

Divine Disagreement Ephesians 1: 3-14

As we mark the start of a new year our nation remains deeply divided, perhaps more so than at any time in our history. We are divided politically, socially, demographically, and almost twelve years after electing a Black president there remains racial division. That is a disturbing observation, for two wars were fought and countless lives were lost to unite ourselves in freedom from the tyranny of England and end the practice of slavery that kept so many citizens of our nation from enjoying their God given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It pains me to say that we are also divided spiritually, in two distinct ways. The first is among the saved and the lost. There always has been and perhaps there always will be a separation between those within the church and those without, those who know and proclaim Jesus as their Savior and those who do not. However, there is now a fast growing and unprecedented high percentage of people who claim no religion. There are many explanations why that is, but none take away our pain in knowing so many will die in darkness and sin.

The other spiritual division lies within the church, among those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus. Even that is nothing new, as God's chosen people are not immune to division and conflict. The Scriptures are filled with prominent examples. The family and tribal feuds between Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau still rage today among their descendants in the Middle East. Muslim against Jew, Palestine against Israel. Sunni against Shiite. Judaism itself is split among Orthodox, Conservative and Reformed.

Even after Jesus came to earth division continued. A classic example is the dispute between Paul, Barnabas, and Mark, three of Jesus early disciples. Acts 15 records that Paul wanted to go back to some cities he and Barnabas had preached in earlier to see how the churches were doing there. Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them. But because Mark had left them on an earlier journey and returned to Jerusalem, Paul wanted nothing to do with Mark. That is understandable, for it appears Mark left them when the times got tough. He missed all the fun Paul and Barnabas had, including being stoned and dragged through the city of Lystra and left for dead.

Eventually Barnabas and Mark went in one direction and Paul met up with Silas and chose to go another. Conflict and division among God's people are nothing new, and even the people called Methodists, we who claim Scriptural holiness to be the root of our doctrine and beliefs, are experiencing it. Unless something miraculous happens this year, the United Methodist church will likely split, perhaps into several new denominations. Do you ever wonder why we cannot just get along? Even after the Prince of Peace came to earth to show us the way to heaven we are still feuding and fighting with one another. The church might do better than some in keeping our disagreements peaceful, but sooner or later unresolved conflict will lead to division.

So, what is our problem? Did God leave something out when we were designed and created? Are we like a cookie or casserole missing a key ingredient that makes it so irresistibly good? The answer to both questions is no. Look at verses 3 & 4 again. We are blessed people, and even before God created the universe we were in his plans, the object of His divine love. Allow me to share that truth from another version, a paraphrase called the Message written by Eugene Peterson.

*Long before God laid down earth's foundations, God had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, **to be made whole and holy by his love.** Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.*

God created us in His image and chose to make us part of His family. That means we also share in God's holy attributes, including the capacity to love one another. God is love, and we are created with a love gene. It is in our DNA, even though science and biology may not be able to map it. When it comes to our failure to love one another the problem is not with God or our genetic makeup but rather with something else- our will. Our willful rebellion against God and His will for our lives is nothing new, and it even seems that we have chosen to allow it to become a bigger problem now than at any time in modern history. God didn't create us as preprogramed robots to love Him and each other- we have a choice in the matter. Even so God has chosen us to be part of His family and provided us with what we need to get along, even the means of escaping wrath and punishment when we fall short.

God blesses us and adopts us into His family, Jesus Christ saves us and frees us and then the Holy Spirit delivers us and allows us to catch a glimpse of what is to come in glory. We can choose to worship that God, the God of the Scriptures, the God of Truth, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or we can choose to worship the other god that Satan and the world embraces- the god of me, myself, and I. Until our wills become one with God's will, our love for self will continue to prevent us from loving each other the way God created and intended us to- in Christ. As we begin this new year together my prayer is that we will continue to identify and remove the barriers that prevent us from doing that. Love and holiness will abound when we choose to worship Him together in spirit and truth.

That also implies we cannot and will not ignore or compromise the word of God in the process. Our regard for the authority of Scriptures is one of the few things truly worthy of divine disagreement, even though there is a growing number of those who believe unity and fairness are more vital than holiness. History proves otherwise. Time and time again, Jesus refused to allow the scribes and Pharisees to abuse their position of authority and corrupt the teaching of the Scriptures for their own gain. 1500 years later, Martin Luther refused to allow the leadership of the catholic church to take advantage of those grieving and suffering in the pews. The founding fathers of the United States refused to allow the King of England to limit the freedom to worship. Abraham Lincoln refused to allow the evils of slavery to continue. Martin Luther King refused to allow the sins of racial discrimination and bigotry to destroy lives and souls. Those are only a few examples of the great fruits of divine disagreement.

In that tradition, I pray for God to give us grace and wisdom to choose our divine disagreements wisely in 2021 and beyond. Let us strive to make love work here and everywhere else we go, not the love of self or the world but the love that is revealed and defined in the Word of God. To those ends I pray we will remain God's agents of divine change and continue to live each day reflecting the love of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.