

“Dimensions of Love: Breadth”

Ephesians 3:17-19

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I tell premarital couples with whom it is my privilege to work that although their love is the most personal of relationships, it is not a private arrangement. To be sure, they are marrying each other for better or for worse, but they are also marrying into each other's families the same way. And beyond that, they are taking their places in the broader community. This marriage of theirs isn't just about them. The way they make their marriage, especially if there are children born into it, will affect the community and the world at large for generations to come.

Further, the great issues of the day are calling all our names. Who will answer? However much we may wish the world would just go away and leave us in peace, it won't, and it shouldn't. We are, each of us, part of that world. And while we are called to love the world one individual at a time, there are issues

that impact the lives of all individuals, which we ignore at our peril.

Oddly, it is religion that has steered us toward staying on the “straight and narrow.” Jesus is even quoted in support of narrowness: “Enter ye in at the strait gate; for wide is the gate and broad the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat. Because strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it!” (Matthew 7:13-14) That these verses follow directly after the Golden Rule surely has lent weight to them.

The overwhelming testimony of scripture, though, is that Jesus was far more concerned with the spirit of the law, which is love, than in the letter of the law, which is legalism. Jesus' own keeping of religious law had a way of breaking barriers and testing the limits of love. That's what got him into trouble and kept him there, and it is the reason that today we not only reverence his name but call him Lord of all. Jesus is history's watershed exemplar because he dared to live at the continental divide of

human separation. Let's look at a few of those divisions.

### THE DIVISION BETWEEN GENDERS

Jesus was friendly with women in a culture that forbade a male from publicly talking to any female not his wife.

- Consider his close relationship with Mary and Martha, sisters of his good friend, Lazarus. Jesus defended Mary's acting like "one of the boys," sitting at the rabbi's feet while sister Martha was busy with women's work—food preparation.
- Contemplate Jesus' complicated relationship with Mary of Magdala, thought by some to be his mistress or his wife. Was she the former "Crazy Mary" from whom he had exorcised seven demons?
- Cogitate upon Jesus' championing of the woman taken in adultery, challenging the kangaroo court of men about to stone her. *Let him among you who is without sin cast the first stone!* Then to the woman: *Go, and sin no more.*

- Visualize Jesus in the house of Simon, where he is approached by a prostitute who bathes his feet with costly perfume, an act which scandalizes all the other males in the room on two counts. First, that a woman of the evening has entered the house and touched him. Second, that the cost of the perfume amounted to a man's annual wage! Hear Jesus remonstrate with them as he lifts her up and honors her. *She has anointed me for my burial; and I tell you that wherever the gospel is proclaimed, this story will be told in memory of her.*

Each and all of these incidents point to God's inclusive love and the broad hint that our love is meant to mirror God's love. That is to say, exclusive love is not love, but self-absorption. In light of the love of Jesus, our loves and our lives are audited. It is said of Jesus in the Epistle to the Ephesians that *he has broken down the dividing wall of hostility . . . that he might create in himself one new*

*person in place of the two, thereby bringing hostility to an end.* (Eph. 2:14-16) The barrier-breaking work of reconciliation extends far beyond the division between men and women. It extends to . . .

#### THE DIVISION BETWEEN RACES

The orthodox Jews of Jesus' day hated Samaritans. Samaritans were Jews that inhabited a region that lay between Jerusalem and Galilee. They had inter-married with invading Assyrians centuries before, so were considered half-breeds. Their practice of the faith, in the eyes of "proper" Jews, had been mongrelized. They were to be avoided. So strongly did Jews detest Samaritans that they often refused to set foot in Samaritan territory. Geographically, Samaria lay athwart the main road connecting Judea in the south and Galilee in the north. Many Jews were willing to add a day to their journey by walking around Samaria!

- Jesus one day was talking about the second great commandment: to love

neighbor as self. When pressed by a lawyer to define "neighbor," Jesus (as he so often did to illustrate a point) told a story. We call it the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus never characterized the Samaritan one way or the other. He just told the story. At the end of it Jesus returned to lawyer's question. *Which man was neighbor to the other?* The only one possible was the man who acted like one. Neighbor is as neighbor does. Love is as love does. In this instance love is a verb. And it is no respecter of racial differences. To call a Samaritan "good" would surely have been an abrasive contradiction in terms for Jesus' listeners.

- Then there was Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in Sychar at Jacob's well, which I will not recount, except to say that in this incident Jesus crosses several boundaries: those of gender, race, religion, and purity.

