



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 17 – Proper 19 Year B

Tribalism

[RCL]: Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

The esteemed 20th-century theologian Karl Barth [*pronounced “Bart”*] reportedly advised preachers to prepare sermons with the Bible in one hand and a current newspaper in the other. Obviously, he wanted the Bible to inform us and advise us, for good or bad, about what is going on in our time.

Today, a magazine article satisfies the “news” aspect of Barth’s pairing.

Describing a very troubling dilemma of our time, Andrew Sullivan wrote in *New York Magazine* (September 18, 2017) about a spirit of “tribalism” in America that has produced an “increasingly dangerous dysfunction,” one that also plagues people around the world.

He identified a prevailing cultural condition that has grown terribly out of hand. It results from what he calls a “compounding combination of . . . differences into two coherent tribes, eerily balanced in political power, fighting not just to advance their own side but to provoke, condemn, and defeat the other.”

Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Watching this cultural warfare, it seems like almost gladiatorial combat, with Tribe A seeking to destroy Tribe B and Tribe B attempting to destroy Tribe A.

Of course, there is nothing new in this. Remember the Pharisees making Jesus and his followers into their deadly enemies? They tried every means to trick him, to trip him up, to prove he was wrong, and to show that only they were right. If Jesus said it, it must be wrong. If they believed it, it must be right.

This acceptance and embracing of conflict clearly echo in our time. Doesn’t it ring true in almost every aspect of our culture, dividing us into competing camps? Driven by fears and insecurities and feelings of loss and absolute self-protection on every side, this view lures far too many of us into a radical and destructive mindset – one that focuses totally on winning, not seeking right solutions or what is best for all – but winning at all costs.

Sullivan goes on to describe how dramatic this malady is and suggests why it is so easy to become tribalistic. One of the great attractions of tribalism, he contends, is that you don't actually have to think very much. You only need "to know on any given subject... which side you're on... A tribal leader calls the shots, and everything slips into place. After a while, your immersion in tribal loyalty makes the activities of another tribe not just alien but close to incomprehensible."

As an example, Sullivan quotes George Orwell from several generations ago. The great social critic suggested that a function of tribalism holds that, "There is no crime, absolutely none, that cannot be condoned when 'our' side commits it." This is a belief that anything done by me – by us – must be okay, and whatever is done by you – by them – must be wrong.

Quite interesting – but quite true. And – quite horrible – because this mentality describes much of American thought and practice in 2018. What tribalism creates, obviously, is an "us *against* them" mentality. Us *against* Them. Them *against* Us. Us *against* Them. Them *against* Us.

To offer a remedy, Sullivan quotes Pope Francis. In Colombia, as a fragile peace agreement met public opposition, the Pope insisted that grudges be left behind, saying that, "All of us are necessary to create and form a society. This isn't just done with the 'pure-blooded' ones, but rather with everyone. And here is where the greatness of the country lies, in that there is room for all and all are important."

Francis urges us to reject the view of Us *against* Them and instead adopt an Us *and* Them approach to living in a divided world. Us *and* Them. Them *and* Us. This can remind us of something we learned in kindergarten but somehow have forgotten as adults – that is, how to play nice with everyone in the sandbox. Us *and* Them leads us to communicate and cooperate, to respect and recognize mutual needs.

What a powerful perspective, to be sure. But is it enough? Mustn't we, here in this place today, reach ever beyond a helpful, but incomplete, Us *and* Them commitment? Knowing our allegiance to Christ, living out our values as a people of faith, isn't there more?

And that is where the Bible side of Barth's pair comes in. We juxtapose the redeeming truth of our Lord, the Good News of God, against the bad news of division we encounter so frequently in our time.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells those who would lay their trust in him: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Giving substance to this cross of self-denial can propel us into a reality more likely to transform the Us *against* Them sickness of our time into something more God-like.

Through the fundamental and essential nature of our faith, we can reveal in word and action a new Us/Them reality. What this can mean is taking up our crosses – in denial and love and giving – to reach a view of Us *for* Them. Us *for* Them.

Honestly and realistically, there will not likely be a corresponding Them *for* Us response – at least not at first. Therefore, it falls on us to show the world the way to overcome the tribalism of Us *against* Them by showing we are *for* them and all others, regardless of whether they reciprocate or not.

We dare not forget how Jesus teaches us to take up the cross of self-denial, commanding us to love one another as we inevitably love ourselves. To turn love into more than a noun, making it a powerful verb of caring. To remember that Christian love is the transforming example of the Good Samaritan – love and care given without hope or desire of receiving anything in return, given *without* strings, given only because of the other's need. Given – in the spirit of Us *for* Them.

If we can act with such a faith, maybe we can turn destructive tribalism on its head and live as a different type of tribe – one that Jesus models – one opposite from the divisive and self-serving kind of tribes described by Sullivan in his analysis of what ails our country. Maybe we can become a tribe of Christians – a tribe *for* others.

Maybe we can be a community of people – who at best are what we already are – the body of Christ, working together with committed allegiance to the same powers of creation that Jesus embodied – rejecting and opposing the harmful and divisive and negative ways of thinking characteristic of tribalism. Putting an end to the winner-take-all mentality that infects our cultural health. Maybe that's who and what we can be.

What if the [number in congregation] of us here today became such a tribe of Us *for* Them? What if we few would commit to stopping the cycle of demonizing the other and the insistence that we alone are right – opening ourselves to the value we know the others possess as beloved children of God? Maybe our efforts would begin the change that the world desperately needs. Maybe we can become the pebble tossed into the pond that creates ripple after ripple, transforming a destructive Us *against* Them culture into an Us *for* Them culture, consistent with the self-denying challenge of our Lord Jesus.

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