

Continental Divide: A Sermon on Coming Together

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When I was in college I was very fortunate and had a semester abroad. I had a little job working at a library in Bradford, England. English was my first and second language – so Britain was where I went. It was the beginning of the semester in winter of 1976 – which sounds much longer ago than it feels to me. I traveled there alone and took the train from Heathrow to Hyde Park, where I had a reservation for the night before taking the train north the next day. I got to my lodgings without any trouble other than getting off the tube a stop early and wrangling my unruly suitcases through London. I hauled them up the stairs to the front desk and was greeted by a young man speaking a language I couldn't understand. "I beg your pardon." I said. He repeated himself. "I'm sorry, I don't understand." I said. Then, speaking very slowly, he told me where my room was, when breakfast was and I realized he'd been speaking English all along. That's how English became my second as well as my first language.

It was astonishing to me that we could be speaking the same language without my understanding him. And I loved it. I listened to the English speak English the way you might listen to music – like Bach – let's say – who started with some simple phrase and then wrote enough variations to fill an evening. It took a lot of listening because even in, as Shakespeare put it, this little world, that precious stone set in the silver sea, the variety of manners of speech is amazing. And, at least back then, there was incredible snobbery about accents and dialects. It was a snobbery not unlike the one we have in the, at least for the moment, United States. Although a bit reversed. In the South of England the speakers thought their version of English the highest and best – the Queen's English – and they looked down at the English speakers of the north as the lower class. The English speakers of the north looked at the English speakers of the south as toffs – people of privilege and snobbery.

Here in the, according to myth, egalitarian nation once envied around the world, we've also let ourselves be divided by language. The prevailing prejudice is that southern accents are the accents of the ignorant, less educated, more prejudiced folks, the language of the black community is the patois of the marginalized; there is a narrow band of eastern seaboard where the truly upper class bestow their lofty accents upon the world, and somewhere in the Midwest is the source of pure American English. Both my father and his brother, who grew up in Savannah Georgia, scoured away any vestige of the southern accent they'd been raised with when they were young men.

Language, though, is the least of our divides. We have Americas that seem so different from one another that, even when they seem to speak the same language, dialect, accent – there is little shared understanding of what is meant by the identically same words. So different that shared experiences – like being poor, living on the same block, same city, same nation, suffering loss, living, loving, believing, doubting, immigrating, keeping or breaking the law, grieving, being marginalized, or oppressed do not connect but further divide. Fracturing the nation into smaller and smaller enclaves.

This is a heartsickness – a disease and imbalance – that cuts into the heart of our being individually and collectively. And this isn't a disease that happens simply because there is

diversity. Diversity and our shrinking world have their impact but the capacity to turn someone from a comrade or neighbor into the other is a sickness that reaches as far back as the first family systems. And each divide is about power. First Corinthians, chapter 11 verse 3 A chapter we don't hear at liberal religious weddings: But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Each label, under the disguise of providing order, confers or defers power.

It's easy to divide people. Around 25 years ago I attended a workshop with Arnold and Amy Mindell, who work with conflict resolution, energy, psychology. Anyway – there were about 50 participants and they split the group in two parts. One side was to argue about gay rights – the issue of marriage didn't come up. And we were asked to push ourselves to live with whatever side we were placed on – no matter our opinion. We talked and debated one point after another. And became more and more heated – even when we didn't agree with what we were saying – it was interesting how invested we became in it. Then we switched sides and did that exercise again and then we were split again to debate abortion. And we had to stand up and face each other. Standing, we were more physically exposed and engaged – and feelings came to the surface more easily. It wasn't long before there was shouting on both sides. Afterward there was a time for a short reconciliation – a time to remember that the “other” side was playing a role just the same, that we didn't know whose opinion was real or not. And we had also had the experience of, as they say, standing in someone else's shoes and seeing – to a limited degree -- from their perspective. In real life, in our society, that happens pretty rarely. I went back to my room and thought about how easily I had become angry.

Preventing people from empathizing with one another, preventing people from looking at an issue from multiple perspectives is the perfect tool for shattering the bonds of community.

A couple of years ago a young woman came to live with us. It's a long story – but she needed a place to stay and we invited her to stay with us. She came from a different, religious background, economic class. She was struggling to get on her feet -- but she came from a family where getting on your feet was a matter of pretty rare luck. She was rebelling against the religion of her parents – a very strict fundamentalism. She couldn't bring herself to come here – but she found comfort and community at Willow Creek – just up the street. Before she moved in with us her car had broken down and she had walked straight from the accident over to a used car dealer who had sold her a used car at a punishing interest rate. During the year and a half that she lived with us she got into various kinds of legal trouble, had personal crises with her family, lost her license for some months, couldn't work, got injured and, though we couldn't stop these things from happening to her, we became a small safety net. None of this happened because she was a bad kid – just one who had not been raised to navigate the system like many middle class kids. She fiercely loved her family and could describe the challenges of their lives with compassion and some insight. We got along pretty well... but one day we were arguing because I had said that I believed that people needed safety nets in the form of things like Welfare. She argued with me, saying that it just made people lazy or game the system. Of course, I argued that that was rare and she told me, in no uncertain terms about the family members, beginning with her mother, whom she thought took advantage of the system. This wasn't the myth of the black mother who stays home all day. This was the reality of small town white folk who came from generations of poverty and marginalization. She grew

up in a cultural setting not much different than J.D. Vance wrote about in *Hillbilly Elegy*. When the last election was over and people wondered where the vote went, the first group that commentators pointed to were J.D. Vance's kind of people.

