



“Striving for the Same Mindset as Christ”
Scripture – Philippians 2:1-13
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, October 7, 2018

The political divide in our nation has been widening the past few years, but the Brett Kavanaugh hearings have ratcheted up the rancor. The crevice between “us” and “them” has expanded as the animosity has amplified. Polls indicate that we do not simply dislike people on the other side of the political divide, we *strongly* dislike them. And this ill will, coupled with a disdain for compromise, threatens to shred the fabric of our nation beyond repair.

Recently, a well-known columnist wrote, “Across the land, before dinner parties or block parties, the refrain “*I hope none of them will be there*” is uttered with increasing frequency. (*Them* refers) to people from a different political party.”¹

Moral Psychologist Jonathan Haidt reminds us that human beings have a tribal instinct. One of the ways our ancient ancestors learned to survive was to connect themselves to others who were similar as protection against outsiders. Haidt says, “We evolved for tribalism. One of the simplest and greatest insights into human social nature is the Bedouin proverb: ‘Me against my brother; me and my brother against our cousin; me and my brother and cousins against the stranger.’ Such tribalism allowed us to create large societies and to come together in order to compete. That brought us out of the jungle and out of small groups, but it also means that we have eternal conflict.”²

The dissension in our nation today will not easily be overcome because there is more than one factor expanding the chasm. We know there exists the divide between red states and blue states, between urban dwellers and those who live in rural areas, between blue collar and white collar workers, between those who embrace multiculturalism and those who fear a minority-majority society, between those who welcome immigrants and those who want to seal the borders, between women who have been the victim of sexual misconduct and those who shrug and say, “Boys will be boys.” These are some, but not nearly all of the divisions that have created competing – no, warring – factions.

To make matters worse, we have public leaders who not only do not want to compromise and reach middle ground, they build their reputation on being intractable and rally their followers with inflammatory, take-no-prisoners rhetoric.

Regrettably, we have entered an era when temper tantrums and smearing one’s opponents are rewarded. Arrogance is considered a virtue, while humility is reckoned a vice. This is one of the sure signs that religious faith has lost its grip on the public, because a bedrock belief of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam is that no one is perfect. Everyone falls short. It takes strength of character to admit weakness and failure. It is lack of character that prompts bragging and bullying.

Is the media over-hyping our current situation or is the dissension potentially lethal to the future of our nation?

Following last week's Supreme Court confirmation hearing, retired Marine Colonel Mark Mykleby said, "When I walked out of the Pentagon after 28 years in uniform, I never thought I'd say this, but what is going on politically in America today is a far graver threat than any our nation faced during my career, including the Soviet Union. And it's because this threat is...coming from within us. I guess the irony of being a great nation is that the only power who can bring you down is yourself."³

Fear is one of the driving forces that landed us where we are today. Many fear they might lose their job. There was a time when people worked for the same company their entire career. Such stability no longer exists. A company may downsize and eliminate your position, or drop you so they can hire someone younger for less, or ship your job overseas. Or, advancing technology may replace you with a robot. Job security has become an oxymoron.

There are other fears. Some fear the changing demographics in our country. Some fear they are one medical crisis away from poverty. Some fear being left behind in an increasingly complex world that is rapidly changing. Some fear the level of violence in our country. Fear can turn people more rigid, more paranoid, and more susceptible to our tribal instincts.

Another contributing factor to the dangerous divide in our country is a desire for revenge. Do not simply get mad, get even. But, as it has been said, "If we seek an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we will become a blind and toothless nation."⁴

If we are, by nature, tribal; and if divisions are inevitable, then the question we must wrestle with is: What exacerbates the schism and what helps to heal the breach?

Today's passage comes from a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the congregation in Philippi. Whereas the church in Corinth, in southern Greece, was destroying itself from within by splitting into factions, the church in Philippi, in northern Greece, brought Paul immense joy because it was united. Paul encouraged the Christians in Philippi to remain united and to radiate love for one another.

Paul wrote, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love...then make my joy complete by being like-minded, have the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind."

Now, if Paul were saying that he expects everyone to be of the same mind in the sense of having the same opinions, then we could legitimately question what Paul had been smoking! That is not what Paul expected. In one of his other letters, Paul says the church is similar to a human body. There are eyes and ears and arms and legs. People are not all the same. They have neither the same gifts nor the same function. However, despite these differences, they can be united as followers of Christ and filled with his loving spirit.

How can they remain united? The key, Paul says, is to refrain from putting yourself above others. Instead, maintain a spirit of humility and look first to the interests of others.

This is a winning formula for a rich marriage. Focus on how you can help your spouse before you think about how your spouse can help you. It is a winning formula in a deep friendship. How can I help you? Before: How can you help me? It is a winning formula in a church. How can I help the church? Before: How can the church benefit me?

