

Jesus, Us, and Them

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[0 : 00] Confederate monuments, George Floyd, COVID, fact or fiction, mask wearing, vaccines, Trump.

These are just a few examples of topics that have deeply divided our society over the last year. These are topics that have come between friends.

They have come between parents and their own children. They have torn families apart. I have members of my own extended family who barely speak to each other because of these topics. And all of the research actually suggests that all of this polarization and division is only going to get worse in the foreseeable future. And as Christians, we believe unequivocally that the gospel alone has the power to unite people.

From every tribe, tongue, and nation. The problem is, is that all of these issues are also tearing the church apart. So before we can have any hope of sharing or embodying the gospel for the world to see, we really need to take a hard look at all of the ways that we may have forgotten it ourselves.

[1 : 20] I'll primarily be talking to Christians this morning, although I know some of you gathered with us are not Christians. You maybe believe something different or not sure what you believe. Hopefully, this is an opportunity for you to listen in on a conversation that I think needs to be happening within the church all around the world.

We're going to be talking about this by looking at the story of Peter and Cornelius. We just read that in Acts chapter 10. And even though this is a story about a conversion, it's about Cornelius and his family converting to Christ and being baptized, the focus of the narrative is really on Peter and Peter's change of heart, his change of attitude in the way he sees Cornelius and other people like him.

Because for most of his life, Peter saw people like Cornelius and people like him as the enemy, as the other. And he repents of that.

So we're going to ask two questions as we look at this topic this morning. What makes division inevitable? And then what makes unity possible, true unity?

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the fact that it doesn't depend on us. Lord, that we can come with all of our distractions.

[2 : 41] Lord, I can come with my agenda. We can come with things that we're thinking about or hoping to hear. And yet you do your work through your word. And you can do it in participation with us.

Sometimes, Lord, you can even do it in spite of us. And so, Lord, I pray that you and the power of your spirit in the name of Jesus Christ would do your work in us now. I pray this, that we might grow in our faith and love of you.

And, Lord, that you would be glorified. That your name would be praised. Amen. So, the first question we want to ask as we look at the story of Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 is, what makes division inevitable?

Why is this something that happens all the time everywhere in societies, ancient and modern? In Acts chapter 10, we meet this man named Cornelius. And Cornelius is a Roman centurion in Caesarea.

Caesarea was a center of Roman administration. The Jews hated Caesarea and everything that it represented. Cornelius is described in verse 2 as a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.

[3 : 54] Cornelius is a man who is earnestly desiring to know the true God, the God worshipped by the Jews. And so, God comes to Cornelius in a vision and tells him to send for Peter the apostle.

He says, send your men, invite Peter to come and stay with you so that he can tell you how to have a relationship with me. And this seems to be the answer to all of Cornelius' hopes and prayers. God said, your prayers have been heard. Send for Peter. He'll tell you what to do. And then the next day, God also gives a vision to Peter. And he tells Peter in this vision to accept Cornelius' invitation. So, Peter travels to Caesarea, to the home of Cornelius. And as Peter walks into the front door of his house, he looks around and he realizes that all of these people, as he knew they would be, are Gentiles.

They're Caesarean Gentiles. Right? And we know this because one of the first things he says is, in verse 28, you yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or visit anyone of another nation.

[5 : 04] Right? In other words, Peter's saying, I just got to be clear here. All of my life, since I was a little child, it has been drilled into my head that I need to keep myself ceremonially clean.

Meaning I can't eat unclean food. I can't associate with unclean people. He says, you know, you just need to know it's against the law for me to even be here, in your house, talking to you right now. Because this itself makes me unclean. And all my life, I've been taught that. And here's what I want us to see first in this passage. This kind of division, this kind of thinking about yourself versus other people, isn't just unique to Jews and Gentiles.

Right? This is partly an outworking of the Old Testament law, which Jesus came to fulfill. But it's also something that is hardwired into every human being.

It's hardwired into human nature. And what we see as we look at societies all around the world, including our own, is that division and this way of thinking comes naturally to human beings.