Vance grew up between Eastern Kentucky and southern Ohio. In earlier days these would have been like some of the folks I knew in Pittsburgh – laborers in heavier industries – before the industries were shipped away. But Vance's people were mountain people – or, as he calls them, hillbillies. These are people with a distinct cultural identity, history, a sense of rootedness in a place – a rootedness that was shredded when the jobs went overseas. What Vance wanted to describe were a people he loves and who, he believes, after getting his degrees from Yale and points northeast, have been forgotten and ignored. He wrote:

“... our vocabulary often extends no further than the color of someone's skin -- “black people,” “Asians,” “white privilege.” Sometimes these broad categories are useful, but to understand my story, you have to delve into the details. I may be white, but I do not identify with the WASPs of the Northeast. I identify with the millions of working-class white Americans of Scots-Irish descent who have no college degree. To these folks, poverty is the family tradition. Their ancestors were day laborers in the Southern slave economy, sharecroppers after that, coal miners after that, machinists and millworkers during more recent times. Americans call them hillbillies, rednecks, or white trash. I call them neighbors, friends, and family.”

For his people identity was key – love of land and country. And when identity is threatened a whole row of dominoes falls. Identity grounds us, give us spice, helps us to know where we belong. But it's a simple thing to turn someone's identity from something in which to have pride and joy to something to fear threats against and fiercely fortify. Generations of immigrants to this nation have faced similar challenges. I learned all about the melting pot in school – probably lots of you did, too. It didn't occur to me back then that there was any problem with that idea. But it turned out that everyone who arrived on these shores didn't necessarily want to melt down into one homogenous white, Christian... etc, etc, culture – and there really wasn't one monolithic white, Christian, etc, culture – but there is a monolithic strip mall culture now – so homogenous that one town looks much like another. And instead of blending in to whatever new generations of immigrants found when they arrived they have brought color and flavor, new traditions, and holidays, different norms. Instead of the imagined American Culture of tomorrow that TV and movies had planted in American dreams – a culture that would reach ever greater pinnacles of achievement but always look like the same basic family – there is a new culture of ever learning and evolving, changing faces and choices, faiths and family structures, color, dress, and habits. So many identities.

Even without that splendid and visible diversity, it's easy to carve people into separate enclaves, interest groups, demographics. Easy to convince people that their interests and lives are insignificant to others and to divide them, further and further, until they are quite isolated.

Hannah Arendt, a philosopher of politics and ethics, who studied and wrote about the rise of Hitler and other European dictators of the early 20th century and whose concern was the preservation of open societies, called this phenomenon of separating people in a society, “atomization”. Rather than being a whole cell or even a body of cells a body could be reduced to its atoms and a people can be reduced to mere individuals, watching out, fearfully, for their own well-being.

This is radical isolation and it makes us vulnerable to a myriad of outside forces. The ability and willingness to divide people in this way is a strategic decision, not an accident. And it is, precisely where our society has found itself. This weekend, as I heard and read about more raids into immigrant neighborhoods, it pushed some old buttons – as a child born just ten years after the end of the second world war, growing up in a Jewish family, I could feel the vulnerability and isolation momentarily close in on me.

Why talk about this in worship? Because the ability and willingness to divide people in this way is one of the closest things to sin I can think of. It violates our deepest nature – which is not one of solitariness and atomization – but of connection, cooperation, and belonging. From the time we rely upon our caregivers to carry us about to the time we become frail and dependent again, we're a social creature, an animal that depends upon the diverse skills and strengths of other animals as well as others of our species to thrive. As a child I remember the horror I felt when I heard about how people in Communist Russia would spy on each other, turn in their own family members and friends, just to keep themselves safe. Then you don't even need big brother to be watching – he's in your head.

That is the isolation that makes people hungry, despairing, makes us vulnerable to lies and terror and manipulation -- and causes us to forget who we are, what we love, and how to feel. The United States has been on the path to this fractured state for a very long time. You can track its progress over decades. And with every decade the people have become hungrier, filling driveways with bigger cars, homes with larger televisions, more electronic devices, more shoes, more stuff – until the people are fully atomized, visible to whomever can hack this snug, small, and entirely permeable, yet private world. We have become less and less united and more and more vulnerable.

Of course we know that no stuff will nourish us the way that true community, deep identity, truth, spiritual freedom, forgiveness, and love will nourish us. And the resistance that we can offer up against the forces of isolation, atomization, and alienation is to resist both melting together or being fooled apart.

The first resistance is to nourish ourselves on what is truly positive and wholesome in our own histories, cultures of origin, and families of origin and choice. And the second resistance is that we need one another and resist being isolated – to resist being pulled apart by fear, by false divisions. We need to create opportunities to connect. We need gatherings that surprise and delight us and bring us into contact with newness and open ourselves to it – because it is the very stuff of life – not sameness from day to day or year to year – but growth, evolution, adaptation.

We need to learn about one another – our differences and similarities. It is a life-giving skill to be able to open up to the reality that we are made greater, fuller, smarter, stronger in the midst of our differences.

It is a spiritual reality that we are only separate beings on one level of awareness – but more deeply, we know, that we are all part of one living organism – this world and her ecosystem.

Whatever perceived differences there are – whatever strategies are created to divide us – our greatest act of resistance is to turn to each other, stand by one another, create communities of love, of interdependence, of support, and of resistance. The opening poem today said “Barriers can muffle noise

Silence sound

But not here

Here

We will hear

My voice, each other's voices,

And the voice of the outcrying world"

So I close by saying that, in hearing, in taking down the barriers this way – no matter what – we resist and we persist. And in those acts, we reclaim the best promise of our society and our souls – at once.