil without succumbing to the violent response of an animalistic vitriol. God calls us to transcend that base response, to see the spirit in things, to see the human-divine potential in people while at the same time standing firm and strong against evil in all of its forms.

Why are we so quick to label as bad those outside our realm of living when we know that such labeling hurts at the very least and incites violence at its worst? What personal pain is so piercing that some of us would rather cling stubbornly to hate or to contempt so we did not have to feel it? What insecurities do we harbor that kindle the fire of jealousy and egomania, of narcissism and fear when confronted with the other that is different from self? What maniacal cauldron seethes just under the surface until someone we taunt someone we have relegated to the margin by our power of privilege or wealth or mainstream into taking the first swing so we can have an excuse to utterly destroy them? What hubris misinforms our James-and-John response to wipe the enemy off the face of the earth? If we have to be taught to hate and fear, and have to be taught from year to year to hate all the people your relatives hate, then we can also be taught otherwise.

Political and religious rhetoric these days is rife with the language of "us versus them." We can do better than this. Let's teach our children not to run FROM a police officer when they're scared, but to run TO them for protection. Let's teach them that different doesn't mean deficient. Let's teach them to dream like Martin Luther King, Jr and to be peace like the Dali Lama. Let's model ways to express anger appropriately. Let's teach them that a culture of us versus them only damns us to chaos; that community means communing with one another, that the world functions better on love than on hatred, on peace rather than violence, on hope rather than despair. For if people can be taught to hate and fear, they can be taught to love and accept. Following Jesus means building bridges between us and them not blowing them up to get even. In the hopeful words of Islam: it may be that God will ordain love between you and those whom you hold as enemies. For God has power over all things. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

Prayer

It has been a difficult and bloody week in the midst of a supremely difficult and bloody month as we hear of attacks in France and the coup in Turkey added to the tragedy of Dallas and Orlando. It is difficult to get our minds around the inhumane anger that seems to be surfacing around the globe, including our own country. Political and religious zealots have usurped the agenda of peace to murder innocent victims. And it is more than a caring heart can bear. So we come today to renew our hope in all things loving and peaceful, even when it appears to be otherwise.

Gather us into the catholic and comprehending arms of your mercy, O God, a various company of folk met beneath this hospitable roof, that together we might be strong and of good courage. Give to the young a light upon their path; to the mature the strength for daily burdens; the elderly that they may not lose the light of the eternal morning. Take us into your personal consideration: the strong, that we may be dedicated; the weak, that we may be empowered; the proud, that we may be humbled; the humiliated that we may be lifted up. Grant that we who came here dismayed may go out with fresh courage, the faithless with renewed trust, the fearful strengthened with might by your spirit that lives within us.

Keep us, we humbly ask, from confusion of mind and dismay of heart amid the turmoil of our present days. When we have failed to strive for the best in life, for ourselves and for others, forgive us. When we have allowed narcissism and pride to sabotage grace, forgive us. Save us from our misuses of our powers; keep us strong in faith and unbroken in courage.

Come to us in your spirit of peace where we face disaster of body, soul, mind, culture or religion. Even as we admire those who have faced intense adversity with courage, so may we be willing to take up the cause for the sake of peace and justice, for freedom and hope. Grant that in every endeavor your grace, which has made all character great, will be sufficient to empower us. Remind us that you have called us not to an easy journey but to an honorable and great journey against the evil that so easily besets us. For Jesus's example of hope and life, we give thanks. Amen.

(Based on a prayer of Harry Emerson Fosdick in his book "A Book of Public Prayers")