

Tribal Fever

Ephesians 2:11-21; 3:1-6

For six years, until last summer,
friends of ours, Bryan and Karah Leaman, and their four children
served as missionaries in Germany, in the city of Halle.

For the first year and a half, Bryan and Karah worked to learn the language,
settle the older children in schools,
adjust to living in a new place and culture,
and *serve* in a small church of *ten* people.

Then, as you recall, Europe was inundated by a *wave* of immigrants.
Germany took in *500,000* refugees
with a large number Syrians, Afghans, Persians, and Kurds coming to Halle
to stay in a repurposed hotel, 15 minutes away from the church.

The tiny church mobilized to assist the refugees
with a store to provide basic household necessities, free of charge.
And while the refugees shopped, the Leamans and others
struck up conversations and began to build relationships.

Within a year, 20 Persians came to faith in Christ and were baptized.
The next year, another 10 refugees, including a number of Afghans,
came to Jesus and were baptized.
At this point, the church was running around 40 people
with enough “critical mass” to attract more people
from Asia, Africa, and Germany, along with international students.
The church shifted from German as the primary language, to English,
with simultaneous translation into German and Persian.

Today the church is running around 70 people—
who have almost nothing in common!
They speak different languages. They eat different foods.
They relate to one another differently.
They disagree about nearly everything related to church life.
Yet despite all the differences that would normally tear them apart,
they are living *in love* because of their common faith in Jesus.

In sharp contrast to the *hatred* and *violence* of tribal animosity
that is continually erupting all over the world
this is the miracle that Paul describes in Ephesians 2:11-21.

The almost inconceivable good news in this passage is that contending groups, no matter how great the hostility among them, can be brought together in unity in a new organism, a new body, a new gospel culture—in the Church.

If you have your Bible, turn to Ephesians 2:11-21, starting with verse 11.

Therefore, remember that formerly you *who are Gentiles by birth . . .* were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

One of the great divisions *at the time of the NT church* was the hatred between Jews and Gentiles.

Because “Gentiles” (a generic word that encompassed all non-Jews) worshipped idols, and because idolatry was associated with immorality, Jews considered Gentiles to be morally depraved. In addition, because Jews had suffered greatly over many centuries from attacks from Gentile tribes and nations Jewish animosity against Gentiles was intense and deeply ingrained.

It is important to understand, though, that this passage applies, just as well, to *any* estranged and contending groups. In Galatians 3:28 Paul writes:

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are *all* one in Christ Jesus.

Anywhere there is unrelenting hatred and conflict,
anywhere there is ingrained and systemic prejudice,
anywhere there is contempt and divisive rhetoric
or even demeaning and degrading jokes
between groups or races or tribes or peoples or parties,
people are infected with tribal fever;
and the truth of this passage is relevant and applicable.

The hope for all kinds of estrangement is capsulized in verses 13-16:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. . . His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of

the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

Before we go on,
notice the immense *cost* of this remedy for hostility, in verse 16.

Jesus' purpose was to reconcile both [groups] to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

All the pain and suffering that Jesus endured,
the flogging of 40 lashes with a lead-tipped whip,
the drawn-out agony of his death—
that is the price Jesus paid to batter down walls of hostility.

Notice in verse 18,
the full participation of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For through [Jesus] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

It takes the love of the Father, the power of the Holy Spirit,
and the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross
to accomplish what would otherwise be impossible.

And look at the wonderful outcome, in verses 19-21.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

That is what Bryan and Karah experienced in Germany—
a *miracle* of reconciliation, bringing former enemies into one church
and then growing *together*, amid the inevitable bumps and scrapes,
to become, in Paul's words later in *Ephesians*:

"a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. . .
holy and without fault.

But I have to ask:
If Jesus has already paid the high cost for reconciliation and unity, and
if this potential for peace and unity is for estranged people everywhere,

why is this not happening in more places?
Why are there disheartening outbreaks of conflict, even in the church?
Why can't we get along better in our workplace?
 In our extended families? In our own households?

To answer this,
 we need to see this passage in the larger context of Paul's ministry.
 When we do, we see that Jesus isn't the only one to pay a price
 for the miracle of reconciliation and unity.
 The apostle Paul also paid a stiff price.

By my count, Paul encountered severe opposition at least *ten* times.
 Two times, the abuse was instigated by Gentiles.
 Eight eruptions of persecution were by Jews offended by his message:
 that Jesus is the Christ; that salvation is by faith, not by law;
 and that Jews and Gentiles have equal access to faith in Christ.

This persecution culminated in Jerusalem.
 in a severe outbreak of mob violence.
 A Jewish mob attacked and almost killed Paul
 because of a *rumor* that he had brought a Greek, a Gentile,
 into the temple in Jerusalem.
 Roman soldiers rescued Paul from the mob and took him to their barracks.
 Paul asked to speak to the crowd and,
 when he spoke in Aramaic, their own language, the mob got quiet . . .
 They listened all through Paul's testimony until he said the word "*Gentile*,"
 and then started rioting again—
 shouting, yelling, and throwing dust into the air.

