

“Them”
Politics, Polarization, and Our Christian Witness
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(Romans 12:9,14,17-21)

Introduction.

Has there ever been a crazier year during your lifetime than 2020 has been? Every year has a few defining moments, but the past eight months have contained so many life-changing, paradigm-shifting vagaries it is hard to keep up and not feel overwhelmed. And the year isn't even over yet!

Between the coronavirus, the economic crisis, murder hornets from Japan, wildfires in the West, social unrest over racial injustice, and back-to-back hurricanes on the Gulf Coast, it's starting to feel like the plagues in Egypt in the book of Exodus. (Did you hear the joke – a man walks into a bar in New Orleans and orders a Corona and two hurricanes. He asks the bartender, “How much do I owe you.” The bartender replies, “\$20.20.” Get it?)

If all that wasn't enough, we're entering the final stretch of a very contentious and extremely polarized election year at a time when the fabric of our country is tearing apart. Has there ever been a year like 2020 you can remember?

As I was planning the sermons for our church earlier this year, I asked God what He thought I should preach on this fall. And I got the clear sense from the Holy Spirit that I was supposed to talk about politics, polarization, and our Christian witness. When I told someone what this series was going to be about, they said to me, “You are very courageous, Peter.” I answered, “Maybe I'm just very foolish!”

There is no question this is a topic we need to wrestle with as Christians today, and I believe that part of my responsibility as a pastor is to help all of us learn how to engage in conversations about politics (and other subjects for that matter) in a manner that honors Christ and is different from the way the rest of the world does it. I also think I need to help people understand what the Bible teaches regarding the role of government, how it relates to the kingdom of God, and what it means to be a citizen of heaven while a resident on earth.

Now, rest assured, during this sermon series I'm not going to tell you how to vote on November 3rd. However, I am going to tell you how a Christian ought to act and the attitudes and mindset we should cultivate and reflect during these contentious times. Along the way I suspect I'm going to step on everyone's toes, including my own. It might get uncomfortable at times, and that's a good thing. I suspect all have some learning and growing to do when it comes to politics and faith.

Today, the title of my sermon is “Them,” and the text I want us to look at is taken from Romans chapter 12.

I. Our Problem with “Them”.

Arthur Brooks says that America is being torn apart.¹ He says it isn't because we're too angry with each other or that we disagree too much. Rather, the heart of the problem is contempt, and by that he means our habit of treating people who disagree with us not just as wrong or misguided in their views, but as worthless.

He says we've all seen the problem of contempt – on TV, in social media, and from public figures. Political scientists have found that our nation is more divided now than we've ever been since the Civil War, and one in six people in America have stopped talking to family and close friends about politics. We're too afraid we're going to set off an emotional land mine, so we don't engage in the conversation. Brooks says contempt is making us miserable, and it's keeping us from making progress as a society. How can we change this, and what does God want us to do in these challenging and divisive times? What we need is not to disagree *less*, but to disagree *better*.

Brooks says that contempt isn't the same thing as anger. We often perceive that anger is a destructive emotion. Sometimes it is, but not always, and it actually serves an important purpose. Think about the last time you were angry with someone. Maybe you got into a fight with a friend, a colleague, or a family member. Were you hoping to erase that person from your life? Of course not. You wanted that person to right whatever wrong they had done to you. That's what anger is supposed to do – help us identify injustice and resolve conflict. And there are times when it's right to be angry.

Contempt is different. It involves anger, but it adds another emotional ingredient – disgust. The result of combining these two feelings is akin to what happens when you pour ammonia into bleach. You get a very dangerous toxic compound, and it can be deadly. While anger says, “I care about this, and I want things to be right,” contempt says, “You're beneath caring about, and I'm going to write you off.” That's what the current phenomenon Cancel Culture is all about, and it isn't good. It leads to permanent enemies, and it harms not only society but also our personal happiness and our health.

But aren't there some people who deserve our contempt? There are some pretty bad ideas and pretty bad people out there. Brooks says contempt is always the wrong response for at least two reasons. The first is because dismissing voices at the fringe leaves those voices unchallenged by people of good will, and it excludes the possibility of getting them to reconsider their point of view. And the second reason to say no to contempt is because it has a terrible impact on us as individuals. Experiencing contempt increases anxiety, depression, and jealousy. It harms our quality of sleep and causes a degradation of our immune system. And this isn't just the case when we're treated with contempt. It also happens when we have contempt for others.

