

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
All Saints Sunday – November 5, 2017
Matthew 5:1-12

I love public radio. In our family, the local public radio station is the first station programmed on our radio presets. Back in Austin, TX, we were proud members of our local station, KUT, for twenty years. KUT was a very good public radio station in the late 90's but has become a truly excellent station in the years since. In addition to offering great programs from National Public Radio and Public Radio International, KUT has also developed remarkable original programming that has been distributed locally and nationally.

Every Friday, KUT airs a short program called Two Guys on your Head. In this program, Drs. Art Markman and Bob Duke, two distinguished psychologists and professors at the University of Texas, explore different aspects of human behavior and the brain. In an episode in the past year, they discussed the question of why it seems that we are so polarized in our political views these days.¹ They cited a study that had analyzed survey data taken since 1970 on people's self-professed political identity, as well as their party affiliation. Over this 40-year span more than 40M people had been surveyed and they found that people are more politically polarized now than ever before.

Now, for any of us paying even the slightest bit of attention, this should not be surprising. But they also found that those who had described themselves as conservative, now describe themselves as very conservative, and those who had described themselves as liberal, now describe themselves as very liberal. And this political identity is now strongly associated with a single political party. So, if you are conservative you are a republican and if you are liberal you are a democrat – full stop. Gone are the more nuanced identifications of conservative democrats or more progressive republicans. The moderate middle ground has disappeared.

The two radio hosts discussed how all this seems to be related with our propensity for group identification. Historically, when we shared common national goals – and especially a common threat – there has been a coming together based on an understanding of who we are as citizens of a country – as Americans. But if we primarily see ourselves not as Americans, but as Conservative Americans or Liberal Americans, or whatever it may be, all the factors associated with in-groups and out-groups come into play. So, now our political opponent is no longer another American, albeit one with a different point of view, but now is a part of some other entirely different group.

Drs. Markman and Duke say there are real-life consequences of all this. If we are friends with someone who has different political views, we may think that person's views are nuts but that person is still our friend. But with political opponents, if someone is of a different political group, now that person is just one of those crazies of that other political party. They are "the other" and are somehow essentially different from us.

It seems it is human nature that when someone professes a belief or opinion different from ours, we tend to distance ourselves from that person because emotion is now involved, and since that emotion is potentially negative, we avoid the situation. So, the question is what do you do when someone expresses an opinion that you disagree with and how can you keep the conversation going? Our hosts said that this is a skill – not just a value or an idea, but a skill that

¹ KUT Radio, Two Guys on Your Head (<http://kut.org/post/why-it-seems-we-dont-get-along-we-used>)

needs to be practiced. And the best way to do this, they said, “is to not treat people you disagree with as the other.”

To not treat people you disagree with as the other. That, my friends, is a theological statement. The issue that Drs. Markman and Duke discussed is not merely a civic problem of increasing political polarization, but is also a deep and fundamental theological problem. And what they suggest is an existential and theological solution. To use churchy language, we would say that the solution is reconciliation – a coming together that ends our estrangement from each other and God. The Church teaches that we are called to be reconciled with God and each other, and as members of the Body of Christ we are also called to be agents of this reconciliation. This is our most important work.

In our Gospel lesson just last week, Jesus distilled the entirety of the holy Law to these two simple and yet endlessly challenging sentences: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt 22:37-40) Love is the foundation upon which all else is built. This love of which Jesus speaks isn’t an emotion – this “love” is the hard labor of reconciliation, of bridge-building, of relationship. This love is the courageous work of reconciling ourselves to each other and God, and through that work all of creation is saved and transformed. In the catechism found in our prayer book, one of the core responsibilities of all the baptized is “to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world.” As members of the Body of Christ, it is our responsibility to continue his work. As we more fully re-member Christ’s body, we become ever more efficacious agents of transformation.

But it seems that we often get in our own way. As the psychologists in the radio program suggest, the ultimate question is: How do we identify ourselves? This question matters. This is very important. Cistercian monk Father Thomas Keating teaches that our transformation in Christ is dependent upon our letting go of our over-identification with our groups and family; that they become obstacles to reconciliation by allowing us to objectify and distance those not in our group and avoid the hard work of relationship. Keating teaches that we need to dismantle our over-identification with our groups and teams because love is our true self. All relationships with others, including God, need to be grounded in this identity of love. And from this foundation, we may join with the saints in the building of the Kingdom.

Thanks be to God, today we celebrate the feast of All Saints in which we rejoice in our membership in the communion of saints, that spiritual union of the members of Body of Christ. Doctrine states that we are all part of this mystical body and are joined in love and prayer with all the saints: past, present, and future. This is our true identity – that of relationship and communion, not of division and separateness. We are united as one body, one family, through the waters of baptism. This is who we are before any other group identification. We are all the beloved creatures of God and God makes his sun rise on us all, the righteous and the unrighteous; those we identify as part of our group those we do not.

Simply put, I believe these distinctions that we make between ourselves are not made in God’s eyes – only in our own. God sees all of creation with the eyes of Love that gazed upon all His creation and has judged it “very good.” These same eyes of Love know each one of us and judge us worthy of love and grace, and as God’s beloved we are called us into full communion with God and each other.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus teaches his with these words: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." (Matthew 5:7-9) Jesus teaches the

disciples that those who act in this way are blessed not because this is how we are to act, rather this is who we have been created to be: members of Christ's Body reconciling all the world to God.

In order to be these agents of reconciliation, we must strengthen the bonds of communion and love between each other, rather than put up false walls of difference that separate and estrange us. For there really is no such thing as "the other" as separate from us because within the bonds of God's love such divisions cannot exist. When we engage in the difficult work of love and reconciliation, we find that our fundamental communion puts to lie the felt experiences of division. When we are merciful, pure in heart, and reconciling makers of peace, we are blessed because, through these actions we reveal the truth of our deep union that lies beneath our seeming divisions. When we see ourselves, each other and the world around us through Christ's eyes, the holy eyes of unifying love rather than the discriminating eyes of group identification, we take up the mantle of our high calling and holy hope and join with Christ in his salvific work of reconciling all of creation to God.

Amen.