May 9, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I remember once taking a rather lengthy drive across Colorado. At a particularly high point, a large sign proclaimed that I had arrived at the “Great Divide.” It is a “Divide” because the flow of water on either side is toward a different ocean. And it is called “Great” because it runs all the way from the Seward Peninsula in Alaska to the Isthmus of Panama.

Here’s an amazing meteorological way of envisioning how the continental divide works. Imagine that a drop of rain falls, and deviates just slightly to the western side of Colorado’s portion of the Great Divide. That raindrop will join others that likewise fall slightly to the west, and will eventually flow via rivers and streams into the Pacific Ocean.

However, if that same drop were to fall slightly to the east of the divide, it would join waters flowing into the Mississippi River and eventually into the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. It is amazing how two drops can start from the same place and yet, from the smallest of movements, end up oceans apart. This illustration applies equally to human beings who, from the same starting point, can end up oceans apart.

Theologian Tom Wright describes a tense church meeting where two friends of his, whom he called Jenny and Philip, disagreed strongly about a moral decision. [[1]](#footnote-1) Jenny was quite clear about the scriptural rules. Philip, on the other hand, was equally clear in saying that Jesus did not come to give us a whole new host of rules, but rather to include people who had been ostracized by the self-righteous.

What is most noteworthy is that, mutual recriminations aside, Jenny and Philip both started from the *same* faith community, recognized the *same* scriptures, and were devoted to the *same* Lord. Yet all Philip could hear as he listened to Jenny was a cold and unyielding legalism susceptible to hypocrisy. Likewise, Jenny could only perceive Philip as one of those dangerous bleeding-heart relativists who sees only shades of gray with no moral absolutes. If this sounds a lot like our daily news, it should.

The “Great Divide” between Philip and Jenny is about how we make moral decisions in a vast world of confusing alternatives. This is a sensible question that each of us must wrestle with as we debate not only how we should live in the shadow of COVID-19, but also what we can even know. Too often such debates give rise to more heat than light as people square off into increasingly bitter camps; seeing those who don’t see the truth as they see it simply as morons.

Statistician William Edwards Deming famously said: *“In God we trust; all others must bring data.” [[2]](#footnote-2)* This suggests that we are capable of truly objective decision making. But, in practice, interpreting data is a messy process that is filtered through the interpreter’s perceptions. Given the same set of data, even scientists can come up with very different conclusions. So much for our claims to objectivity.

A biblical parallel may be seen in Pontius Pilate, who was also trying to live in a world with a plurality of clashing truths. Caught between restive Jewish factions and a young Galilean rabbi, Pilate cynically asked: *“what is truth?” -* a nice *rhetorical* question that would give Jesus a chance to at least be reasonable. Ironically, it was Jesus *refusal* to be “reasonable” that sealed his fate. The scene discloses that truthis not a *what,* but rather a *who* abiding in a love that goes beyond what seems reasonable to us.

In John’s gospel, Jesus consoled his disciples, saying: *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” [[3]](#footnote-3)*

It is noteworthy that Jesus’ reference to *“many dwelling places”* is held in proximity to the statement where Jesus tells his disciples that *“No one comes to the Father except through me.*” By holding these seemingly contradictory statements together, Jesus points to a unifying force in a divisive world of alternatives that redefines truth from *what* we think to *how* we follow in Jesus’ way of relating with one another. Jesus did not advocate a reasonable, tepid tolerance which can rarely muster up the moral fortitude to withstand evil, and knew that we must sometimes make judgments or even take sides. But Jesus’ also knew that no matter how much we know or believe, we cannot be right if we lack good will toward those with whom we may differ. [[4]](#footnote-4)

Jesus’ overriding concern was to proclaim and exhibit the Kingdom of God. When First Century Jews spoke of God’s kingdom or eternal life, they were not referring to being whisked away to heaven. [[5]](#footnote-5) Rather they were referring to the fulfillment of Israel’s ancient hope that God would unite heaven *and* earth in a kingdom where God’s will and peace (*shalom*) would prevail. Every time we recite the Lord’s Prayer, we are asking that God’s reconciling love reign in the here and now as well as the hereafter.

In his passion and death, Jesus took upon himself the hatred and division the world hurled at him. Then he did something wondrous by transforming them and giving them back as forgiveness and love. [[6]](#footnote-6) God’s glory and truth are the transformation of people so that their deepest divisions are willingly swept away by love. [[7]](#footnote-7)

Christ’s “way” of making God’s peaceable kingdom real and immediate is the key to overcoming our differences, abiding in truth, and *witnessing* to Christian faith. *“By their fruits will you know them.”* [[8]](#footnote-8) It was *precisely* this quality of a life, centered upon the love of Jesus, that attracted converts to the early church, which had very little else to offer.

The tsunami-like impact of a global pandemic has a way of narrowing our perspectives and reducing our foresight. We instinctively dislike change, because it necessitates attitudinal and behavioral changes that we may find uncomfortable. Yet changes in how we will live and work – some predictable and others unfathomable – began even as the case-count started to rise.

We don’t have a lot of say about whether changes, like *“live long and prosper”* salutes instead of handshakes, video-conferences, and masks as fashion accessories, will occur or persist. But we do have a choice about *how* we will view each other as we enter into this altered reality. Will we be dividers, who simply inflame and reflect back the polarization and mistrust that has long been all around us? Or can we show some post-pandemic solidarity that makes it possible to imagine more and to rise above harshness and enmity reflecting back only graciousness and openness to everyone? As was said by the Grail knight in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade,* choose, but choose wisely, because only one is the truth.

Grace and Peace,

Dr. Bob

1. N.T. Wright, **After You Believe, (**HarperOne, New York, NY), ***2010,*** pp.1-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Harvard Business Review, March 31, 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John 14:1-7 (NRSV) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 1 Corinthians 13:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. W. Willimon, *“Answering Pilate: Truth and the Post-Liberal Church,”* (*Christian Century;* religion-online), ***1987,*** on [www.textweek.com](http://www.textweek.com) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cited in: S. Hoezee; <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-7c-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.challies.com/articles/three-vivid-images-of-unity-in-diversity/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Matthew 7:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)