Everybody has a “them” in their lives. You know, *those* people who look at the world different from you, people who make you angry because of their beliefs or actions, or folks who just rub you the wrong way because of their politics. Your “them” might be Democrats or Republicans. It might be Donald Trump or Joe Biden. Your “them” might be athletes who kneel in protest during the singing of the National Anthem, or it might be folks who say, “If the flag offends you, then leave our country.” Maybe your “them” are people who protest with signs that say, “Black Lives Matter,” or it might be those you think are ignorant of and blind to the problem of racial injustice in America.

In the world of sports it might be the archrival school. I went to the University of Georgia, and our “them” was Georgia Tech. But, of course, Tech hasn't been very competitive in recent years, so now it's not much of a rivalry. (See how easy it is to become dismissive of the people who are “them” to you?!) Your “them” might be a competitor in business, or a neighbor down the street, or a kid in your class. We all have a “them” in our lives.

Who is your “them”? I want you to take a piece of paper and write down the name of the person or the group of people who are “them” to you, and then I want you to put it aside for a moment. We'll come back to it later.

Our struggle with “them” isn't anything new, and people throughout history have had a problem looking down on others and treating them with contempt. In fact, the disciples of Jesus struggled with this very problem, and we read about it in Luke 9. There we read that as the time approached for Jesus to be taken up to heaven, He resolutely set out to go to Jerusalem.

However, when He tried to go through a Samaritan village, the people didn't welcome Him. You see, Samaritans were particularly hostile toward Jews who were on their way to Jerusalem to observe religious festivals, and they worshiped God in a different way. When the disciples James and John heard about the reaction of the Samaritans, they asked Jesus, “Do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy this village like Elijah did?” But Jesus rebuked His disciples, and He simply encouraged them to travel to another town. (See Luke 9:51-55.)

Samaritans and Jews had a big problem back then with each other, and the racial tension between these two groups of people was intense. That's why Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan was so shocking to His listeners when He first told the story. A Samaritan is the hero of the story? You've got to be kidding! A Samaritan was one of *them*.

There are times when all of us are tempted to want to call down fire from heaven and bring God's judgment on people who are different from us or when they make us angry. We're quick to right them off and would just as soon God wipe them off the face of the earth. But that isn't the reaction Jesus wants His disciples to have. Instead, He wants us to love *them*. One of the most counter-cultural things you and I are called to do in this contentious political season is to love people we perceive as enemies and pray for the ones who are “them” in our lives.

II. God's Call to Love “Them”.

Cultural exclusion seems to happen almost universally. For all of our talk of tolerance these days, we tend to demand that others adopt our characteristics and our particular point of view before we'll accept them. We scoff at people who are more liberal than we are as being social justice warriors, or we disdain those who are more conservative than us as hateful bigots. And the result is that we end up demonizing people who are different from us.

One author wrote that one of the most troubling aspects of human identity is that the formation of any “we” must leave out or exclude a “they.” The result is that our identities are inevitably dependent on the people we exclude. Only by denouncing, blaming and despising the different identity factors of people – such as race, class, religion, or political perspective – can we feel good about our own.²

But in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus had a different way He wanted His disciples to look at life and a different way to live and love. He said, “*You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder,’ and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.*” But I

tell you that anyone who is angry with contempt against his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'You brainless idiot!' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Mt. 5:21,22).

Later on in the Sermon Jesus added, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:43-45).*

The apostle Paul followed up on Jesus' teaching in the passage we have read this morning when he wrote to the Christians in the city of Rome, *"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.... Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.... Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good" (Rm. 12:9,14,17-21).*

The teaching of Scripture is clear, and it presents a radical call to love the very people who are "them" in our lives. When Jesus told His disciples to love their enemies, He wasn't asking them to do anything that He wasn't willing to do Himself. The Bible says that even though sinful humanity rejected God and we rebelled against His law and His love, Jesus did not regard us as beneath His caring about, and He didn't write us off. Instead, He made Himself nothing by taking on the very nature of a servant, and He became a human. He became one of "them". And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross. (See Philippians 2:6-8.) And from the cross Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they're doing."

The one Person who had every right to view every single one of us as "them" entered our broken world and died in our place to pay the penalty for our sins. He gave us a model for loving and welcoming those who are different, rather than excluding "them" as the "other". Jesus had the right to exclude us, but He didn't. Instead, He loved, welcomed, and reconciled us to Himself. What a gift of grace. What an example to follow.

