

From Us/Them to WE
October 22, 2017
Calvary Presbyterian Church
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Text: Psalm 106, 36-48, 1-48, Galatians 3:26-39

When I begin to think about what I might say on any given Sunday, I take several things into account. I give some thought to what's going on in the life of the church... tidbits of conversations I've had with some of you, with Michelle, and what happened at the most recent Session meeting. I look at the assigned lectionary readings for the day. I'm also alert to what's in the news, what's likely been on your minds as well as what's been going on in my own life that stirs my heart. It is important to me as an occasional preacher, to connect what we do here with what's going on beyond these walls.

And I have to confess that on some Sundays over these past weeks, when Michelle has been taking us on a journey through Exodus with Moses, my mind and heart were somewhere else.... there were other stories in the front of my brain and captured more of my attention.

One of those stories is about a bi-racial quarterback playing for the San Francisco 49ers who wanted to raise awareness about the injustice he felt black men were getting at the hands of police across our country. So he chose a non-violent form of protest....he sat down. His sitting down wasn't the issue.... it was WHEN he sat down...during the playing of the national anthem, one of the strong symbols in our democracy. His gesture created a new frontline in the national conversation about race, policing and patriotism. His action has spread beyond the N.F.L., to soccer fields and basketball courts, and into high schools across the country. As others have others started to join him, it has morphed into something other than what he intended. Even so, sides have been taken. Owners vs. players, Patriots and non-patriots, THEM, US. Whose side do you come down on? Who is right? And maybe more importantly, why does it matter?

A second story; this one closer to home. I say one word and you know what I am talking about: Charlottesville. I don't need to remind you of what happened there. The ideology of White supremacy raises its ugly head again, a young woman, Heather Heyer, loses her life, run down by someone who chose to use his car as a weapon. The President makes a comment that BOTH SIDES are to blame, and a torch is lit: US vs. THEM. At the University of Florida this week, the Governor calls a national emergency because they don't want another Charlottesville on their hands. The Right to Free speech is a foundational principle of our Constitution. Whose side are you on? Are you with US.... or are you with THEM?

And then there is Las Vegas. Yet again, another uniquely American tragedy involving guns. Over 50 people lose their lives, hundreds wounded, at an outdoor concert. The gun control debates heat up yet again. Legislators make noise about tightening restrictions. The NRA makes a statement. Yet, the Second Amendment is sacred ground for so many. Americans own half of the guns on the entire planet, with one out of three US households declaring gun ownership. The right to bear arms, a law created at a different time in our history, has morphed into a sacred symbol of freedom. Are you a member of that tribe? Whose side are you on? Are you with US...or THEM?

These stories, plus a few natural disasters along the way, have been in the front of my brain during the time of our sojourn with Moses, these past four months. Each of these stories is a separate sermon in and of themselves. The common denominator is how they illustrate the deepening divide that exists across our land over important issues where people believe strongly and differently. US vs. THEM. This is not to say these differences are new, but most would agree they've been exacerbated by our current political climate. Journalists and authors have documented the growth of what has been called a NEW TRIBALISM in our country, and it is spreading to other countries. Does it trouble you? I hope it does. It certainly troubles me.

And this sermon is in part of my search for a proper response. How do we as a push back against this growing sense of tribalism...what does the Gospel call us to? At the heart of any response, we first should understand the context. What does it mean to be a member of a tribe?

You and I are members of, and surrounded by various Tribes...collections of people who affiliate around one thing or another. We find our identity, our sense of belonging, in our neighborhood and community, in our ethnic and social identities and their rituals and symbols and myths. Our worship this morning is filled with those rituals and symbols and myths. Think for a minute about all of the tribes that you belong to and make up your identity, both by birth...and buy choice. I belong to the White Anglo Saxon Protestant tribe, the Democrat tribe, Washington Capitals hockey fan club tribe, my college alumni tribe ...the list goes on. There are hip-hop and country music tribes; video Game tribes; Harley Davidson owner tribes, Redskin or Nats fan tribes. Facebook groups, military and former military tribes.

Here at Calvary we are also a particular Tribe... and there are tribes within our tribe. I mean that literally...some of you are village leaders back in your home countries. The mix and diversity of the tribes represented here are part of the unique diversity of this place and one of the reasons Heidi and I come here. We want to be a part of a global religious community where everyone doesn't look like us or even believe like us, because we want to learn and expand our perspectives beyond that which we already know. That diversity is also one of our biggest challenges, because it is real work to get to know people across our tribal divides...it

takes intention...curiosity and time to be the kingdom that Paul refers to in his Galatians text.

