

Us versus Them

No doubt you read that the title of my little sermon is “Us versus Them”. You are probably wondering what I have in mind. Over the last several weeks our interim pastor, Gail Crouch, has preached a series of sermons on forgiveness. And here I am, offering one on conflict.

I found Gail's sermons to be both insightful and instructive. They inspired me to reflect on relationships, both the particular relationships in my life and relationships in general. I have been unhappy about a couple of key relationships, and Gail's messages of forgiveness were very helpful. They prodded me to dig a bit deeper, to resolve that trouble and find a bit of peace.

Resentment

As most of you know, I am in recovery. I have been working a 12-step program for many years. This program has taught me much about relationships. In fact, the heart of the 12 steps is getting and staying “right” with the people in my life. The program teaches that if I want to stay in recovery, I have to rid myself of resentments. I also have to maintain a constant vigil against new ones. In this way I am able to have and keep healthy relationships with those around me.

But this is not easy. It is so much easier to resent, to demonize, and to scapegoat. If I demonize you, if I make a scapegoat of you, not only do I not have to work on our relationship, I get to blame you for my problems. My life is a mess – and it is all your fault. I am poor, lonely, tired, hungry – and it is all your fault. You did this to me. You are rich, loved, energetic, well fed – and you will not share with me. It is all your fault.

But there is a problem here. When I demonize you, make you a scapegoat, I give up responsibility for myself and my actions. I give you all my power. I let you dictate my feelings and my actions.

Unfortunately, this is terribly easy to do. Well, it's easy for me anyway. It can be comforting. to have you in charge. If you are in charge, then I don't have to make decisions, I don't have to create. I don't even have to think. I can just react to you.

As you may know, 12-step programs are filled with cute little aphorisms, and one of them applies here. If I point a finger at you, I have three fingers pointing back at me. Resenting you, blaming you, demonizing you, is my problem. Not yours. This pointing finger is a sure sign that I have work to do, on me.

Ostracism

I know that it is natural for me to want to be part of “Us” and to oppose “Them”. I identify with several groups. I am gay man. An American. A veteran. A business owner. At 45 years old, I am about middle-aged. A Seattleite. Very liberal politically. A Christian. A member of this liberal church community. “They” are those who are not part of these groups. Sometimes “they” are women, sometimes youth, sometimes east coasters, sometimes political and religious conservatives. Identifying with a group is not bad. It is how we treat those outside the group that can cause problems.

In the aftermath of those awful shootings at Columbine High School the media busily tried to “make sense of it all”. At that time, I heard an interview on NPR. In 1993, Vivian Gussin Paley wrote the book “You Can't Say You Can't Play”. In it, she described

her experiences in working with kindergarten children, exploring how to keep them from ignoring or picking on classmates.

It would seem that as children we naturally ostracize others. In order to be “in”, we designate others as “out”. I suppose this is a normal part of childhood development. What strikes me here is that she was a kindergarten teacher. At age 5 we begin thinking in terms of us versus them. This probably comes as no surprise to you parents and grandparents, and to those of you who work with children.

In her book, the author described how she sought to counteract this tendency by implementing and enforcing a rule: You Can't Say – You Can't Play. The children were taught how unfair it is to pick on others, to cast them out, to set them apart. This was no easy lesson. The children reported back years later that the lesson continued to have an impact on their lives. The interview implied that if children learned this simple rule at a young age, perhaps horrible incidents like the Columbine shooting could be prevented.

So it turns out I am not an aberration, at least not in this case. No one took me by the hand as a child and taught me to not ostracize others from my life. No one taught me to struggle against the natural tendency to demonize others. No, I am not an aberration. In fact, I am all too normal.

Finger pointing is inherent in who we are. No wonder we have lived in a war-torn world for over 5000 years. For whatever reason, separation and conflict are a part of human nature.

Grace

This tendency to resent others, to ostracize and separate myself from the people around me is a natural part of who I am. It's a wonder, then, that I get along with anybody. It's a wonder we get along with each other, that we humans have not completely destroyed ourselves.

How have we survived this far? What has kept us from self-destruction? Where do we find hope?

The answer is easy. You know it. I know it. Everyone does. The answer is God. We know this because in the intricate pattern of our existence, of our lives, Wisdom Teachers have arisen, been sent by God, to show us a different way. The Christ Jesus. The Buddha. The Savior Moses. Muhammed, peace be upon him. The sage Lao Tzu. And many, many other prophets, including Jeremiah.

Today's reading from Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant. God tells the peoples of Israel and Judah that he has put his law into their minds and written it on their hearts. God's love, God's grace is within all of us, available to everyone. We need only turn our attention inward to find God's grace shining out.

Conclusion

As Christians we turn to Jesus for answers. His words echoed the message of Jeremiah. God's love is there for us. We need only open our hearts. We can lay down our swords, end our conflicts, and through forgiveness, love and grace find peace within ourselves and with each other.

Jesus walked with the pariahs of his day - the prostitutes, the tax collectors, and the lepers. They were his followers and his friends. My personal challenge is to find my pariahs, my demons, and to befriend and walk with them. In my case, that includes

political and religious conservatives - the Republicans, the fundamentalists, the rich and powerful.

For you see, the central message of Jesus Christ, of all the Wisdom Teachers, is that there is no "they". There is no "they". There is only us. We are all children of God, beloved by God. When we learn this. When we believe this. When we know this, we will find peace within ourselves and with each other.