

Learning From Our 'Cultural Enemies'

Polarization, Prejudice, and the Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Like our president said yesterday, "It's been a tough week" Most Americans, including myself and probably you, are upset, unsettled, angry, frustrated, and find ourselves grieving at the events of the past few weeks and what they represent in our country. There are indeed tears in heaven, and there should be tears in our eyes as well.

It appears we no longer know how to live without thoughts and actions being dominated by a mentality of either/or, right/wrong, us/them. While differences of opinion and perspective are necessary for any society to function properly, it appears that we have once again reached a tipping point. **We are experiencing the deadly consequences of extreme polarization, based primarily on the fears, prejudices, misunderstandings and distrust between cultures** – whether based on race, religion, politics, socio-economic class, or anything else we can find to divide and separate ourselves from others. **That is our primary illness: separateness and a lack of relationship.**

On Thursday morning, in response to the recent deaths at the hands of police in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and near St. Paul, Minnesota, I changed my Facebook profile picture to a meme that states, "Black Lives Matter." It caused a bit of a stir, leading one person to predictably respond, "ALL Lives Matter." I was then accused of showing favoritism to African Americans. I was scolded for not treating everyone equally, like it says in the Golden Rule. Oh, the irony. You know, if everyone treated everyone else with equal fairness, respect and dignity – how they would like themselves to be treated – then there wouldn't be an issue that the Black Lives Matter movement would need to address.

The recognition of white privilege and the acknowledgement that racial injustice is embedded deep within our culture in general, and within the justice system in particular, has become a mirror the privileged are rarely willing to gaze into.

As I mentioned in my recap of the General Assembly of the PC(USA) last week, one of the items of business from the Social Justice Committee, approved by consensus in the entire Assembly, was a **"call for radical reconciliation and an active engagement in a new civil rights movement."** It states, "This should begin with both deep self-examination and bold action within the PC(USA) and our nation addressing the structural racism all around us. Since the justice system in the United States is not now serving and protecting each of us equitably, God calls us in this moment to respond beyond our collective comfort to **demand urgent reforms of police policies and judicial practices.**" For instance, "That local and state jurisdictions, in order to ensure that all citizens are treated with equal dignity and justice, review and revise, as needed, use of force policies and training," and "improve police training to include social interaction, implicit bias, de-escalating violence, and cultural responsiveness." I'm proud of our

denomination for taking this bold action to help address these particular systemic issues of inequality and prejudice.

But then on Thursday night, just three days ago, came the horrific attack on law enforcement officers who were helping protect Black Lives Matter protesters marching in downtown Dallas. The gunman's motivation, it appears, was his fear and hatred of police, especially white police and white people in general. Unfortunately, as we have learned in this country, **it now depends on where you get your news as to the spin on this or basically any other issue.** There's a recent Facebook post entitled "Red News, Blue News" that shows the different interpretation on issues, including the Dallas shooting, from polarized conservative and liberal media perspectives.

Occasionally, however, there are voiced of reason that see beyond an us/them perspective. Sportscaster **Dale Hansen**, of the ABC News affiliate in Dallas, WFAA, is given the opportunity to share a personal commentary from time to time. This was his sobering on-air reflection on Friday. I'm pleased to report that it is a trending post of Facebook.

...There was another shooting in America. This time it was in our city... We'll fly our flags at half-mast, we'll say all the right things, we'll make promises we won't keep, and then nothing will change. Our lives will go on while the lives of so many others won't because we expect it now and we accept it. It wasn't this way when I was a boy, but it is life in America now.

But shooting a police officer is not the answer to a problem that too many people deny. Police officers are not like you and me, they're better. They run into the darkened alley where we won't go, they run into the buildings we run from, they look for the person we try to hide from. But they're not allowed to make the human mistakes that we all make because they have the power of God strapped to their hip, and the authority to use it.

When we talk about blindly supporting the blue, when we try to show our support for these brave men and women, we fail to realize we can't defend them all, and we shouldn't defend them all. A white man in America doesn't die for selling cigarettes on a street corner, he gets a ticket. A white man in America doesn't die for driving with a broken tail light, he gets a ticket, too. And the officers who abuse the badge and the power they have should be punished, and too many times, they're not.

But what possible purpose does opening fire on the streets of Dallas do to right the wrongs too many people deal with everyday. As one of those on the city streets last night told a reporter, "they might have killed the good cops." A person of color has always hated to be painted with a broad brush to suffer the indignity of the stereotype so many people claim as fact. And then that killer last night did exactly the same thing, shooting at anyone in blue because don't we all really know they're all the same.

America's problem has come to Dallas now, and our Lieutenant Governor blames the peaceful protesters, because our Lieutenant Governor is a fool. It just not an attack on the Dallas police, it was an attack on our basic humanity and

the common decency we used to cherish in America. But that's all gone now – we lost that a long time ago.