It is also the creed that made this nation great in the past. People asked what they could do for the good of the country instead of only focusing on what the country could do for them. It is the spirit of sacrifice for a greater

good that prompts men and women to go into military service. They put their lives on the line for the good of the nation, rather than forever whining, “What am I going to get out of this?”

In our current political atmosphere some leaders promote themselves by accentuating the differences between tribes and overstating the divide between us and them. Returning to our passage, Paul said, “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, though he was in the very nature of God...took on the very nature of a servant.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it like this: Christ became like us so that we would become like him.

In the time of Jesus, the animosity between Jews and Samaritans was even greater than the ill will today between progressives and conservatives. Yet Jesus used the example of a compassionate Samaritan – a despised outsider – to illustrate the nature of a true neighbor. Jesus went even further when he said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matt 5:43-44).

It is essential for us to push for what we believe the gospel tells us is right and true and good. Yet, at the same time, we must remember that God has called us to a “ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Cor. 5:18). This was key to preventing a civil war in South Africa and is key for us if we are not to deteriorate into chaos.

I hope we will keep in mind that it is not necessary to agree with someone’s political opinions in order to get along with them. I suspect most families have people on both the left and the right, and you have to make efforts so that holiday gatherings do not devolve into nuclear conflict! In our family, when the conservatives and progressives are together, both sides are careful not to throw a grenade into the room.

And when disagreements arise, we try our best to treat one another with respect. Disagreeing in a spirit of love is very different than demonizing those who think differently.

As each of us makes a personal decision about whether we will embrace the ministry of reconciliation to which we are called, I hope we will remember in this highly polarized atmosphere that most of us are not as different as we sometimes imagine. Whether on the right or the left, all of us want to be treated fairly. We yearn for friendships and love to laugh. We are attracted to beauty and appreciate wisdom. We disdain cruelty, slavery, jealousy, and greed. We know that no one is perfect. We want to be treated with kindness and respect. We need to be loved and we need to love.

In the wake of this bitter fight over Judge Kavanaugh, emotions are raw and many women feel betrayed. It is tempting for one tribe to lash out and for the other tribe to gloat. It is probably a good moment to just hit the pause button.

However, in the days ahead, we must ask ourselves: As followers of Christ, what role will we play? Will we allow our fury to consume us and contribute to deepening the divide? Will we highlight our differences and downplay the things we have in common? Will we elect people who will stoke the fires of partisanship and champion a winner-take-all mentality or will we elect people dedicated to building bridges of understanding and dedicated to improving the lives of people from every political stripe? Will your opinions and your actions exhibit what Paul reveals are the fruit of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23) How do your values align with the teachings of Jesus?

Writing a blessing for people in positions of power, priest and poet, John O’Donohue wrote, “As high over the mountains the eagle spreads its wings, may your perspective be larger than the view from the foothills.” While many of our leaders opt for short-sighted victories of our tribe over our opponents, I pray that others will have the courage of conviction to promote the common good of the entire nation.

NOTES

1. Thomas L. Friedman, "The American Civil War, Part II" *The New York Times*, October 2, 2018.
2. Jonathan Haidt, "Can a Divided America Heal?" TED Talk, November 2016.
3. Friedman, "The American Civil War, Part II."
4. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving – Sudie Niesen Thompson

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Eternal God —

We praise you for your love:
bringing order out of chaos,
breathing life into dust,
leading captives into freedom,
calling wandering children home,
giving bread to the hungry
giving drink to the thirsty,
raising the dead to life.

Wonderful are your works, O Lord!
In joyful celebration,
we join our voices with the faithful of every land
who sing your praise:

Holy, holy, holy ...

Thank you, Lord —
we thank you for Jesus:
Word made flesh,
light of the world,
living water,
shepherd and gate,
way and truth,
bread of heaven,
cup of salvation,
resurrection and life.

Remembering your boundless love
made known in Jesus Christ,
we break bread and share one cup,
giving ourselves to you
to live for him in joy and praise.

Great is the mystery of faith:

Christ has died ...

Spirit come —
come and live in us:
in this bread, in this cup,
in your people,
one in Christ,
one in faith,
one in ministry,
in this place, in every place;
in this world, in the world to come.

As we gather at this table,
to share one loaf and one cup,
to celebrate our diversity and our unity,
make us one —
one with Christ,
and with all who share this feast.
Give us the same mind,
the same love,
the same compassion,
the same purpose,
as our one Lord,
until his kingdom comes.

Blessing and glory,
wisdom and thanksgiving,
honor and power,
now and forever:

Amen ...

Hear us now as we join our voices as one
to offer the prayer Christ taught us: **Our Father ...**

Adapted from a prayer in the *Book of Common Worship* (WJK, 2018)