Sebastian Junger, known for his movies and books about the war in Afghanistan, recently published a book called *Tribes: On Homecoming and Belonging*. And in it he writes about what we can learn from tribal societies, about belonging and the eternal quest for meaning. He writes that for many people, war feels better than peace.... and hardship can turn out to be a great blessing.... and disasters are sometimes remembered more fondly than weddings or tropical vacations.... because humans don't mind hardship. In fact, *they thrive on it*. What they mind is **not feeling necessary...and modern society has perfected the art ...of making people feel not necessary**. Political scientists agree that the outcome of the 2016 Presidential election was influenced by the Trump campaigns ability to tap into this strong emotion of **not feeling necessary**.

When was the last time you felt you weren't necessary? Almost two years ago this month, I was brought into my managers office for what I thought was a routine check in meeting. What I learned quickly was that this was not a check in meeting, but a meeting to tell me that my conditional employment contract, which had been renewed every four years as a matter of course over 16 years, was not going to be renewed again and in five months I would be out of a job. It wasn't a matter of my performance, so I was told, but management wanted to go in a different direction. I was being informed by a new manager who hardly knew me or my body of work, that I was no longer necessary. I will never forget that feeling... the emotional memory of that conversation is burned into my brain. The impact of not feeling necessary fuels the US vs THEM mindset...the choosing of sides.... the identification with groups where you are seen and valued.

And so back to the central question of this sermon. How do we as a particular tribe, push back against this growing sense of tribalism...what does the Gospel call us to do? What is a way forward?

The Scriptures lessons chosen this morning serve not as a prescription, but rather, as they so often do, as a reminder...If I were to put a headline over the PSALM 106, it would read **WE ARE A PENDULUM PEOPLE ... but OUR GOD DOESN'T SWING**.

If we were to have read Psalm 106 in its entirety, all 48 verses... what we have is a summary of the 17-week journey that Michelle took us on through her Moses sermon series. The Psalm highlights the pendulum nature of God's people...on the right path, then off the path...back on the right path.... and off the path...yet through it allthe one constant is God's faithfulness, who returns to his chosen people again and again in spite of their ways. **WE ARE A PENDULUM PEOPLE, but OUR GOD DOESN'T SWING**.

The second headline I would write from this Psalm is that **GOLDEN CALFS ARE EVERYWHERE... AND SOMETIMES THEY CAN PULL LIKE A BULL**, especially in this day and age of the Internet and social media. Like the people Moses was trying to lead, the worship of Baal is alive and well in our culture today, and I would argue that the tribalism and nativism that has risen its head in America are two of our Golden Calves.

Michael Gerson, a columnist for the Washington Post spoke to this point in a column he wrote this week...you might have read it. Gerson is a former Bush White House speechwriter, and identifies as an evangelical Christian. In it he writes about the capacity of well-intentioned religious folk to fall into idolatry as they neglect an understanding of our common good.

He writes “Who would now identify conservative Christian political engagement with the pursuit of the common good? Rather, the religious right is an interest group seeking preference and advancement from a strongman — and rewarding him with loyal acceptance of his priorities. The prophets have become clients. The priests have become acolytes.” He goes on to say, “When anyone or anything takes priority over the faith, there is a good, strong religious word for it: idolatry. And the word is unavoidable, as religious conservatives carry their golden calf into political battles.”

GOLDEN CALFS ARE EVERYWHERE and THEY CAN PULL LIKE A BULL, *especially when they align with the values of our tribe.* Beware good Christian people, when our US and THEM takes priority over the WE, we are probably in or near the stall of a golden calf, *and we need to be careful where we step.*

The third reminder that I would offer is at the very heart of and a central tenant of the gospel that we preach...**WE ALL MATTER...and WE ARE ALL NECESSARY.** There are no deplorables in God’s Tribe...every member of every tribe has its place...Jew, Gentile, Black Male, White female, regardless of your economics, birth, race, politics, beliefs, values...being right has never been an entrance requirement into God’s kingdom.

The journey FROM THEM AND US...to WE...is a tough road sometimes, especially when our sacred symbols are involved. Regardless of what you believe about the national anthem, or hate speech the right to own a gun or guns.... the gospel challenges our tribalistic tendencies as we internalize the truth that we are all sisters and brothers responsible for one another. We are not simply islands of self-concern, to hell with everyone else. God calls us to buck this radical individualist, nativist tendency. As David Brooks recently wrote after Hurricane Harvey, “You might be Black Lives Matter and he may be Make America Great Again, but you’re both Houstonians cruising the same boat down flooded streets.”

Neither Jew, nor Greek, slave nor free, tribe x or tribe ...but all are one in Christ Jesus. Easier said than done...it is hard work.... but God calls us to that work, breaking

down the walls of tribalism, and living into the dream of God's kingdom. May it be so.... may it be so. Amen.