On Thursday night I changed my “Black Lives Matter” profile pic to the word “Enough.” I followed that one up on Friday with one that simple states, **“Love One Another – Every. Single. Other.” That is our calling. That is our challenge. And that means we, too, must honestly face our own fears, prejudices, misunderstandings and distrust of others. We must look into that mirror and honestly assess what we see.**

However, as people of faith, we are also called to be a people of hope. We must not resign ourselves to a “that’s just how life is now in America” mentality. But how? The new **co-moderators of the General Assembly**, the Revs. Denise Anderson and Jan Edmiston released their response to our denomination yesterday. It includes the following:

It is never easy when we are so profoundly confronted with the world's brokenness. Our pastoral wish for you is that you care for someone today. Check on a loved one or colleague for whom these events are particularly personal and painful. Limit your own access to distressing images, if necessary for your health.

Provide space for lament in your congregations and worshipping communities. Seek ways to live into the visible unity of Christ's church, as our newest confession—the Confession of Belhar—calls us to do. Today especially, our communities need to find respite and healing. May they find it in the body of Jesus Christ [the church].

We continue to pray and work for peace in our own contexts, trusting in God's strength amid our own weakness and resting in the hope that the God who calls us to peacemaking will give us what we need to accomplish that end.

So how do we work for peace in our own contexts? Each of us must answer that for ourselves. I did so, in part, by attending a gathering yesterday evening (along with a couple other from College Hill) at Restoration Unitarian Universalist Church, led by the Rev. Gerald Davis. It was called “An Invitation to Restore.” For an hour and a half we listed to anyone who wanted to speak, to share from their heart what they were feeling and experience. It was a powerful experience, indeed.

The night before, on Friday evening, I attended what was billed as an emergency Tulsa City Council meeting, where pastors and faith leaders were encouraged to attend. The overall purpose was to promote dialogue and communication in order to expand our compassion and understanding of one another. I found the gathering a bit frustrating, however, primarily because their version of dialogue only included time for their own monologues and comments, and none from those of us who attended. Saying that, there were some good suggestions, including educating both the public and police – both sides of a traffic stop, for example – on the inherent stress each faces in the situation. **It is still plainly obvious we are dealing with a distinct lack of trust, on both side of the badge.**

When the chief of police and the new sheriff both commented on how good things are overall here in Tulsa, I asked myself: How do they define good? Would people

of color in North Tulsa and elsewhere describe things as 'good?' Are things 'good' only when people aren't getting shot?

If I had been given the opportunity to speak at that meeting I think I would have said something like: Our problems could be significantly diminished simply by extending basic dignity and respect to each and every person we encounter, acknowledging that everyone carries within themselves the Sacred Presence of God.

There are so many passages from scripture that can help us in this regard, as well. Interestingly, the **parable of the Good Samaritan** is one of them. But not primarily from the usual interpretation that the pinnacle of Jesus' command to love our neighbor simply involves our acts of kindness, charity and mercy, though that is part of it. For even the lawyer in the story knew that people of faith are called to bind the wounds of the wounded and take care of the oppressed and downtrodden. Those are givens for people of faith. So perhaps Jesus had something more subversive in mind.

Blogger on patheos.com David Henson believes that Jesus was trying to get us to recognize the Samaritans in our own lives. Remember, the Samaritan represented a **'cultural enemy'** of the injured man in the story. **We are asked, therefore, to do the hard work of seeing them as humans not as Others.** So it all begins by recognizing and confessing that we all have our own cultural enemies. And just as the injured man in the parable learned how to treat and love others as a neighbor from the Samaritan, his cultural enemy, we are called to do the same. But as Henson writes:

The problem is we don't want to learn from our enemies. We don't want them to be our teachers. Because, if we are willing to learn from them, if we are willing to take the time to listen to their stories, then it will become difficult to demonize them, to blame them for all that ails our country and our own lives, to rage at them from afar...

What do you suppose would happen if our initial instinct weren't to immediately look for someone else to blame?

Too often we cast ourselves into the role of the Samaritan, assuming that it is through our actions that we become the salvation of others. This is a common assumption of the privileged. But the opposite is also true, that we should not assume that our cultural enemies are always our saviors. So to avoid another either/or, us/them trap, Henson suggests:

We are each the beaten one on the roadside, in need of salvation from our enemies. We are each the Samaritan, with the power to save our enemies by loving them.

In other words, this parable asks us to do the unthinkable. It asks us to heal and to be healed by our enemies, [who also happen to be] our neighbors, our sisters and brothers.

That is part of what it means "to live an eternal life today. It asks us to live on earth as it is in heaven."

Amen.

Resource: David R. Henson: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2013/07/jesus-doesnt-want-you-to-be-a-good-samaritan-lectionary-reflection-for-proper-10c/>