[6 : 20] If you want to do what is most natural to you, this is how human beings naturally behave. It's the path of least resistance. So we want to ask, why? And the answer is the sorting hat.

Not the kind of sorting hat you see in Harry Potter. The kind of sorting hat that our brains evolved to utilize. Our brains evolved to do three things.

Number one, to see people not as individuals, but as members of a group. Right? So you're hardwired to group people. To group them and categorize them.

To create taxonomies of people in your life. Furthermore, our brains are hardwired to group people into two basic categories.

Us, people like me. And them, everybody else. And number three, our brains are hardwired to do this with the least amount of time and energy necessary.

[7 : 22] In other words, we are cognitive misers. As soon as we can group and categorize somebody, we are ready to move on. And your brain does not want to spend one more moment of time, one more unit of energy, than it absolutely has to in order to make those determinations.

And because of this, we have a sorting hat that is always in operation when we are meeting new people or around people we don't know very well.

And the way that your sorting hat makes these determinations is dramatically influenced by things like your upbringing, your education, your life experience, and all manner of social and cultural factors.

So when you meet somebody for the first time, when you see somebody for the first time, your sorting hat is activated. Right? And it begins looking for signals.

It goes into kind of scanning mode. It's assessing, and it's looking for signals to let it know which group that person belongs in. Right?

[8 : 27] So what do you look at? You look at appearance. You look at clothing and dress. You listen to their accent. You look at their posture, the way they carry themselves.

You look at their behavior. You note their word choice. And immediately, within a fraction of a second, your brain begins to make all kinds of assumptions about that person, to fill in the blanks, if you will.

You assume things about what class they must be in. You assume things about their beliefs, what they must think about this or that. You assume things about their values, what must really matter to them.

Ultimately, your brain is trying to answer this question. Is this person like me? Or are they other? Are they in the us category or the them category?

And usually, research shows that within a few seconds, all of that happens, your brain delivers the verdict, and moves on. Right?

[9 : 33] So as quick as a handshake, that person's in a box. And probably, you're in a box. And so we have to ask, why do we do this? And the reason has to do with threat detection and survival.

You know, long ago, if you had an effective sorting hat, if you could quickly determine who was in your tribe and who was not in your tribe, that theoretically increased your chances of survival and passing down your genes.

So Peter is standing in this living room with Cornelius and his family, and Peter's sorting hat is going nuts. It is sounding the alarm.

You know, Gentile, common, unclean, other, enemy, right? That is sounding in his head. And this is why he says what he says.

You just need to know. Everything in me is saying, get out. So now we think about what are some modern examples. Most of us haven't grown up with the kind of Jew-Gentile tension, that kind of racial ethnic tension in the way that they experienced it in the early church.

[10 : 39] But we have grown up in a society with a lot of racial tension. That's one of the most obvious applications of this. This weekend, we're celebrating Juneteenth, which is, of course, the celebration of emancipation, right?

A number of slaves in Galveston being set free because of the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the war. But as we know, and we've talked about this a lot over the last year, in particular, after slavery, that was Jim Crow.

After Jim Crow, there came mass incarceration, all leading to the ongoing conflict and unrest that we have today. And we ask, well, why is that the case? Well, I mean, when you have an entire population of black-skinned Africans forcibly brought to the country as slaves over several hundred years, and then when that is paired with post-Enlightenment pseudoscience that justifies slavery by creating the modern conception, the modern taxonomy of race, and then claiming that lighter-skinned Europeans are inherently superior to darker-skinned Africans, when that takes hold in the imagination, that has a powerful and lasting impact on your sorting hat, on the sorting hats of everyone in our society.

Right? It begins to skew your perception. It shapes how you make those split-second determinations that we were just talking about. Right? So one of the things that we as a society are reckoning with now is the fact that, yes, slavery ended, but the lasting impact of a culture that sorts people based on skin color remains.

And as much as we want it to not remain, as much as we consciously are committed against that way of thinking, what we're realizing is that there are many ways in which it nevertheless does remain. And that it may very well take many more generations to truly overcome this.