This is a good example of tribal fever:
 irrational mob violence, based on rumor and suspicion,
 and fed by longstanding bitterness.
 The crowd was primed to believe the rumor,
 and to react with mindless violence,
 because of an *ingrained mindset* of suspicion and hatred.

At this point, the Jews asked for the trial
 to be transferred from Roman jurisdiction to a Jewish court
 so that they could ambush and kill Paul along the travel route.
 To prevent this, Paul appealed to Caesar, insisting on Roman jurisdiction
 which is how he ended up under house arrest in Rome.
 Later, when Rome burned and Nero blamed the fire on Christians,
 —as we can best reconstruct the story—

Paul was killed, along with thousands of other Christians, in the ensuing wave of persecution.

In Colossians 1:24, Paul wrote:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

Paul did not mean that he had to supplement Jesus' death on the cross; he meant that, for the gospel to spread and the church to grow, he also had to suffer, he had to pay a price—and by extension, so do we.

To answer my earlier question about *why*, with this great promise of reconciliation and unity, there continues to be so much conflict and distress not only in the world, but in the church, the answer, as I have come to see it, is that we—all of us together—have not been willing to pay the high price that it takes to tear down walls of hostility.

To put this in pharmaceutical terms, the ailment of tribal fever is so virulent that over the counter medications are not enough. Inexpensive generic prescriptions are not enough. Only drugs—at exorbitant cost—can treat this infection.

But it is *doable*.

We *can* demolish the walls of hostility that divide us from other groups.

One remedy is simply to **speak well** of people.

In Ephesians 4:1-6 Paul writes:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk [and talk] in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

This remedy can be applied as broadly as another *race* or *ethnicity* or *religion* or *country* or *church* or *political party* or *socio-economic level* or as close home as our *boss*, a troublesome *relative*, or an *ex-husband* or *wife* who has inflicted great pain on us.

When we talk about someone,
we are to speak kindly, gently, and considerately.
When we post something on Facebook,
we are to engage other points of view with civility.

And when we are in the midst of conversations,
and another person or group is being put down or ridiculed or blamed,
we are to challenge that criticism by saying something *constructive*.

In one sense, this is easy—just to speak well of people.
But when we speak up against the negative views of the majority
we risk being misunderstood and **put down** ourselves—
as the price we pay to diffuse animosity.

The way we talk *with* (and *about*) people
either spreads the germs of tribal fever
or helps to inoculate people against this virus.

The **second** remedy is also easy, yet hard to *motivate* to do;
that is to **get to know people who are different—and build friendships.**

People are people.
Though we differ in *race* or *culture* or *nationality* or *points of view*
we have much the same *hopes* and *fears*, *joys* and *trials*.
And when we get to *know* people who are different
when we hear their story, when we get to know them as “real people,”
we usually come to feel better about them.

Our daughter Brooke, who is with us again today,
taught middle school in Philadelphia for 10 years.
Nearly all of her students lived in difficult circumstances.
One of her students died in a house fire.
One day he was in the classroom; the next day he was gone.
Another student’s father was killed on the street by random gunfire.
One student's father was arrested in the middle of the night
and deported—with the family left behind.
For Brooke, the complex, national issues
of poverty, gun violence, and immigration
have become very close and personal and heart-breaking—
because she *knows* these students and their families.

One of the best ways to inoculate ourselves against tribal fever
is to get to know people who are different from us

and build relationships with them.

Third, whenever possible, we can **mend relationships**.

The biblical directive in Romans 12:18 is:

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”
We’ll talk about this more next week
when we get to the ailment of “Bumps, Scrapes, and Fractures.”

But for now, as a preview of that message,
here are the helpful words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer
written in the midst of the destruction and bloodshed of World War II.

“The great peace for which we long can only grow again
from peace between twos and *threes*.” (April 10)

When we make peace, with whomever we can,
we diffuse mistrust, dissension, and enmity.
The great *reconciliations* for which we long
begin in our household, extended family, workplace, and church.

When we think about the magnitude of *hatred* and *division* in the world,
it seems so *small*, so *insignificant*, to *speak well of people*,
to *befriend people*, to *mend relationships*. What does this accomplish?

The most notorious wall in modern history was the Berlin Wall,
a maze of 12-foot partitions, guard towers, and electrified fences.
This barrier separated the people of East and West Berlin for 28 years.

Yet in one day—November 9, 1989—that wall came down,
not by *warfare*, not by *violence*, not even by *negotiation*,
but by hundreds of thousands of East Germans (the night before)
marching calmly, and peacefully, in the cities of Germany,
many of them carrying lighted candles.

One person, one candle, at a time,
and the cumulative light (and influence) of those people,
demonstrating their collective will and resolve
shattered that notorious wall of hostility.

In our sphere of influence,
we may not have the power of a bulldozer to raze walls of hostility.
But we can chip away at these walls with the chisels of *gracious speech*,
interpersonal relationships, and *day-to-day peacemaking*.

If we are willing to pay this price, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we *can* experience the break-through good news of this passage:

For [Jesus Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.

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