You may say, "But Peter, I can't do that. It's just too hard to love "them". I feel too much anger over what they've done and what they stand for. What you're asking is too much." You're right. It is too hard to do it in your own strength, and it is asking too much if you had to do it by yourself. But in the power of God's Holy Spirit and with the transforming work of Jesus Christ you can do it, and it is what Jesus is asking you to do.

In 2004 the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was killed by a Muslim radical. In the aftermath of his death, mosques in the Netherlands experienced retaliatory attacks, including the bombing of an Islamic school. The violence shook a Dutch nation which had prided itself on being a peaceful open society.

In this very tense moment, a Protestant minister by the name of Kees Sybrandi did something unusual. Sybrandi was a very conservative, traditional Dutchman who lived in a community where poor Middle Eastern immigrants had brought a great deal of poverty and crime. Yet that week the pastor walked to his neighborhood mosque, he knocked firmly on the door, and to the shock of the Muslims huddled inside, he announced that he would stand guard outside the mosque every night until the attacks ceased. In the days and weeks that followed,

the minister called on other churches in the area, and they joined him, circling and guarding the mosques throughout the region for more than three months.

Why would Reverend Sybrandi do such a thing? One interviewer wanted to find out. Was it some experience that made the change? No. The pastor didn't recount any stories of past friendships or dialogues with Muslims. Perhaps it was the secular, liberal values of the country which had softened his attitude? No. He said appeals for tolerance and a celebration of cultural differences had little influence on his heart. So what had overcome his inherent traditional conservatism? He simply replied, "Jesus. Jesus commanded me to love my neighbor, and even my enemy too."³

Conclusion.

In his Lyceum Address in 1838, Abraham Lincoln famously declared that "all the armies of Europe, Asia, and Africa combined...could not by force take a drink from the Ohio River, or make a track on the Blue Ridge Mountains." But, Lincoln added, that doesn't mean America isn't vulnerable. He said, "If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of free people, we must live through all time, or die by suicide."⁴ Civil discord has always been the greatest threat to America's security and America's future.

When we dehumanize others, it can lead to the justification of words, actions, and even policies that demean and degrade other people. The Jews did it to the Samaritans, the Nazis did it to the Jews, the Hutus did it to the Tutsis, Afrikaners did it to people of color in South Africa, and you and I do it to people today who have a different political perspective from us or with whom we profoundly disagree. And it is to our detriment as a society, my friends.

Christ calls us to a different way of living and a different way of loving. Will you choose to love the "them" in your life? Will you pray for "them"? Will you seek to be Jesus to "them"? They are made in the image of God, just like you. And Christ died for them, just as He did for you. We are all sinners saved by grace. So be an agent of Christ's love this fall as we go through this contentious political time and seek to be His light in the darkness. You can make a difference.

A Time of Confession.

We're going to take some time to talk to God about these things, and we'll have an opportunity for us to pray a prayer of confession. Do you remember that piece of paper I asked you to take out and write down on it who your "them" was?

Take that piece of paper out again, and I want to you read the name of that person or the group of people to yourself. You may even want to say the names out loud. There may be several individuals or several groups of people. Name these people who are "them" to you.

Now I want you to confess your bitter feelings toward them, and you may want to repeat this prayer after me. "Lord, you know how I feel about this person and these people. You know how much they upset me. I'm angry about them and what they stand for. But I confess that I also have contempt for them, and I disdain them. And your Word tells me that they are made in your image and that you died for them, and Scripture calls me to love them even if I think they are my enemies. So I ask your forgiveness, and I pray you will help me love them and pray for their best. I can't do it on my own, and I need your help. I give them to you, and I pray that in the coming days you will remind me to pray for them and to lift them up to you.

Thank you for the transforming work of your Holy Spirit. Bring a change in my heart and remove the bitterness I feel. Help me to see them through your eyes, not glossing over where I think they are wrong, but to see past my anger and disappointment and to love them as you do. I pray this in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.

¹ I got much of the material for the introduction from Arthur Brooks in a short video he made about his book entitled, "Love Your Enemies/Say No to Contempt." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dv1ORTvm8w> .

² Paul Gilroy, "Diaspora and Detours of Identity," in *Identity and Difference*, edited by K. Woodward (London: Sage/Open University, 1997), p. 302.

³ Adapted from Tim Keller in *The Prodigal Prophet* (New York: Viking Press, 2018), pp. 183-184.

⁴ Abraham Lincoln. <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm>