



THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
JUNE 14, 2020
MATTHEW 9: 35-10: 8
“BEYOND OUR TRIBE”

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

SERMON

Many times when growing up, my mother would tell me, “the Olberts are more moral than other people.”



Even as a little boy, I would cringe inside. At the time I didn't understand why, but her statement did not make me feel special or proud. It made me feel awful.

Later, when it became apparent that my father was a functional alcoholic and, even later, when he was accused of embezzling money from the school where he had been principal, it became obvious why I, intuitively, had cringed inside.

Mom's pronouncement is an example of tribalism.

Tribalism instinctually divides us from them. The Olberts are more moral than all those immoral people out there. We are different. We are special. We are better.

At its best, tribalism provides each of us a healthy foundation and a strong starting place in life: the Olberts are from the German tribe. The original name was Ohlbrecht. We are from the Lutheran tribe. We are from the Ohio tribe. Go buckeyes! We are from the lower middle-class tribe, although we barely had a foothold. And, well, we

Don't want to talk too much about the conmen, range riders, adulterers, and those prone to violence in our extended tribe.

How are we more moral?

I invite each of you to reflect on the tribes from which you originate and to which you still belong. It does help provide you a sense of identity and belonging.

But tribalism only goes so far in building a peaceful world founded on spiritual values....

In one of my former congregations, a catholic boy impregnated one of our young Lutheran women.

You would have thought the world was coming to an end. A young man from the catholic tribe wanting to marry his pregnant girlfriend from the Lutheran tribe? Never!!!!



It took multiple meetings with the priest, me, and both families to cross this chasm. Eventually, we celebrated a lovely wedding complete with Catholics and Lutherans celebrating communion together. And the world didn't end. In fact, they are still happily married. And the priest and I became great friends.

We may start from the strength of our tribe but, if the world is going to move toward some semblance of peace and unity, we must outgrow the narrow confines of tribalism.

It is no easy task, because in today's gospel, even Jesus initially is caught in the web of tribalism.

As background, please recall that, from the days of the earliest churches, Jesus was acclaimed as fully divine and fully human, which means as a human being he was caught in the culture of his time.

And he is a Jew. A member of the tribe of Israel. His spiritual home is the synagogue. He is known as a Jewish rabbi, a teacher of the faith of Israel.

And so, when he sends his disciples out, he tells them to proclaim, "the kingdom of heaven has come near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give."

And to whom are they to freely give?

Everyone? All people?

No!

"Do not go among the gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans."

"Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel."

If we grab his words and bring it into the 21st century, Jesus as a Jew, speaking to his disciples, would tell them, "Do not go to the towns of the Catholics or



Lutherans or those non-denominational churches. Do not go to the Buddhists or Hindus or Muslims. Go to the lost sheep of Israel.”

This is tribalism.

And how did Jesus’ humanity begin to expand to include others besides his own Jewish tribe?

Because of his face-to-face interaction with a Samaritan woman. Because of his face-to-face interaction with a roman centurion whose servant he heals. Because of his face-to-face interaction with a Canaanite woman whose daughter he heals.

Tribalism crumbles when we interact meaningfully with those from tribes different from our own.

Again, the early church had to figure out how they were going to operate. Peter wanted all new converts—gentiles and pagans—to enter through the Jewish faith. He argued that men needed to be ritually circumcised like Jews and that all needed to observe the Jewish dietary laws. So, tribalism would still reign supreme in the early church. First, you essentially would become a Jew and then Christian.

Paul argued that this was the wrong way to go and Paul won. After lengthy instruction, gentile and pagan converts entered the Christian faith through the sacrament of baptism.

But, after martin Luther shattered the unified catholic church through the reformation, the once unified church continued to split into roughly 400 different church bodies, all claiming, in some way, to have access to “the truth.”

And once this occurred, we became competitive, critical, and judgmental toward one another’s expression of the truth....

Early on, when I was interim pastor at CLC, I took thirty leaders for a retreat to Northway Christian community church. I had become friends with their lead pastor, Scott Stevens, and felt that our leaders could benefit by seeing how a growing and strong congregation organized their ministries.



There was blowback from some. Northway wasn't Lutheran. They were large and we weren't. They did things differently than we did. Why should we listen to them, although Northway is among the 100 fastest growing congregations in the country? Sad to say, those who objected ended up leaving CLC.

And, we continued to receive criticism from some as Northway came alongside us and gave freely of their resources so we could improve our ministries.

Tribalism.

When the catholic church protects its priests who sexually abuse children, this is tribalism.

When police protect their fellow officers, who brutalize black and white citizens, this is tribalism.

When white people ask Asian, Latino, and middle eastern folks born in this country where they came from, this is tribalism.

When my mother was all worried because, in high school, I dated Jewish girls, this is tribalism.

When biracial children are hurt by insensitive and mean remarks, this is tribalism.

Most congregations are little more than tribes....

