
Division Does Not Have to be Our Destiny

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 21, Year B

Whoever is not against us is for us. *Whoever is not against us is for us.*

We are continuing our long walk through the gospel of Mark, where Jesus seems to be saying over and over again that division does not have to be our destiny.

Last week, you will remember, that holding a baby in his arms, Jesus reminded us that God stands with the least, and the lost, and the last—that to be with God is to be a servant of all. If you want to be first, you've got to be last. And then this week, he tells the disciples that he who is not against us is for us.

Now to appreciate what this must have sounded like to the disciples, you need to have a sense of the world they lived in.

It was full of toxic division. I mean, the students of one rabbi hated the students of another. The Sadducees didn't like the Pharisees, and the Pharisees didn't like the Sadducees. The zealots didn't like the Essenes. And the Essenes didn't like the zealots. Everybody hated the Romans. And no matter what religious sect you were in, there was some code of purity which segregated some people from others, the clean from the unclean, the pure from the impure.

In telling the disciples that anyone who was not against them was with them, Jesus had wandered onto a very slippery slope. Once you start including people, how will you know where to stop? Perhaps you can recognize some of this in our own day and age, some of this toxic division. But I want to remind you of Jesus's theme.

Division does not have to be our destiny. There are social commentators who look at what's happening in our world today and diagnose it as being the consequence of something called People Like Us Syndrome. Which is to say that we have slowly, methodically, but effectively sorted ourselves into all kinds of different groups: demographic groups, socioeconomic groups, religious groups, political groups.

And then when we're safely ensconced, we derive our identity from being in those groups and build up barriers that separate us from each other. That process, that People Like Us Syndrome, has caused us to lose our common life. That is, the habits, rituals, and institutions that used to bring us together, that used to let people from all of those different identities mix and mingle and live together are eroding.

They're losing their power as we lose our common life. Not surprisingly, we lose trust. We lose our ability to trust each other. We lose our ability to trust our institutions. And we look for proxies like people who went to the same school or live in the same neighborhood or go to the same church. It's a natural thing to do.

It has been happening throughout the history of mankind. I want to suggest to you that division does not have to be our destiny, that in fact, this People Like Us Syndrome has a very profound weakness. We're social animals. We are drawn to being together. We don't have to think about it. We don't always even have to want it.

It just happens. Think about laughter. You may immediately think that laughter is a response to humor. That's not wholly wrong, but it doesn't define all of laughter, does it?

Did you notice during the pandemic how some of the shows you used to watch on Netflix just weren't as funny when there wasn't a live studio audience? Have you ever noticed that when you go to the theater with someone else, you laugh longer and harder and louder than if you were sitting on your sofa at home? Have you ever noticed people of a certain age get the giggles and like, never stop? Laughter is contagious. It's social. It's how

we reach out and connect in intimate ways with another person. Not by thinking we want to do it. It just happens.

Or how about empathy? Empathy is not thinking in our heads about why another person is doing what they are doing. Empathy is feeling what they're feeling. When we see someone in pain, someone who's lost somebody they love, somebody crying, we actually feel a small dose of what they're feeling. And that's why we're drawn to them. We're drawn to them because in that moment, we recognize our commonality. Our compassion is literally drawn out of us by their need.

How about loneliness? Loneliness is not just being off somewhere by yourself. Loneliness is a physically manifested condition, which is why painkillers sometimes help with loneliness. It's something we feel in our bodies, and we are drawn to other people to alleviate the pain, the discomfort, laughter, empathy, loneliness. All of these things are weaknesses in the People Like Us Syndrome. They leave little cracks for us to exploit.

There is, I think, a holy alchemy that turns this iron into gold. And it's the church. It's the church. This is the one place in many of our lives where people from all of those different groups, all of those different identities, all of those different locations mingle, share our lives together, live together, work at creating a common life.

Here at church, we have the habits and the ritual and the institution that supports the common life. But bringing people together face to face is not enough. Just putting people in a room, even if they have a common interest or want to serve a common purpose, is not enough. A structure is required. That structure, I think, first and foremost has to have as part of it equality.

