# Us vs. Them

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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## Scriptures

* Acts 1:1-11
* Psalm 1
* 1 John 5:9-13
* John 17:6-19

There is a certain ugliness appearing in America right now, an ugliness especially present in hot political times. This is a ugliness of division. It goes by various names, and I’m sure you are all familiar with it. Red state vs. Blue state. The coastal states vs. the “flyover states.” Christians vs. Secularists. Liberals vs. conservatives. Free-market capitalists vs. those who approve of good government. And so on.

Depending on where you stand in these divisions, I think there are some natural tendencies when thinking *about* these divisions. For conservatives, I think the natural tendency is to hunker down, to dig in your heels, and resist. For liberals, I think the natural tendency is to try to educate and enlighten until we are all liberals, or to say, “Why can’t we all just get along?”

This teaching is especially for those of us who are on the liberal side of things, in some sense of the meaning of “liberal.” There’s a lot of things this could mean, but perhaps for the sake of this teaching, I mean a sense that we desire to erase distinctions and promote equality and fair play.

For example, a number of people I know who grew up in the Mennonite tradition can look back on a time when most of their interactions were with other Mennonites, and (although this wasn’t spoken out loud), there was a certain sense that Mennonites lived a more Christian life than other groups that called themselves Christians. These same people, I think, tend to look on those days with a bit of shame at the pridefulness of it, and are quick to embrace other traditions and other churches now. Even I, who grew up in a more or less secular and Democratic home, have seen my view of who the real, true Christians are expand from my early days as a new Christian in high school. I remember meeting my first Catholic who seemed like an on-fire Christian; that threw me for a bit of a loop. And then I met these people called Presbyterian, and Reformed, and Christian Reformed Christians, and these African-Americans who were Baptists, but different from what I knew. Episcopalians, Free Church Methodists, and then these very interesting people called Mennonites. In each case, I felt my world grow bigger, and am much more humble about what it means to be a “real Christian” than I was when I was younger.

So, let’s look at a bit of Psalm 1:

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Well, here’s an “us” versus “them” for you. There are the good people, and there are the bad people — those who are happy, and those who are wicket. There are the people who read and think on the Bible, and then there is “the chaff.”

And let’s look at the epistle, 1 John 5:

Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son….Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Well, here’s another “us” versus “them.” There are those who believe in God and Jesus as the revelation of God, and there are those who don’t. There are the living, and there are the walking dead. There are those who believe what God says, and those who call God a liar.

And let’s look at our gospel lesson, from John 17, where Jesus is praying to his Father:

I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. … I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

There’s the “us” versus “them” again. There are those to whom Jesus has made God’s name known, and those who don’t know it. There are God’s chosen, and there is “the world.” There are those who keep God’s word, and those who have not. There are those who belong to God, and those that don’t.

What are we good liberals to do, we who don’t want to divide and distinguish? We, who don’t want to think ourselves better than others? How do we react to these scriptures of separation?

I think we first of all should take these scriptures very much to heart. We can’t dismiss them as old-fashioned in thought or language, or outmoded in imagery. We might get away with dismissing Psalm 1, or even 1 John (I doubt it, but we might); but John 17 is Jesus’s own prayer, and he, our leader and savior, is making the distinction.

In fact, we live in a media-drenched world in which nearly every message to us is to celebrate our own special uniqueness, that we are all the same in our individuality, that we should each follow the desire of our own hearts and our own pleasures and entertainments. It is not cynical to say that these messages are not primarily motivated by altruism, but instead are the most convenient beliefs for citizens of a capitalist society built on the free market — the more we desire, the more we desire to buy. There is a worldliness out there, and we are called to escape or redeem it.

Three words come to mind as I think about what should distinguish us from the world, and those three words are “love,” “trust,” and “holiness.”

The scriptures tell us we are to love everyone, but especially those in the household of God. The scriptures tell us the greatest commandment is to love God and to love our neighbor. We are to be a people of love.

The scriptures tell us to “believe in the Son of God” and thus to “have the testimony in [our] hearts.” The scriptures tell us to accept the words of God as true, to mediate on God’s word day and night; to trust Jesus, the true Word of God. The scriptures tell us that it is through faith we are saved. We are to be a people of trust.

The scriptures tell us to avoid the ways of foolish wickedness, to be a people distinguished by our good conduct and high moral standards. The scriptures tell us to dedicate our lives to the living God, to put God before all other duties, to be perfect, even as God is perfect. The scriptures call us to be sanctified by God. We are to be a people of holiness.

When we, together (and we must do it together), find ourselves more loving, more trusting, more engaged in a devout and holy life, we will see divisions arise organically. We never give up on everyone or any group, but we will see distinctions become manifest. At times, that will sadden us, but mostly we will be grateful to God for calling us out of the wilderness.

Be a people of love.

Be a people of faith and trust.

Be a holy people.