

Making Friends, Making Enemies: Working In Between Us vs. Them

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This lecture seeks to envision an approach of working toward social transformation that disrupts the polarized and polarizing dynamics of “Us vs. Them.” We find ourselves in historically polarized times. The election of Donald Trump and mainstreaming of fear-mongering and hate-bating has generated passionate resistance. The issues of racism, xenophobia, misogyny, white nationalism, Christian supremacy, violence against indigenous peoples are not new, although perhaps our school text-books have suggested that these are merely unfortunate fixtures of our nation’s history when in fact they are present dwelling realities still very much alive and empowered.

But even this time when disbelief and despair are refreshed each day with bizarre headlines regarding our nation’s governance, I also observe examples of new forms of resistance. A golden age of satirical commentary, championed by John Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s prolific works, has gone viral, even going so far as to resurrect the public significance of Saturday Night Live. In the streets, people who have never participated in political protests, or called their congress person, are discovering and enacting their civic agency. The embers of the unfinished Civil Rights movement are being stoked aflame by the Black Lives Matter movement. These are also signs of our time. And while our social and political circumstances are intensely reactionary, and uncertainty of the outcomes may cause us to lose sleep, there is also evidence that we may be living through the kind of large scale crisis that births large scale social transformation.

The topic I wish to speak to tonight concerns how we make friends and how we make enemies. This process of defining an “Us” and a “Them” has both purpose and function in our lives, and amounts to the normative practice of boundary construction in today’s public spaces. It also comes at a cost, and the limitations therein may be barriers to realizing the fullness of social transformation. My hope is that what I can offer here will shed some light on glimpses of a transforming world and speak to how our small scale interactions may contribute to substantive social-relational change.

As a practical theologian, and in faith with my Quaker upbringing, I want to offer theoretical content that is grounded in lived experiences and contextual circumstances. So as I speak to this topic of making friends, making enemies - let me begin by sharing some of my own text:

My first friends were Friends. My Quaker Meeting was the center of my life. I attended my Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly meetings, as well as other Quaker conferences throughout my childhood and adolescence. From a very early age, I sat through 60 minutes of “unprogrammed” worship, and attended political protests with many members of my Meeting. This is not a typical upbringing for most American children, but it was normal for me.

And it was among Quakers that I learned that faith in God knew no human bounds, religious or otherwise. And it was here that I learned that faith and work could not live without each other. Later in my life when I caught up on my Bible literacy and discovered a Jesus whose incarnate presence embodied the communion of faith and work, and whose example the Apostle

Paul proclaimed worthy to be emulated – then I recognized that what Quakers had offered me from the beginning reached to the roots of Christian theology.

But I wasn't just raised in a Friends Meeting, I was the child of two Quaker parents who have worked much of their adult lives for the American Friends Service Committee. And when I stepped out my front door, in Berkeley California, I encountered a city that easily agreed with the values of my liberal Quaker upbringing. The codified testimonies of “peace, simplicity, community, integrity, unity, equality” were effortlessly translated in the liberal political bastion of Berkeley. It made it easy to believe that my liberal values were normative and even superior, and that my beliefs were the source of solutions to our social ills.

Liberals tend assume that they are unlike fundamentalists – that they are loving, friendly folks who want the best for everybody, and that if everybody would agree with us, our world would be fixed. When the other side of the political spectrum accuse us of being aloof, elitist, and out of touch – we tend to rebuff such notions, minimize such criticism, and then reinforce our sense of superiority. When our adversaries do the same thing, they are hardheaded, simplistic, and morally corrupt; when we do it, we are justified because we have the moral high-ground.

Perhaps these days, you are reading Lamentations or some righteously indignant Psalms, or perhaps Jeremiah. These are resonating with me. But I want to share some other passages in which I am finding both solace and hope:

Luke 18:10-11

Two went up to the temple to pray. One, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you for not making me like these deplorables.”

Luke 6:32-35

If you love those who love you, what good is that? For even sinners love those who love them. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what good is that? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

I would like to share one more, one that broke open my liberal Quaker identity and served as a signpost to new ministries in my life:

Acts 10: 1-4, 9-17

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Roman Empire. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius.” He stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” He answered, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.

The next day, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heavens opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten

anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane or unclean." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared, asking for Peter.

Peter is the right kind of religious person. He is pious and committed. He knows the rules and he follows them. He knows he is right and he knows who is wrong - not only on intellectual grounds, but religious and moral grounds. And so he has no hesitation in refuting God's message and God's bounty, even though he hungers to be fed, because he has it figured out. It is easy for us to read his failure, but so often this was my failure too. I knew what was pure and clean, and what was profane and unclean. Even when God was making a new thing possible, I was sticking to the certainty of my own pious assurance.

I'm a nice, pacifist Quaker from Berkeley, do I have enemies? No just friends, and other folks that when they figure out I'm right will become my friends. Who is like this Roman centurion in my ideological thinking and religious believing? If I'm honest with myself, I can see my judgments: it's the Religious Right, and Trump voters, it's folks in the military and in the police force. These are the folks I have come to believe are religiously and morally unclean.

But that way of thinking comes from somewhere. These notions of "Them" began with where I first learned "Us." If I had spent my life exclusively among liberal Quakers in Berkeley, I would have a skewed perspective on our world. It's not news that such a community is peculiar, but consider how most of us construct our social-relational worlds: typically, human beings adjust to the world around them and assume the norms of that world - we observe our surroundings, see what's available and how it works, assimilate enough of the cultural values and beliefs to pass functionally, and find a role to play that results in our needs getting met. This is rooted in survival, our species evolved to interact in these ways - jump off the script too much and you're likely to be eaten by wild animals of one kind or another. And a part of that evolution process has imbedded a sense of danger and avoidance behaviors when threats are perceived. Don't touch the fire; don't wander off alone; don't confront power unless you are ready to fight to the death to take that power. Day to day, we call this "conflict avoidance." Our biology calls it self-preservation, or staying alive.

Sometimes we talk about today's social media, like there is something new under the sun, but our Facebook friends are just a new construction of tribe. They are ones who support, nourish, and confirm our beliefs, values, and suspicions. Like religious communities have done explicitly for generations, social media is now providing meaning-frames and filters evidence that confirms our opinions and commitments. And just as tribe-construction has always done, by design, our friends are friendlier and friendlier, and our enemies are ridiculed, dehumanized, and when possible, cast out. Or as we call it now: "unfriending."

Whether you spend much time on Facebook or not, doesn't actually matter - if you're a human, your tendency is to look for friends, those who confirm your bias and keep you safe from threatening enemies. Perhaps we are less fearful of the potential threats of sticks and stones as our ancestors, but the war of words seems every more hurtful. And given our evolutionary biology, when we feel threatened we are prone to hang closer to our friends and put as much distance as possible between us and our enemies. This is natural to us.

But this is not our moral imperative. The command to love enemies is threatening to our DNA and baffling to our cultural norms. There is danger over there. There is discomfort over there. I don't want to be eaten alive. I don't want to leave the safety of my friends. We are not asked to give up our friends - we still need them to comfort us and compensate for our shortcomings - but it is worth asking are we spending too much of our lives in their exclusive company. We may need to seek out opportunities to turn and re-turn in the direction of those who have been rendered strangers to us.

Let me try and illustrate this. Nearly 12 years ago, a grieving mother, Cindy Sheehan, tried to get some answers about the death of her son, who was serving in the U.S. Army in Iraq. When President Bush didn't take her calls, she showed up in Crawford TX and began a vigil that captured the imagination of the nation. Central TX in August is not a nice place for a camping trip, but a few hundred hearty folks joined her there. As the demonstration got more press, more people came, not only those in agreement with the anti-war position of Sheehan's camp, but also counter-protesters.

