

We're All in This Together

a sermon

by Larry Bethune

These are divided times, in our nation, in our world. Seems like everybody's choosing up sides and regarding the others with contempt. Maybe it's always been that way. It's the way of the world, "us against them," again and again. Again and again, the hostility explodes into violence. And how do we find the path to peace? Is it not with the recognition of what we all hold in common? Is there not some universal human connection that can help us understand we are all related to one another?

When I read this in Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, it blew my mind:

Every atom you possess has almost certainly passed through several stars and been part of millions of organisms on its way to becoming you. We are each so atomically numerous and so vigorously recycled at death that a significant number of our atoms—up to a billion for each of us, it has been suggested—probably once belonged to Shakespeare. A billion more each came from Buddha and Genghis Kahn and Beethoven, and any other historical figure you care to name. (The personages have to be historical, apparently, as it takes the atoms some decades to become thoroughly re-distributed; however much you may wish it, you are not yet one with Elvis Presley.)

We are all made of the same basic stuff, and we all share this good world God made. Long ago the writers of Genesis suggested God made humanity to be responsible caretakers of creation together. In spite of the tribal divisions and national borders we have created, our scientists keep discovering more and

more ways we are connected to each other, so that the well being of any one of us affects the well being of all of us. Chaos theory suggests the beating wings of a butterfly may set forces in motion that result in a hurricane on the other side of the earth. (And if I lived in Florida, I would be gathering up every butterfly I can find!) For good or evil, all creation is connected. We don't need to work to create this universal connection. It is already there! We need only to recognize it and quit resisting it.

Well...if the world can't recognize this universal interrelatedness, then surely we Christians can recognize it among ourselves, can't we? I mean, in addition to the atomic level connection of God's creation, we are joined by the bonds of God's love in Christ. Of all people, we should demonstrate the unity of all humanity to the world. But no. We are also divided. And just as there is no violence quite as passionate as domestic violence, the divisions in the church are especially vitriolic at times, disproving in the eyes of the world just about every claim we want to make about God's love in us.

On the wall in the hall outside my office is a poster, that comes from the Mennonite Central Committee, which reads:

*A modest
proposal
for peace:
let the Christians
of the world
agree that
they will not
kill each other*

That would be a start, wouldn't it?

I think we shall never find unity in belief. If some kind of enforced orthodoxy is the only hope for Christians to be unified, I see no hope. But then Christ never called us to have unity of belief, or he would have left us a systematic theology to follow. Instead, he left us a model of love, and called us to follow that. On the night in which he was betrayed, when he gathered with his disciples in the upper room, after he had washed their dusty feet, he said:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

Now, in our time, love has been relegated to the list of weak sentimentalities that only make you vulnerable. You won't find love a significant strategy in the boardrooms of business or the halls of justice or the smoke-filled rooms of politics. You won't hear a candidate of any political party advocate love as the basis for international policy in the next debate. But love is the heart and soul of the Christian agenda in the world.

So Paul writes to his young colleague, Timothy, as he encourages him not to base his behavior on fear:

For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace (2 Tim 2:7-9).

"Join with me in suffering for the gospel," he writes. Why should anyone have to "suffer for the gospel," for the good news that God loves us all? Because the world does not accept love as a solution. Because there will always be resistance to God's love in the world, by those who gain more for themselves by not loving as God loves. After all, for this message, Christ himself was crucified. This is Jesus' way: God loves all of us, always, always.

But a big part of this suffering is the suffering

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which always attends love. To love is to suffer when the beloved suffers. To love the world means to take its sufferings for your own. In Chaim Potok's little classic, *My Name Is Asher Lev*, the title character is told,

"Asherel, your father sees the Jewish people as one body and one soul. When a head hurts in the Ukraine, your father suffers in Brooklyn. When Jews cannot study Torah in Kiev, your father cannot sit still in Brooklyn. Do you understand, Asherel?"

We should understand. This is the kind of solidarity Jesus wants us to have as his followers when he tells us to "love one another."

The unity we share as Christians is not a uniformity of belief, but a universality of love. We must join with Christians in all times and places. We must join ourselves to the glory and the shame of all our Christian history, that we might trust in the grace of God alone for our Christian future. We must transcend our differences of opinion, our differences of style, our differences of structure, and remember we are—one and all—dependent on the love of God in Christ. He is our unity. He is our peace. He is our only hope.

—Larry Bethune is the senior pastor of University Baptist Church in Austin, Texas. Texts used: Psalm 137; Lamentations 1:1-6; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10.