

TWO KINDS OF CHRISTIANS

Scripture Readings: Mark 2:13-18, 2 Samuel 6:1-5

(this sermon refers extensively to George Parker's Article, "*How America Fractured into Four Parts*" - <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/07/george-packer-four-americas/619012/The Four Americas>)

I want to begin this morning with my top five personal favorite Mark Twain quotes. You'll remember that Mark Twain was the pen name of Samuel Clemens, noted author and perhaps the greatest humorist the United States has produced. These will probably be familiar to you:

Number 5: "*A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.*"

Number 4: "*... suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself.*"

Number 3: "*It is better to keep your mouth closed and let people think you are a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.*"

Number 2: "*(The Human) is the only animal that blushes - or needs to.*"

Number 1: "*I did not attend his funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved of it.*"

Now I want to share one more Mark Twain quote, not nearly as famous as the others but, I believe, more important to the times we live in. Here it is:

"There are two kinds of people in the world: those who believe there are two kinds of people and those who don't. And I'm one of the latter."

I like that quote because of its paradoxical nature. It's like a snake eating its own tail. And I like it because it's a bold-faced lie, asserting that he's not the type to think there are two kinds of people in the world while beginning it by stating that there are two kinds of people in the world.

Is that us right now, us kind-hearted, good-intentioned folk who try to accept anybody and love everybody? But we walk around in a world of maskers and anti-maskers, vaxers and anti-vaxers, Conservatives and Liberals, Democrats and Republicans, Elitists and Common Folk, Racists and Antiracists, Socialists and Capitalists – I mean, that's what you hear nowadays, right? That's what we are being taught to think, believe, and look out for – the OTHER kind of two kinds of people. The scary part is when that's what we **start seeing** as we walk around the world: two kinds of people, Us and Them, friends and enemies. And just at a glance - depending on their T-shirt or their bumper sticker, their flag or their yard sign, the supposedly revealing code words they use, their mask or their no mask.

I'm sick of it. I'm sick of the judgment and the endless conflict, of us, in a moment, slicing up people according to which kind of people we think they are. And I'm **terrified** of it when I spot that kind of instant judgment in **myself**:

"There are two kinds of people in the world: those who think there are two kinds of people and those who don't. And I'm one of the latter."

I know many of you are sick of it, too, and are struggling to find a way to bridge the serious divides that are striking our nation, our communities, our neighborhoods, our families, our closest relationships. We can't underestimate the Pandemic's role in all this. Jason Rezaian wrote in the Washington Post recently about the effects of long-term isolation. He wrote as a journalist who spent 544 days as a hostage in an Iranian prison, first in solitary confinement and then in a small room with single other captive.

When he was released, he emerged a changed person. He didn't like being touched. He didn't want to gather in large groups. He had trouble looking people in the eye when he talked with them. Sounds like many of us, emerging from Pandemic, doesn't it? And sounds like a recipe for taking personal offense at things that have nothing to do with you. Why won't she hug me? Why won't he look me in the eye? Why do they turn down all my invitations to get together?

We can't underestimate the effects of our own and others long social isolation. It's going to take a while for the trust to return, the confidence, the ease of social gatherings. For some, it may never return to what we called "normal."

There's no doubt that isolation has intensified our feelings of division across our families and our streets, even in our schools and churches and businesses. But there are divisions that existed prior to the Pandemic that have deeper roots and more long-term effects.

So, what's the way out of such deep-seated divisions?

Our Old Testament Reading, with David bringing the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem, gives us one way out. Remember that God is using David to attempt to bring a new thing into the world: a theonomous monarchy. In an era when the political system of monarchy dominated governments across the Near Eastern world, Israel's tribal system was no longer working to bring shalom – justice, peace, and safety – to the nation. So, through David, God was trying to establish a new model of monarchy, one heedful of the divine demands for neighborliness, benevolence, fairness, compassion, and justice. All other monarchies had descended into the pattern of resources flowing upward to the powerful while the needs of the poor and needy were being ignored. But not with David - or so God hoped.