When I arrived, having been to many demonstrations, I found this one to be the most curious I had seen. The idea of getting the attention of the President, who was vacationing at his ranch three miles away, was basically futile from the beginning. What was taking place amounted to a handful of protesters, holding handmade signs in a drainage ditch along one side of a narrow dirt road; on the other side of the road, in the other drainage ditch, stood the counter-protesters, holding their handmade signs. If you couldn't read, it would have been impossible to tell that these were two different groups of people, and not an exact mirror image of each other. It was the absurd spectacle of it that stopped me in my tracks, and then this question: what are we doing here?

Hoping to understand, I introduced myself to Sheehan's comrades, and asked that question. And the rhetoric poured forth. It was all familiar to me, my mother tongue, my liberal anti-war Berkeley Quaker speak. I knew the words and images by heart. But as I turned to look across the road, at those who were surely the adversaries of peace and justice and goodness, I couldn't help but wonder: if we are so right, what are those folks doing here? And before I knew what had come over me, I was walking across the road to meet these strangers.

I was greeted warmly, the expressions on their faces seemed to ask: had their handmade signs worked, had they won a convert to their side? As I visited with those folks, I heard the same intensity of passion, the same sincerity of commitment to a cause, and the same assured moral judgements of those with opposing viewpoints. There's was a different script, but they performed it as convincingly as those on the other side. And then I felt the futility of this sort of activism even more deeply. We weren't getting the President's attention, we weren't winning any arguments; we were just standing in the unrelenting heat of central TX in August in an actual ditch.

This kind of activism has a purpose, a ritualistic purpose – that shapes and fortifies the “Us” and clarifies the depravity of the “Them.” That is sometimes what we crave as human beings. But this kind of activism can also intensify the echo chamber reality of our polarized public discourse and dehumanize those on the other side.

Let me be clear: I am not advocating being nice to mean people, or “let's just all get along.” Our ‘no’ must be our ‘no.’ We must resist and defy systems of injustice and tyranny. I mean to suggest that our ‘no’ is not all there is. I mean to suggest that there may be opportunities to reach out, with compassion and openness, because our ‘yes’ must also be our ‘yes.’ We must find ways to repair the breached places through relationship.

Recently, I had an opportunity to be present for a different kind of protest. I was invited to come as a chaplain in support of thousands of military veterans gathering at Standing Rock. This opportunity was made possible only because I have spent the last 12 years, searching for a different way of working for peace and justice including the last 7 years working as a chaplain with veterans and military service members and their families.

Most of the military veterans at Standing Rock were not experienced activists, aligned with activist organizations – their primary identities were rooted in the ongoing mission of service and protection of vulnerable people, in this case the indigenous communities seeking to protect the water and land in their care. Many of these veterans came ready for combat, ready to be assaulted violently, ready to get hurt. These are psychologically and physiologically familiar conditions for many military veterans. It's what their military training has prepared them for. Our job, as a team of chaplains, was to stand among them, as vessels of God's peace and mercy, to be listening ears, and accompany those ready to step into the breach.

While the progress made by their presence is quickly being undone now, the power of these veterans gathering in solidarity was swiftly realized. And the potential for future such actions is only beginning to be glimpsed. At Standing Rock, Edward Hicks' classic painting of the Peaceable Kingdom came alive. This picture is not without its problems and tensions, it is not without power and potential violence. It is precarious, with no assurances that promises will be kept between creatures, but for a moment there is hope that we may see each other, and meet each other, and dwell in relationship.

And if we can entertain that possibility, it may be worth asking: in your life, who are you spending time with? Remembering that Jesus spent lots of his life throwing parties and inviting the wrong kinds of people together, to their discomfort but nonetheless with a clear purpose - with whom do you have parties? Loving our enemies does not mean "liking" or "agreeing," it is about compassionate relationship across difference – the kind of relationship that does not seek to persuade or conquer, but rather is willing to take risks, to be discomforted, and to be resolved in hang in there a little longer. We have evolved into experts at making friends, making tribes, and also making enemies – the moral imperative is to faithfully discern what God can make possible, to dangerously subvert our natural expertise to self-preservation, and practice compassion in spite of peril.