

The Great Reversal

Acts 2:1-21

I do not need to inform you that the world is at war with itself. Russian Orthodox are at war with Ukrainian Orthodox. Muslims and Jews are fighting each other in the Middle East. Serbs and Croats killing each other in Bosnia. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs fighting in India. White supremacists fighting nonwhites everywhere. Republicans and Democrats at each other's throats. Ever since the beginning of human social arrangements from hunter-gatherers forward, we have formed into self-contained groups often called tribes.

When we hear the word tribe, we may think of Native Americans, but in modern usage the term can also refer to people who share common ideas and allegiances. Tribalism is defined as "behavior and attitudes that stem from strong and often excessive loyalty to one's own tribe or social group." Group affiliation can bring cohesion to communities and inspire individuals to act on behalf of others. Tribalism can have very negative consequences when it is used to exclude individuals or groups or to take away their rights, status, or independence. These negative aspects of tribalism promote fear, anxiety, and prejudice, all of which make us more susceptible to fake news, propaganda, and conflict.

Regardless of where we are situated in the world, we love our tribes. This is only right, as tribes are an extension of our families. But by what criteria are we allowed to think that OUR tribe, OUR family, should be elevated above all others? What is so inherently worthy of only us? This is the sin of tribalism: the promotion of my kind over all others.

Modern nation-states are sophisticated tribes. You often hear national leaders say, "We will always act in defense of our national interests." Meaning, our interests will always trump yours. Our tribe is more important than yours. Tribalism is our world's most difficult obstacle to world peace and domestic harmony. John Meacham, the great presidential historian and committed Christian, worries that our democracy is at peril because it depends on finding consensus. And consensus is becoming impossible to find anymore. We are so unwilling to let go of our tribal loyalties. Is there any way out of this dilemma?

Our text this morning tells the story of what is known as the birthday of the church. The disciples of Jesus were gathered together in Jerusalem awaiting the promised coming of the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit came upon them, no one could have predicted the consequences. The disciples began to speak in a language that could be understood by anyone nearby, regardless of their native tongue. Jews from most of the known countries of the Roman Empire were there. They are in Jerusalem because they came to celebrate the Feast of the Passover a few weeks earlier. Each heard the message from God in their native language. This astonished them. What could this possibly mean?

To answer this question, we need to recall another biblical story, the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. Prior to this, God had instructed humanity to “be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth.” We are given to think of the Garden of Eden to be the entire planet. God commissioned humanity in the form of Adam and Eve to be the caretakers of the planet. They and their progeny were to spread over the entire earth and bring out of it its abundance for all. However, our stand ins (we should think of Adam and Eve as us), they pridefully chose to disregard God’s advice and preferred to be their own gods and lost their Garden, but not their commission as God’s stewards of the earth. Their descendants, by the time of the Tower of Babel story, had not dispersed throughout the earth as God wanted. Instead, they gathered in one place and spoke one language resisting being scattered and resisting God’s call to fill the earth and produce its abundance for all. Their strength was thought to be in themselves, in their tribe, not God.

In order for God to overcome this resistance, God confused their language so they could not understand one another and scattered them over the earth. This has been the condition of humanity ever since. And we have not learned to be good stewards and cooperation among different tribes has been rare and not long lived. The pride that drove Babel continues to drive modern tribes and to the same effect. We prefer ourselves to all others and our agendas instead of God’s. But all this changed on the Day of Pentecost with the coming of the Spirit of God on all people, empowering them to be one people with one mission. Pentecost tells us that our humanity, ruined and distorted in our distrust, has been restored to us by the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus was filled with the Spirit in such a way that he was empowered to be fully the human image of God, so now humans share in that same Spirit and power.

The question now is, what are we going to do with this power?

There is and always will be tension between the world and the church. The world, with its tribalistic notions of self-importance and willingness to assert its power over all others, runs in stark contrast to the servant attitude of the church where the greatest of all is the servant to all. In this way, the church serves as a counterbalance to the world, a countercultural fix to tribalism.

