

Lambs, Wolves, and the Christian Challenge to Build Relationship
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In addition to a few days' worth of sweltering temperatures, the past week was memorable for all of the Independence Day celebrations. This is a robust holiday in my neighborhood, and Kent and I have enjoyed having neighbors who, year after year, vie for having the most thrill-inducing bottle rockets, roman candles, and crackle effects in area. As a result of this friendly competition, we never really feel the need to go anywhere beyond our own roof to get our fill of July 4th celebrations, and this year was no exception. There is, by the way, no official designation of a winning household at the end of the night, but I think everyone within eyeshot agrees that the family at 408 E. Madison Ave. was the house to beat this year.

While our neighborhood July 4th celebration showed little sign of wavering in 2019, from the vantage point of the news headlines, the holiday this year had an unusual amount of ambivalence. Whether this particular commemoration was a positive or negative experience seemed to depend largely on a person's political frame of reference. For starters, there was the President's plan to mark the holiday in grand style at the Lincoln Memorial. Some coverage of this event drew attention to people who were excited by what they took to be a fitting expression of national pride. Turn the channel, and there were others who criticized the festivities as too militant or too politicized or too expensive. Divided opinions and different frames of reference turned up in another news story this past week, a story about a Gallup poll in which the number of people who are proud to be American hit the lowest mark since this annual survey of patriotism was initiated 18 years ago. Once readers move past the headline about an overall decline, they learn that there's actually a strong polarization in attitudes with

Republicans maintaining a great deal of patriotic feeling while Democrats and Independents draw the overall average down with their frustration.

So, while the fireworks in my neighborhood continued unabated, other indicators point to the probability that the people setting off those fireworks are in some ways less friendly to each other, and perhaps less willing to recognize a common purpose or common values with their neighbors.

An article by Joseph Pierre,ⁱⁱ a UCLA Clinical Psychologist, reported on several studies that have captured features of our growing divisions, mainly by comparing the results of similar surveys over time. One study identified the percentage of people from the two major parties who agreed with a range of political statements. In 1994, the survey found that, on average, the level of supportive responses for each party differed by 15%; when the study was performed in 2017, the average difference between parties more than doubled to 36%. And one more study—and, I promise, this is the last one—found that the parties are not only more polarized in their positions, but the people from one party are also more likely to experience negative feeling for members of the other party. Some of the indicators of this acrimony include the likelihood of a parent to object to their child marrying someone because of party affiliation and an inclination to resort to disparaging stereotypes for being a Republican or a Democrat.

There we have it: citizens in this country who identify with a political party are less likely to share common ground and are more likely to have negative feelings about those who belong to the other major party. So, what are we to do when we see the preconditions of acrimony in our communities? And is there a Christian response to a world of polarization and increasing incivility?

We don't need to read too far into the Bible—the Hebrew Scripture as well as the New Testament—to be reminded that factionalism and acrimony are not inventions of the 21st century. Ideological divisions and tribalism have long histories, and they are certainly part of today's gospel from Luke. In this reading, there are references to a world marked by all sorts of division and mutual suspicion, one of the most helpful things I learned in doing my research on this gospel is that the number of travelers that Jesus appoints—70 of them—is not arbitrary but a reference to a list of all of the nations of the world as they appear in Chapter 10 of Genesis.ⁱⁱⁱ The message here is twofold: first, salvation in Luke is offered to all of the nations of the world—no exceptions—and second, the call to discipleship requires stepping into the points of tension that divide people, and navigating those difficult places.

“I am sending you out like lambs in the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3), Jesus tells his followers. From our vantage point, in a post crucifixion and post-Easter world, we can probably recognize the theological resonance in Jesus calling his followers to be lambs, but those who were hearing this instruction without the benefit of a resurrection experience had to be wondering about the wisdom of a venture that put them in the position of lambs among the wolves. What does this mean? What is Jesus asking followers—and what is he asking us—to do when he describes a situation that sounds ill-advised if not lethal?

One thing is conspicuous: in asking his disciples and others to go out into the world and to be lambs among the wolves, he is not focusing on a particular lesson that needs to be shared with people unfamiliar with Jesus' teaching. Rather, in today's gospel, Jesus devotes most of his instruction to ways to build relationships with people who are not only outside the fold but who may be hostile to news about a Jewish Messiah.

Being a lamb is a matter of assuming a disposition and a manner of engaging others.

Relationships are primary here, and I think there are three qualities that this gospel identifies with a lamb-like disposition in the company of wolves. One of these qualities is vulnerability. Shortly after referencing the lamb, Jesus describes the way in which his followers should approach the potentially hostile people they are to engage: “carry no purse,” he says, “no bag, no sandals” (Luke 10:4). In other words, they are to make themselves dependent upon those that they fear or have their suspicions about; they should learn to rely on these perfect strangers representing all of the nations of the world for food, for shelter, and for safety.

Further, the lambs in this gospel do not counter a wolf’s aggression or intimidation with a show of opposing force. Rather, the lamb introduces herself or himself with generosity and goodwill: “Whatever house you enter,” Jesus advises, “first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person” (Luke 10:5-6). The Christian guest establishes the tone for future engagement, and that tone is set with a prayer of supplication, an earnest request that those who might be construed as a threat to one’s safety nonetheless partake in a satisfying peace.

That gift of a prayer creates the conditions for the house owner’s hospitality, and the final instruction that Jesus offers to his followers is that they complete the circuit of relationship by receiving whatever generosity is offered to them: “Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you,” Jesus instructs, “eat what is set before you” (Luke 10:7). A cycle of mutual benefit is established, and presumably with these relationships in place, further teaching can get underway. But, again, in Luke’s gospel, Jesus seems less interested in the teachings than in the relationships, and as all 70 travelers return at the end of our reading, the

celebrations focus on the way that—out of a position marked by vulnerability, generous prayers for peace, and willingly received hospitality—the wolves became cooperative followers of Christ.

Tending to Jesus’s instructions to his 70 followers offers one lens for considering a response to the points of tension and division in our own context, be they political tensions, ethnic and racial tensions, regional tensions, or anything else with the power to divide us. It would be hard to deny that the Christian Church has played some role in the polarizing that marks our times, but Luke’s gospel offers one biblical call to a different kind of engagement in the world, one that builds relationships even with wolves and that opens all conversations with a message of peace. Let us pray for the strength to be relationship builders in our own walks of life.

3. For the Human Family (from the Book of Common Prayer)

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*^{iv}

ⁱ “American Pride Hits New Low; Few Proud of Political System,” *Gallup News*, July 2, 2019.

https://news.gallup.com/poll/259841/american-pride-hits-new-low-few-proud-political-system.aspx?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosam&stream=top

ⁱⁱ “Why Has America Become So Divided?” by Joseph Pierre, *Psychology Today*, Sept. 15, 2018.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/201809/why-has-america-become-so-divided>

ⁱⁱⁱ *Feasting on the Word*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

^{iv} *The (Online) Book of Common Prayer*, The Episcopal Church. <https://www.bcponline.org>