In my second congregation, we were attracting lots of young families. We had outgrown our building and were using a trailer for additional Sunday school rooms and children's' choir practices.

We had added a contemporary service and all kinds of new programs. One Sunday morning, one of the matriarchs of the congregation could stand it no longer. She angrily exploded in at me in the lobby, "who are all these new people?"



Ask a member of a congregation if their church is friendly, and 99% of the members say yes. Ask visitors the same question and, unless the congregation has outgrown tribalism, the answer is almost always no.

When a church member laments changes by crying out that the congregation no longer feels like “my home,” this is tribalism....

Martin Luther King, Jr. Called worship on Sunday morning the most segregated hour of the week. Because most congregations—white and black—are still imprisoned in a tribal mentality. Most want other members to look like them.

Yes, the tribe is where we start. And, it is difficult to grow out of our tribal mentality. Even Jesus finds it a challenge.

But this is the necessary spiritual work of everyone who calls themselves by the name of Christ.

In order to change, one has to have the capacity to be self-reflective.

What happens with thoughts and feelings when you see an interracial couple?

What happens with thoughts and feelings when you see a biracial child?

What happens with thoughts and feelings when you see an Asian or Muslim woman?

What happens with thoughts and feelings when you see an Hasidic Jew?

What happens with thoughts and feelings when you see three young black men walking toward you on the sidewalk?

What happens with thoughts and feelings when see a Latino family?

What happens with thoughts and feelings when a halfway house wants to move into your neighborhood?



If we are followers of Christ, we work to deepen in faith and outgrow our tribalism. We begin by acknowledging the ways we all have been socialized to fear the other.

Especially now, this is most important inner and outer work any of us can be doing....

A more innocent form of tribalism is being a fan of our favorite sports team.

My long-term therapist, Tom, lives in south bend and has a BA and law degree from Notre Dame. He is a season ticket holder to Notre Dame football games. Sitting on the Notre Dame side of the field, he regularly roots for the opposing team in order to challenge the rabid Notre Dame tribalism.

He's lucky he gets out alive.

Alayna and I once drove to Madison, Wisconsin to watch my wake forest basketball team play the university of Wisconsin. In the packed arena, I think Alayna and I were two of six people with wake forest t-shirts.

The Wisconsin fans seated around us were all friendly while Wisconsin beat up on wake during the first half. But, as wake slowly pulled ahead in the second half and went on to win, the Wisconsin fans got angrier and surlier until I wondered whether we were going to get jumped by the end of the game.

Tribalism is pervasive and it controls much of our behavior, overriding reason. Wars are essentially, and often quite specifically, about tribalism. Genocide is tribalism—wipe out the other group to keep your group safe. Racism lets us feel like our tribe is better than theirs. Parents end contact with their own children when they dare marry someone of a different faith or color or of the same gender. People deny evolution, climate change, or other basic scientific truths because they challenge tribal beliefs.

Tribalism unchecked leads to racism, homophobia, xenophobia, hatred, and division. And shame on national leaders who urge us on toward greater division and hatred.



Now is the time that all people of goodwill must come together, look at themselves, and grow out of the tribal chains that are literally ruining us as a nation. The tribal chains that contribute to injustice and violence.

Tribalism arises out of ignorance, which the Buddhists hold as the root of sin....

So, what does a mature Christian look like?

On the one hand, we hold onto our tribal roots. Our tribal roots give us a sense of identity, a foundational sense of being our own individual in the world, a sense of belonging to a group. I am foundationally a straight white man, an Olbert, a German, a Lutheran, an American, a sinner, a follower of Christ.

On the other hand, we work hard to remain open to the truths of other religions, the cultures that are not our own, people from other races and other sexual persuasions, people of other classes, all those who are “other” to us.

I close by paraphrasing one of the sane religious leaders of our day, Franciscan monk, Father Richard Rohr:

God is like a flow, a movement, a community. God is a relationship.

Faith is moving with the flow, with stillness and love in the heart, trusting that we are small, but included in a larger, compassionate whole.

A walk with God in daily life lies in embracing the world lovingly, relationally with other people, animals, the earth, and yourself. All things have an inner life as well as an outer life.

There is no need for overly precise definitions like different church bodies love to do. There is no need to contain God in some human-created box.

There is no need for tribalism. No need to argue with or against people of other religions or no religion. Imagine God’s love as light shining through a stained-glass window. Each culture, each religion revealing some of the light, always in a different color.



Live lightly on the earth and gently with others. All are brothers and sisters in the dance. Give them space to be themselves. Stillness and love, with a passion for justice is enough.

Remember that Jesus reveals the living spirit of God and that the spirit is more than Jesus. It is the universal Christ, who embraces all.

Finally, as we approach re-gathering, I invite all people of goodwill, willing to outgrow tribalism, to join us here at CLC.

SERMON SONG

ONE OF US (JOAN OSBORNE)