A book was recently published with a provocative title: “I Love the Church/I Hate the Church.” Most pastors I know resonate with this. We love the church, at least in its ideal form. We love our congregations. We acknowledge that much good comes from within their walls. Yet, we also acknowledge that there is a vast distance between what the church’s purpose is and its accomplishment of it. What we hate is the church’s failure to close that distance. We see the church reflecting too much of the world’s tribalistic attitudes instead of the ideals of the kingdom of God. In some quarters Christianity and Americanism are seen as equivalent, that is, what’s best for America has become the church’s agenda. Both political parties want to co-opt the church for their purposes, and they are often very successful.

Jesus left us with a foundational demand of his followers. We are to live by the Golden Rule and love our neighbors and enemies as ourselves. Admittedly, this is not easy to follow. Many are called; few are chosen. Yet, this ideal must be used as the benchmark for all we do in the world. It is by this standard that we will be judged. It is by this standard that the world will become what God intends for it. So, as far as other tribes are concerned, if we continue to treat them as less than, or certainly as our adversaries, nothing will change. As is often said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." As long as Christians can be confused with most anyone else, we will make little difference in our world. We have lost our countercultural role.

There is one thing that if immediately implemented would change the church and ultimately change the world. The world and the church have both bought into a particular myth that is destroying both. It is the myth of redemptive violence. The myth that violence is best overcome with violence. It's the recent slogan that the best solution for a bad man with a gun is a good man with a gun. The myth is foundational. It fills our movies, computer games, armed services recruiting posters, and even our churches. In Memphis on the day Desert Storm began, the largest church in town had on its massive outside electronic billboard this message: "Thank God, America is a man again!" The whipping we took in Vietnam is now rectified by whipping Saddam Hussein.

How quickly we retreat from Jesus' example of nonviolent resistance as a way of life not only for him, but for us who follow him. C. K Chesterton said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." This is certainly true for most of American Christianity. However, there are a few notable exceptions.

On the afternoon of April 13, 1919, a crowd of at least 10,000 East Indian men, women, and children gathered in a building which was nearly completely enclosed by walls and had only one exit. Most of them were there to protest the ban on public meetings imposed by their British overlords. Soon soldiers arrived and sealed off the exit. Without warning, the troops opened fire on the crowd, reportedly shooting hundreds of rounds until they ran out of ammunition. It is not certain how many died in the bloodbath, but, according to one official report, an estimated 1500 people were killed or wounded. After they ceased firing, the troops immediately withdrew from the place, leaving behind the massacréd.

Rather than organize in violent opposition to England's oppressive rule of India, Mohandas Gandhi began organizing his nonviolent protests. This massacre is thought to be the beginning of the end of British rule in India.

It has been noted that the moment the civil rights movement finally entered American consciousness and led to legislative equality, if not actual equality, was when nonviolent protesters were captured on TV being violently assaulted by police.

On May 2, 1963, black children, trained in nonviolent tactics, gathered in Birmingham, Alabama, to protest racial segregation. Over the course of the protest, children were arrested, blasted with fire hoses, clubbed and attacked by dogs. Images of the children appeared on television and in newspapers around the world, provoking global outrage. This is how it happened. [\[VIDEO\]](#)

MLK Jr. and other civil rights leaders did not respond in kind, and even took lessons from Gandhi in nonviolent methods in overcoming violence. It does not take a good man with a gun; it takes a good man or woman with the courage to give one's life in the pursuit of a higher good. Jesus, Gandhi, King, and a host of others testify to the waste of life that is the myth of redemptive violence. Without such a commitment, "An eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth mentality would create a world only of the blind and toothless."

What we are celebrating on this Pentecost Sunday is the inbreaking of God's purpose for all humanity, bringing us all together in understanding in spite of, or better still, in full recognition of our differences. The reality of the presence of Parthians, Medes, Cappadocians, and Elamites, diverse as they are, in no way diminished their uniqueness. In fact, their very distinctiveness is preserved and is to be celebrated. But it is celebrated in the spirit of appreciation for the gifts that difference brings rather than despise differences because they are not us. That is the gift of Pentecost. It is in this Great Reversal of tribalism from self-love to universal love that true redemption is found. It is a gift God brings to the world—Pentecost is today and every day when we welcome one another as God welcomes us. AMEN