In our reading, David is in the midst of establishing his monarchy through a variety of initiatives new to Israel:

- the founding of a capitol city – Jerusalem;
- the establishment of a royal bureaucracy;
- and the blending of the old tribal battalions into one royal, mercenary army.

As one would imagine, all this innovation frightened and alienated the traditionalists. In this passage from 2 Samuel 6, David brings the ultimate symbol of their tradition into the new capitol city: the ark of the covenant that led people of the Exodus was brought into Jerusalem. The ark had spent the last twenty years getting dusty in Abinadab's storeroom. But now David brought it out, a political master stroke meant to unify a fragmented people by appealing to their common history and their deepest attachment to that history.

Could something similar be tried today in our nation? We seem to be irreparably two kinds of people, but isn't there something deeper in our past or our patriotism that can transcend our national divisions?

In a recent and fascinating article in the Atlantic by author George Packer, he asserts that it's too simple to think of our nation as divided into two. In fact, he believes we've been fracture into four parts: what he calls America the Free, America the Smart, America the Real, and America the Just. These are the four dominant patriotic values and visions that both inspire us and drive us apart.

America the Free, according to Packer, is rooted in an understanding of our Constitution as a libertarian document upholding individual and states' rights under a limited federal government. "Don't Tread on Me" is its motto and has been expressed by the pioneer, the entrepreneur, the self-made person lifted up by their own bootstraps. The Reagan Revolution claimed America the Free for its own and tied it to tax cuts and deregulation. Packer believes it also broke unions, starved social programs, and brought about a new age of monopoly with Walmart, Google and Amazon stepping in for J.P Morgan and Standard Oil in a second Gilded Age.

America the Smart, according to Packer, is rooted in the American value of education, of our ability to better ourselves through a better understanding our world. In more recent times, America the Smart, Packer writes, arose from a new knowledge economy which created a new class of Americans: people with advanced degrees who became salaried professionals in the tech sector, in medicine, law, the arts. This is Bill Clinton's vision of the Bridge to the 21st Century, everyone getting better educated and lifting themselves up out of old obsolete jobs. But Packer sees the dark side of this vision as well. Some of those "old" jobs still need to be done. And Smart Americans have created an elite class that redefines the nation as a meritocracy, rule by the best educated.

America the Real, the third patriotic vision identified by Packer, has always been a part of our nation's story; the idea that *"the authentic heart of democracy beats hardest in people who work with their hands."* It respects those who work hard and do the jobs that are often the most physically demanding and least financially rewarded. In recent times, Packer tells us, the vision of America the Real was lifted up by Sarah Palin and Donald Trump as a reaction to the elitism of America the Smart. But America the Real was taken down by economic corruption, factory closings, corporate headquarters fleeing for cash-friendly shores, and jobs being taken overseas.

Packer then goes on to say that with Donald Trump came some real baggage: throughout his adult life, Trump has been hostile to Black people, contemptuous of women, vicious about immigrants from poor countries, and cruel toward the weak. America the Just is rooted in the founding document of our nation when it boldly states that *"all men are created equal"*. Recently, the vision has been strengthened by a younger generation who doesn't buy the soothing assurances of slow and steady progress: *"Rosa sat so Martin could walk so Barack could run so we could all fly!"* That was the story in a sentence but *"the kids don't buy it,"* according to Packer. Black Lives Matter, concerns over Climate Change, and the demand for rights for the LGBTQ+ community are all primarily fueled by young marchers and leaders of a new generation. *"Something is deeply wrong, our society is unjust, our institutions are corrupt,"* they tell us. But Packer concludes by observing that the grand systemic analysis usually ends in small symbolic politics.

America the Free, America the Smart, America the Real, America the Just. I encourage you to read the longer article and book it spawned to find a fuller explanation and form your own thoughts in response. I found myself disagreeing with Packer's analysis at several points but also quite inspired by his conclusion: Packer urges us to acknowledge the deep and valid patriotism at the heart of all four visions of America. In that acknowledgment, perhaps we can find mutual respect.