This is what Paul is saying in Galatians 3:28 when he says there is no slave or free, male or female. There has to be a sense of equality. We have to feel like we're all in it together and the dignity that we so crave is granted to all of us and not taken away by a system. The church, at its best, provides that, and we provide that because what's common among all of us, regardless of the intersectionality that we may represent, is we are all loved by God.

We are all loved by God and church. The spiritual relationships that we form, our relationships that we have with another person through God, as if we looked at them through the eyes of God.

I was at a very small wedding once that wasn't going very well. The bride's daughter-in-law wasn't as fond of the groom as the bride was. We sat in a circle, all looking at our shoes as if the answer were somehow there. And the priest who was celebrating this very small gathering asked us each to look at the person on our right, to imagine what God thought of that person, and then to see if we could agree with God.

"Look at the person on the right. Imagine what God thinks of that person and then see if you can agree with God."

We all got humble real quick. The tension alleviated and the celebration continued. That, I think, is an exercise of practice for what I mean when I say spiritual relationship, to be in relationship with another person through God.

The second thing that church does is create some intensity. You know, it's not just about knowing things. It's about experiencing things. And the intensity we create is not the intensity of war or competition. It is instead what happens when we are vulnerable with each other over a long period of time. You don't have to go out of your way.

Suffering will find us all, and if we are sharing a common life, we will all have a chance to help each other and to be helped by somebody else. We had a staff member over the weekend who got stranded in the second floor of her home. The water had risen up out of Peachtree Creek. The cars on Peachtree Battle were underwater and she and her dog and her husband and her daughter were stranded there.

She had the good sense to call the church, where a certain person who's here so I won't name her organized an effort to get out there. Thank you, Dorsey. And Dan Murphy all-too-eagerly really brought his canoe and his kayak and his boots. And he was ready. And as all the neighbors stood around, Dan got in his canoe and paddled out to the house and got everybody out, including a big ole huge dog.

And all the neighbors were standing around and they said, "Who are you people?" And we said, "Well, we work with her." They were like, "Really? Like, who do you work for?" I said, "The church." Dorsey said, "God." Nevertheless, there we were. Was it extraordinary? In a way. But it was also just another day of church, wasn't it?

It was just another day of church. Somebody needed help. We could do it. We did it. Intensity. We're all going to be vulnerable at one point or another. And vulnerability generates an intimacy. And intimacy brings us closer to each other, lets us see things in each other we wouldn't have seen before. Invariably find something to respect that we wouldn't have noticed before. Or, if you will, find out that somebody we thought was not like us actually is like us after all.

It's a way of drawing the circle wider on who the people like us are, which is why I call it holy alchemy. It just takes that predisposition we have to being drawn to familiarity and expands the definition of familiarity.

And the third thing we have in our structure is routine. I know you all know this because you're here, right? You know where the offertory anthem is going to be? It's the same place it was before. We are going to go through this ritual of breathing together, singing together, praying together, being with God and each other in the same way.

And every time we do that, we're exhibiting our commitment to being with God in the same way. And every time we witness someone else demonstrating that commitment, we come to trust them just a little bit more. The routine of our worship, of our life, when repeated over and over again, turns people who are not like us into people who are like us.

Church is a model, I think, for how to restore trust. It is holy alchemy, which is needed in a time when everything seems so torn apart. All the threads of our society seem to be pulled in opposite directions. But division does not have to be our destiny. The People Like Us Syndrome may pull us apart, but we do in fact have a weapon to fight back.

It's the common life, the rituals, habits and institutions that bring us together and create an "us" across all of our other differences. We find that people who we thought were not like us are in fact very much like us because they are loved by God. And in looking at them the way God would look at them, we too are transformed.

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Church, I think, is the holy alchemy that can transform our lives into one where we have people we trust who live in all kinds of different places, go to all kinds of different schools, vote for all kinds of different candidates, all to the glory of God.

Amen.