The reason these stories were remembered, recounted, and finally recorded is that they shatter stereotypes that allow us unconsciously

to maintain our divisions. We may still maintain them, but we now do so by conscious decision and at our soul's peril. Jesus' love did not stop here. It reached out to dismantle . . .

#### THE DIVISIONS OF RELIGION & NATIONALITY

I cite three stories about Jesus.

- First, the Roman centurion whose daughter Jesus raised from the dead. In this instance Jesus responds to the request of a pagan foreigner and officer in an occupying army.
- Second, the Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter Jesus healed, but only after he initially ignored, then insulted the woman as a foreign dog.
- Third, the feeding of the second multitude, this one a crowd of 4,000 beyond the borders of Israel.

All divisions of gender, race, religion and nationality. All have to do with ritual purity and what I choose to call . . .

#### THE DIVISIONS OF CASTE

When we think of a caste system, we think of Hindus in India. But there are caste systems

all over the world and in more religions than the Hindu. The two principal castes in the ancient Jewish world were "clean" and "unclean." This applied to animals, to food, and to people. Unclean, for instance, was any animal with a cloven hoof: a pig or a camel. Unclean was any person who was a leper, was hemorrhaging or menstruating, who had just given birth to a child. Unclean were the crippled, the insane, the dead. Sinners and foreigners were unclean.

We have come by this long road to the house of Simon the tanner in Joppa, where Peter is a guest. He is on the rooftop at noon, hungry, and waiting for lunch to be prepared. Falling into a trance, perhaps induced by low blood sugar, Peter has a heavenly "vision," which is more like a nightmare. Peter sees heaven opened, a four-cornered sheet descending, filled with non-kosher fare: all kinds of animals, reptiles, and birds. Here is how Luke records the scene.

*And there came a voice to him, "Rise, Peter, kills and eat." But Peter said, "No, Lord, for I*

*have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” And the voice came to him a second time, “What God has cleansed, you may not call common.” This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.*

From this vision Peter's horizons are expanded. He can see with new eyes that God does not despise foreigners or non-kosher food, and that he is mandated to broaden his embrace of God's good creation, not to pass judgment on it. Peter finally gets it!

Dr. Leonard Sweet, former Dean of Drew Theological Seminary in Madison, New Jersey, writes:

*The continental divide in the church today is not between liberal and conservative, evangelical and mainline, Roman Catholic and Protestant, but between those who get it and those who don't. And if you have to ask what the "it" is, you don't!*

Beyond the barriers we erect and maintain,

a broader life beckons—a barrier-free one—where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, black nor white, poor nor rich, gay nor straight, illegal immigrant nor blue blood yankee, atheist nor believer, Protestant nor Catholic, Christian nor Shiite Muslim, sinner nor righteous, young nor old, educated nor unlettered.

Our divisions are both unnecessary and bogus. Full of our sanctimonious little judgments, we barricade ourselves not only from our natural neighbors, but from God. Insofar as sin is separation, we are sinners! Jesus Christ is our window on a wider world. God loves diversity, the very thing we have hated in our defense of a narrow and dying faith.

The rich, thick texture of life God has created shames the pallid, thin sheet beneath which we shiver. The varied palette of colors beneath God's paint brush dazzles our monochrome vision. The breadth of God's embrace in Jesus Christ dismisses out of hand our little revulsions and exclusions. The

cuisine at God's table is exotic. Sample some. Take, eat! How dare we call unclean or common what God has blessed!

Just this and I'm finished: The next time your mouth is full of words that are cultural, ethnic, or racial slurs, just bite your tongue and swallow hard. You and I are not here to judge the earth (that is Christ's job) but to live upon it and dwell among earth's inhabitants as fellow-citizens. I am inveighing against attitudes that are antithetical to the mind of Christ and absolutely destructive of human society.

Beyond the tragedy and terror of hate crimes, which we are seeing with a ferocious and increasing frequency, lies the unspeakable horror of mindless fanatics intent on destroying the different. To demonize what is "not like us" is to live in a world gone mad. In such a situation is it better to be broad-minded or narrow-minded? Better to be exclusive or inclusive? Is it better to be a universalist or a fundamentalist?

Mindless fundamentalisms of every stripe (white supremacist, survivalist, Communist, Jewish, Islamic or Christian) are real and present dangers around this globe. They must be firmly opposed and passionately resisted by people who know better—who know a better way—the way of broad and inclusive love—the way of Christ.