And in that respect, perhaps we can begin bridging the gaps that divide us and find common cause which can unite us again.

My beloved professor of Christian Ethics, Jim Nelson, used to tell us, “*There are two kinds of people: Splitters and Lumpers*” - people who tend to see the differences and people who tend to see the commonalities. I’m a Lumper by nature. The divisions that arise, particularly in the church family, I find personally very painful. The conflicts between Christian right and left, Progressive and Evangelical, Conservative and Liberal often are answered by me with a naïve plea using the words of the King, Rodney that is: “*Why can’t we all get along?*”

Splitters are what Jesus faced in our Gospel Reading. They saw him call a tax collector, Levi, and then go to Levi’s house to eat with other tax collectors and sinners, gluttons and drunkards, they called them elsewhere. But they were definitely the WRONG kind of people. Jesus didn’t see the issue and reframed their pious complaints by bringing it into a missional context: “*Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick.*” Then, more outrageously, he adds, “*I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.*”

Just a few years ago there was a hospital founded entirely by doctors and nurses. It was a beautiful building, spotless and well-equipped. In fact, it was so nice that the doctors and nurses decided to exclude the sick from the building. It was just too nice! They didn’t want all those sick people dirtying up their new hospital, so they turned it into a research facility. True story!

The sick, the openly sinful, the desperately needy... those are NOT our kind of people, the scribes of the pharisees, religious Splitters that they are, declare to Jesus. OUR kinds of people are like John’s disciples who follow the old ways like ritual fasting and, elsewhere, the ritual rinsing of hands.

In answer, Jesus does David one step better by, later in our passage, talking about the danger of putting new wine into old wineskins. The Gospel of Love-Your-Neighbor even if they’re your enemy is the new wine. The old wineskins are the Splitter mindset that says there are two kinds of people, two kinds of Christians, US or THEM, IN or OUT, saved or damned. Jesus is calling Levi, the scribes of the pharisees and all of us to new wineskins appropriate to the new wine of the Gospel; a deeper place, a more compassionate heart, a more loving practice that transcends divisions with one other through union with God.

Do you know the Loving Kindness Prayer?

May I be peaceful and happy.

May I be safe and free from harm.

May I be healthy and strong.

May I be at ease in the world.

Maybe that’s the prayer we all need right now, a prayer for peace, safety, health, and ease as we emerge blinking and changed from the Pandemic.

I’d like to encourage you to assume a comfortable attitude of prayer. Put your feet flat on the ground. Open your hands and close your eyes and repeat this prayer after me:

May I be peaceful and happy.

May I be safe and free from harm.

May I be healthy and strong.

May I be at ease in the world.

Now shift your focus onto someone you care about, a good friend or family member. And, if you feel comfortable, you can say their name as you repeat after me:

May (you) be peaceful and happy.

May (you) be safe and free from harm.

May (you) be healthy and strong.

May (you) be at ease in the world.

Now something harder - direct your attention of loving-kindness towards a person who has been difficult in your life, even someone you might consider an enemy. Again, mention their name if you feel comfortable:

May (you) be peaceful and happy.

May (you) be safe and free from harm.

May (you) be healthy and strong.

May (you) be at ease in the world.

Finally, a prayer for all people, even all creation who come from God's care and live in God's loving kindness.

May all be peaceful and happy.

May all be safe and free from harm.

May all be healthy and strong.

May all be at ease in the world.

This is the attitude Jesus seemed to hold toward all kinds of people as he walked among us. This is the Spirit of Christ in whom "*there is no east nor west, no Jew nor Greek, no male or female.*" This is a loving kindness that breaks down all the walls, reduces all the barriers, finds common cause and dignity and respect and even unity in the Spirit.

This is what we mean when we say that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who think there are two kinds of people and those who pray for and care about all kinds of people.

Amen.