[12 : 27] And these are things that I think that we, while there are lots of opinions on how to diagnose it and what to do about it, underneath, I would hope that almost everybody in this room could agree that there are ongoing challenges with this.

Right? So that's one example, I think one of the most obvious examples, but another way that we sort people, especially more these days, is we sort people politically. We sort people politically.

Right? Think of the events of January 6th, 2021. What do you call what happened?

What actual word choice do you use to describe it? Was it a protest over election fraud that got a little out of hand? Was it a nationalistic insurrection?

Was it a coup? Was it an act of domestic terrorism? The point I want to make is, your word choice will immediately become a signal that activates the sorting hat of people around you.

[13 : 34] And if somebody uses a certain, one of those choices that I just listed, A, B, C, or D, if somebody uses one of those phrases to describe those events, it will activate your sorting hat.

And your sorting hat will immediately think, either this person is a part of my tribe, because they use the same word that I would use, or this person is a part of the other tribe, because they use the phrase that I would never use to describe that.

Right? So that's how your brain does this. And so if they say the right thing, and you agree, right, you feel yourself relaxing around that person. I can, this is a person I can relate to.

If they pick a different phrase to describe those events, you don't relax, you recoil. Oh, I know your kind. I know where you belong.

I know the kind of person you know. I now probably know all of your political opinions about everything, just based on that. And I know we're probably not going to get along. And you can feel yourself doing that. I had dozens of those conversations, right, in January and February.

[14 : 40] Dozens of those conversations. Where I knew that lines were being drawn in the sand that were probably going to stay there forever. Right? So your word choice is a powerful signal, right?

So it's become, in our society, impossible to say anything about anything that is happening, because words themselves have become signals that we use to sort people into us-them categories.

People are listening less to what you're really trying to say, and they're just listening for your word choice, just to decide what party are they in, and do I have anything in common with them? Right? So you can pick the wrong words right out of the gate, your first sentence, and you immediately lose people.

They're not listening to anything else that you're saying. And we do this too, right? During this sermon, the fact that I made a reference to racism was a signal to some people.

Right? Some people heard that, they thought, again, they're bringing this up. This guy's, this church is just becoming more and more liberal. I made a reference to evolution. That's a signal to some people.

[15 : 43] This church is becoming liberal. Last week I said in the sermon that one of our main goals in this church is to see more adult conversions, more people becoming followers of Jesus, more adult baptisms.

If this is your first time here and you heard that, you would say, that's a signal. This person sounds like a conservative evangelical. I'm in a conservative evangelical church. That's a signal.

Right? Our timeline for reopening the church, our mask wearing policy, our social distancing regulations, all of those were activating people's sorting hats over the last year.

People were observing these decisions and deciding based on that information alone, sometimes this church is too conservative or this church is too liberal. And by the way, this isn't just Advent.

This is happening everywhere. This is happening everywhere. Churches all around the country, this is happening. And by the way, we're all doing this all the time. Right?

[16 : 39] Even this week as I was thinking about this, I caught myself doing this again and again and again. Last night I was at a big gathering of people and I caught myself doing this in conversation as I was thinking about preaching this morning.

So it's automatic. Right? And because this is linked to threat detection and survival, in other words, sorting is a survival tactic, what do you think happens when we're feeling a lot of fear as a culture, when we're feeling a lot of anxiety as a culture, when we're feeling like the nation may be crumbling, right, when we feel like things are coming apart, or when we're overloaded with information.

What do you think that does to your sorting hat, which is a survival mechanism? Well, it kicks it into overdrive. And so I think this is one of the things that is driving all of the polarization that we're experiencing in recent years.

I think everybody's in survival mode and we are sorting as though our lives depend on it. And so the reason that division is inevitable is because of our sorting hats.

We are hardwired to sort people into us-them categories. Right? So now we have to ask, what makes unity possible? What makes unity? If we are going against our own nature, what makes unity possible?

[17 : 54] Because what that would say is, unity is actually unnatural. What is natural is tribalism. What is natural is a taxonomy, a sordid groupings of people, like attracting like, and repelling difference.

