

Us Against Them

You might call today the great reversal.

For as long as humanity existed, the primary way that we organize ourselves, whether in families or tribes or nations has one thing in common: Us Against Them.

Adam blames Eve for scarfing down the forbidden fruit; Cain kills Able in a fit of jealous rage; Esau and Jacob divide into hostile camps that to this day provide some of the most vexing problems for peace in our world, namely, the unending conflicts in the Middle East.

Us Against Them, it seems, is as old as humanity.

Somehow, we form our identity in large part by defining ourselves as what we are not.

And since so much of the world is what we are not, there's far more of "them" than there are "us."

The examples range from the ridiculous to the sublime.

We got a small glimpse of this locally a few days ago at the Halekulani Hotel.

I'm not quite sure where, between ridiculous and sublime to place this, but here goes anyway.

A few days ago, our well-known musical artist Weldon Kekauoha and his family were enjoying the pool at that fine, upscale Halekulani hotel.

Apparently, a white woman summoned the security guard and demanded that an inquiry be made about the Kekauohas' status as guests of the hotel, because, one can only guess, they aren't white.

So, the security guard approaches Wendell for proof that he and his family are hotel guests.

I guess Wendell showed them the \$20 bag of M&Ms from the in-room refrigerator....

At which point Wendell, perhaps figuring that turn about is fair play, asks the security guard to confirm that the complaining woman is also a guest.

The security guard refused, putting this whole story on the front page of the newspaper!

Us Against Them is as old as humanity, yet, today is the day we celebrate the end of Us Against Them.

Today is the Day of Pentecost.

It is the day of the great reversal, when strangers become friends, when what has been centuries of enmity begins to thaw and drip away, when God begins again, creating something new: a new beginning to creation; a new way of being human.

But before soaking up the new, let's spend a moment recalling the old.

The scholars tell us that the Old Testament book of Genesis was likely written around the time when Israel was overrun by the Babylonian Empire.

That's the terrible time in Israel's history when the first Temple, the one begun by King David and completed by King Solomon, is burned to the ground.

The higher ranks of Israelite society are forced to march to Babylon, modern day Iraq, and the poor folks who remain are forced to intermarry with foreigners that the Babylonian Empire relocate to Israel.

Later this year we'll read about the hated Samaritans.

And they were hated.

When Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan, it was like telling the story of the good Taliban!

An oxymoron to most folks ears!

One reason the Jewish people despise them is because during the time of the Babylonian occupation, the Jews in Samaria intermarry with the foreigners brought in by Babylon, and so become, you will pardon the expression: half-breeds, and therefore suspect, and therefore despised.

It is in the midst of this captivity in Babylon, during what seems to be the end of the Jewish people, that the Book of Genesis may have been first written.

Yet far from being a book of despair, Genesis is a meditation on a very different way of understanding life.

The Babylonians have their own creation myths: and these myths are based on gods tearing each other apart; of creation erupting out of violence, out of chaos.

The Genesis meditation is something entirely different indeed.

In Genesis, creation is the gift of a good God.

There is no violence in God, there is no war between gods: the only violence that eventually comes is the violence generated by a fallen humanity.

And it is here that the early authors of Genesis, in telling us about the story of Babel, may have told this story first in order to undermine, even to laugh at, the guiding myth of the Babylonian Empire.

It is this: "The Myth of Redemptive Violence."

In short, all we need is one more war, one more battle, and all will be well.

You see, the Babylonians, in their time, were something like Rome.

They conquered far and wide, and wherever they go, they build tall towers to show off their conquest, they insist the conquered people speak Babylonian.

So, to have the true God scatter these folks, to change their single language into many, may be a way that the early Hebrews come to see the hidden power of God providing for them a way out.

As Mary says in her Magnificat, God scatters the proud in their conceit, the rich he sends away empty.

So it is with Babel.

But the story of Babel is also the larger story of humanity.

Divided from one another, we are scattered into differing languages, customs and cultures; a scattering that defines humanity, until that day when Jesus looks down from the cross and says: Forgive them.

Forgive them.

At the cross, a new way of coming together as human beings is created.

"Think of all the ways we are scattered, all the ways we tear each other apart, all the broken relationships, all the bitterness, all the terrible hurt.

Think of the wars and the killing and the terrible racism that scatters us as peoples across the earth, with so much tragic killing and so much unspeakable grief.

This is what Jesus came for, to gather us together again in loving forgiveness." Paul J. Nuechterlein

I heard a minister say a few days ago that when Jesus speaks of forgiving one another endlessly, Jesus doesn't mean we become reconciled.

He went on to say that we can love someone without liking them, and that forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting.

This is sheer blasphemy.

Too often the greatest enemies of our faith are our clergy; because too many of us try to make easy the hard road Jesus sets before us.

We seek to change the Word rather than allow the Word to change us.

Forgiveness means reconciliation.

Forgiveness means forgetting.

At the cross, we no longer come together as Us Against Them: now, we can at long last come together as a people who forgive one another.

It is a complete reversal.

There they are, huddled together, shivering and shaking, these frightened disciples, when something like a wind blows through, when something like tongues of fire come and dance on their heads, and before you know it, these no longer scared people are announcing with conviction to everyone; people from every place and from every time, that God is doing something new!

The spirit of God is on the loose; and that's a dangerous thing, especially if you like the status quo.

The spirit of God is on the loose, and if you're the kind of guy who likes control, watch out!

If you're all tied up with Us against Them, if you like the drama played out over the centuries as Hatfields shoot McCoys, then you're in trouble: because God is doing something new!

Peter quotes from the prophet Joel about childhood visions and old man dreams and finding ourselves smack dab in the middle of the end times because the end times are indeed upon us.

Not as described in the silly books like the Left Behind series or Hal Lindsey's The Late Great Planet Earth; not as envisioned by some of our more imaginative evangelical friends: but the end times that break into history whenever a human being lets go of resentment, lets go of anger, lets go of desires for revenge: whenever communities decide to act with justice rather than greed, compassion rather than self interest: and so join Jesus as he hangs from the cross, saying with Jesus as he hangs there: forgive them.

The end times mean the end of the days of Babel; the end of the days of Us against Them, the end of human self-sufficiency.

These are the end times that the forgiveness of Jesus ushers in.

We have over the years made many idols of what we call God.

But today, Jesus makes it as clear as day what God is really like.

Phillip asks the million dollar question: "Let us see the Father."

And Jesus sits him down, and looks him in the eye, and gently lets him in on the secret that when we see Jesus, we see the Father.

The gift we receive today, the gift that will soon come upon our dear Damian Lacuesta, who is about to be baptized, is a gift that calls out of us our very best, our deepest and most profound.

As the philosopher came to see:

"When we look at the misery of our world, its evil and its sin we long for divine interference, so that the world and its demonic rulers might be overcome.

We long for a king of peace within history, or for a king of glory above history.

We long for a Christ of power.

Yet, if He were to come and transform us and our world, we should have to pay the one price which we could not pay: we would have to lose our freedom, our humanity and our spiritual dignity.

Perhaps we should be happier; but we should also be lower beings, our present misery, struggle and despair notwithstanding.

We should be more like blessed animals than human beings made in the image of God.

Those who dream of a better life and try to avoid the Cross as a way, and those who hope for a Christ and attempt to exclude the Crucified, have no knowledge of the mystery of God and humanity." P. Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundations,
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Today is Pentecost.

It is the day of the great reversal.

The reversal that begins as the Son of God hangs from a tree, praying:
"Forgive them."

Let us, my friends, take up our cross this day, and do likewise.

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