That's what comes naturally. So what makes unity possible? Well, generations ago, if you were to go out in the street and ask somebody, what makes unity in our society possible?

A lot of people would point to national identity. They would say, well, we're all American. And it's our American identity that unifies us. And they would say, you know, the idea that we can, the kind of American dream that you can come from any nation, from any class, from any creed, and you can come here and here we're all Americans.

They would say, that's what unifies us. But more recently, we've begun to see what happens when that common ground of unity fades. Right?

And we've come to realize that if national identity alone, if that's your only foundation for unity, it's very fragile. And there are very few examples in history of any nation, as diverse as ours, having unity based on national identity alone.

[19 : 09] Right? And so people are starting to ask hard questions. Well, who gets to define American identity? And then who benefits from that definition? What is the impact of globalization and our relationship with other nations?

What happens when faith in our public institutions and government leaders starts to crumble? Well, then what? Well, all of the common ground of our national unity begins to fade.

And what happens? Well, we regress into tribalism. We regress into identity politics. Which is what comes most naturally to human beings. I think this is a great opportunity.

Because it makes two things crystal clear for us. One, the reason that we have this propensity toward division is not simply because we're hardwired to do it because we are evolved creatures. The real reason is sin. The real reason is a profound brokenness that sits at the heart of every human being. And this is not a problem that we can solve.

[20 : 13] The answer has to come from outside of us. And that brings the second thing into sharp focus. There's only one real hope for unity that is unshakable and eternal.

And that's the gospel. And that's what we see happening here between Peter and Cornelius. God gives Peter this vision. Peter sees all kinds of animals that the Jews consider to be ceremonially unclean.

And it descends down on this cloth. And God says, rise, Peter, kill and eat. And Peter refuses. And Peter is horrified. He says, I've never eaten anything that is common or unclean.

You know, is God testing him? And the voice responds, what God has made clean, do not call common. And this happens three times.

Anytime something happens three times in the Bible, it means it's extremely important. Then this leads, Peter, to the two great realizations that I think sit at the heart of this entire passage.

[21 : 11] Here's the heart of this passage. Verse 28, God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. And then verse 34, truly I understand that God shows no partiality.

In other words, he shows no favoritism. Before Jesus came, it was easy to imagine that God had a favorite people. It was easy to imagine that God had a favorite language, that he had a favorite culture, that he had a favorite nation, that maybe he had a favorite political party.

It was easy to imagine that God played favorites. A lot of the Jewish identity was built around the assumption that God plays favorites. But when Jesus Christ came into the world, it changed everything.

And I cannot emphasize that enough. Jesus comes, and he exposes, he exposes the truth about all of the ways that we divide ourselves against each other.

Jesus comes, we compare ourselves to Jesus, and we realize that all of the lines that we are drawing in the sand are arbitrary, and meaningless, and ultimately ridiculous.

[22 : 20] It exposes the emptiness of our division. Because when Jesus comes, here's what becomes very clear. The real dividing wall, the real dividing wall that we should really be concerned about is the one that we have built between ourselves and God.

That was the reorientation that the Jews needed. Because every human being has rejected God, right? We looked at this last week, Paul's conversion, Paul coming to realize there's no difference. We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That transformed Paul's heart. It transformed, it's about to transform Peter's heart. Because of that wall, all other walls that we may draw between ourselves, those just fall away.

They're meaningless in compared to that wall that we built between ourselves and God. And yet, the gospel says this. Here's what the gospel says. God only has one favorite. And it's his own son. But his son was willing to take our place. He was willing to take our sin. He was willing to be cast out. He was willing to allow God to draw that line between himself and his own son.

[23 : 37] He was willing to be labeled other, labeled outsider, labeled forsaken. And Jesus was willing to do that, not only so that we could be forgiven, but actually welcomed in.

You know, Paul says in Ephesians that when Jesus did that, he brought down the dividing wall of hostility in his own flesh. That wall came crashing down. And then Peter goes on to say in verse 43, to him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him and receives forgiveness of sins through his, everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

In other words, the gospel says that no matter how many walls we put between ourselves and God, no matter how many times we try to build walls between ourselves and God, Jesus relentlessly tears them down because that's what he came to do.

What this means is that every single person you meet, no matter who they are, no matter where they're from, no matter what they believe, every single person you meet is a person God created to bear his image and a person for whom Jesus gave his life.

Every single person you meet. And they don't have to believe that for that to be true. And so God says, based on these two things, how dare you call such a person common or unclean?

[25 : 05] How dare you? I created that person, my son gave his life for that person. How dare you? So Peter has to repent of his attitude.

And then Peter sees with his own eyes the Holy Spirit fall on them. The whole family, they come to faith and Jesus says, we have no choice. They're obviously, God is present and active in their life. We have to baptize these people. And when they baptize Cornelius and his family, they become the same family. Whatever vestige of a division might have remained is eradicated, it's washed away with the waters of baptism.

So how do we think about this? Well, I just want to bring these things together. The gospel, as it really sinks into your heart, as you really reflect on what God has done for you, it begins to change the way you see and the way you sort other people in your life.

The sorting hat, as we said, is hardwired. It comes naturally to group people based on the tiniest bits of information. That comes naturally because of sin.

[26 : 16] And what that means, if that's the way you live your life, here's what you're doing. You're living your life in low resolution. You're seeing everybody around you as a low resolution snapshot.

You're grouping and categorizing them based on blurry pixels, very little information. And you're assuming you know everything else about them. It's blurry, but I get the gist.

I know this kind of person. But this is not how God sees you. When God looks at you, he doesn't see a blurry low resolution image. God sees you as an irreducibly complex individual of infinite worth.

God sees in 4K to risk pushing the metaphor a little too far. So if you want to see people the way God sees you, that means committing yourself to seeing other human beings in high resolution. And that takes a lot more work. It's a lot harder to stop and to put the effort into seeing more and more and more fine grain, fine pixelation, right, more and more color, more and more detail that you might have missed had you just moved on.

[27 : 31] It takes a lot of energy to see each person in high resolution. That's right, low resolution works a lot better. But if you want to commit yourself to seeing in high resolution, it means these four things at least.

Number one, never reduce people to groups or categories. But see each person as an irreducibly complex individual of infinite worth.

Don't see people in groups and categories. Number two, never make assumptions about other people's motives. I rarely say words like always and never, but I don't know that there's ever, there's ever a good reason to assume you know why somebody is saying or doing the things that they are. Number three, always look for the presence and the work of God in other people's lives. Right? Peter is seeing God in a place he would least expect it, in Gentiles.

I would love for you to think about the person or the group, the people, where you least expect to see God working. and then watch and see if you don't detect evidence of God at work in that person's life.

[28 : 55] And then number four, always find common ground wherever you can. Always find common ground wherever you can. This was Martin Luther King's strategy. You know, he says this, every time somebody tries to draw a line between themselves and me, every time somebody tries to draw a line that divides us, I always draw a circle around us.

Right? Because we're, we're all human beings. We all bear God's image. So if you're looking for reasons to draw lines, you're going to find them. The good news is, if you're looking for ways to draw circles, you're going to find them.

So the next time you meet someone for the first time, the next time you pass by somebody that you sort of know, and you realize that you're seeing them in low resolution, and you start to put on the sorting hat, catch yourself.

And I actually pray that we would become better at catching ourselves in the act. And then I want you to do this. I want you to remember that if God did that with you, if God did that with you, you would have no hope.

I would have no hope. Jesus Christ gave his life so that one day there will be no us and them. All of those lines will be wiped away because one day we will all be one in him.

[30 : 23] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And as we, as we hear it, we know there are things that may not be of you, and we pray that you would allow those to fade from memory.

Whatever is of you, and in particular, the people, the assumptions, the groups, the conversations, the experiences that may have come to mind, Lord, I pray that you would underline and highlight those in our minds.

That you wouldn't let us forget them, but that your word would continue to prod us. Lord, to highlight for us ways of doing these things to glorify you.

And I pray that in this we would be a peculiar people. Lord, that this would be a part of our witness to a divided world. And we pray this for our good and your glory.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.