

We live in a world that is becoming more and more divided, or so it seems. We have the haves and the have-nots; red and blue states; conservatives and liberals; and on and on and on. We seem to define ourselves by labels...but labels do not define who we really are. I am a male, a husband, a father, a grandfather, a pastor, hospice chaplain, friend and...I have been a fireman, emt-first responder, missionary. No one label really fits who I am. In some things I am conservative and in others I would be considered liberal.

We know those places where certain subjects are taboo. I mean we don't talk politics with relatives. We may feel that the thread that is holding us and our world together is growing very thin.

Now some would say that faith and belief are what holds or binds us together. But one does not have to go far to see divisions within faith and belief. Author Ann Rice has recently declared that she is leaving Christianity. Not Christ, but Christianity. She is tired of the anti-stance of her church. She sees them as more against than for. They seek to divide rather than unite. Jesus says in Mark 3:35 *"A house divided against itself cannot stand."*

Both Scriptures today explore what I call, "the tragedy of faith." What happens when faith encounters the world? Jeremiah is in opposition to other prophets who tell the leaders what they want to hear. Jeremiah is constantly saying the opposite. He is speaking out against the political climate of his day. The other prophets speak what the world wants to hear. Here in Jeremiah God is calling for prophets who speak, "the word of the Lord." But speaking such words can be dangerous. Jeremiah is jailed, dropped into a cistern and left to die all because he spoke the "word of the Lord."

In Jeremiah 12:6 we read, *"For even your kinsfolk and your own family, even they have dealt treacherously with you; they are in full cry after you; do not believe them, though they speak friendly words to you."* Jeremiah will be carried off captive into Egypt (Jeremiah 43) because the people will not listen to the "word of Lord" that asks them to stay where they are. Speaking the truth can be unpopular at best.

I remember a Town meeting in New Hampshire (if you have never been to a New England town meeting you should at least attend once. They will pass budgets of millions of dollars without discussion and then argue for hours whether or not the Librarian can have \$500 for new books!). There was a proposal on the floor that was, in my opinion and the opinion of many others, immoral. I stood in line and waited to speak on the issue. I was doing fine until I happened to mention that the action was immoral. Immediately the moderator, a friend, ruled me out of order and told me to "sit down and shut-up" (his exact words). Jeremiah speaks the truth and is ruled "out of order" by those in power. His words, God's words, are not the words the people want to hear. Here is one tragedy of faith – those who should listen are not listening to the "word of the Lord."

Jesus understands the tragedy of faith. He knows how faith values often go against the values of the world. Faith can and has divided homes, peoples and nations (US Civil War is an example). Coming to faith is not always easy and is not welcomed by all. Recall a friend of my aunt and uncle who came to faith at a Billy Graham Crusade. Because he came to faith he lost all his old friends, his drinking buddies. He shared how lonely those days were. He had lost his old friends and people in the church were "standoffish" because they knew

his past. It took almost a year for him to be accepted and new friends made. He told of how several times he longed to go back to his old life, he longed for friends. Coming to Christ did not come easy. However, he stayed with his decision, made new friends and found hope, but the journey was not easy.

Jesus points out that coming to faith is not easy. Now, in some ways we are fortunate in this country. Most people don't care what we believe. You believe what you want and let me have my own faith system. We will not lose jobs, homes, families because we come to faith. Some may not understand or support our decision but understand our freedom to make such choices. Of course, the freedom that allows us to make a decision for faith is the same freedom that allows another to make a different decision. A recent episode of "Bones" dealt with a Muslim employee who needed time to pray each day, to practice his faith. It was allowed. Remember missionary Walt White commenting, "If only Christians stopped and publically prayed 5 times a day!" Our freedom for faith is also the freedom that allows another to follow a different road.

Jesus understands that our faith often divides us from the world. But, Jesus is NOT saying that our faith should divide us from one another. Jesus is not talking about divisions in the Church but divisions in the world. Yes, we are often divided against the world and its philosophies: He who has the most toys is not the winner! Our faith should put us at odds with the world. We care for the poor, the orphan, the widow. We speak for those who have no voice to speak. We look out for those who cannot care for themselves. We stand for those who cannot stand. That is part of our calling in Christ.

However, it should not pit us one against the other. We are a house divided in many ways and because of that we are losing most of our credibility in the world. We put labels on various forms of faith and separate one from another. The labels that define who we are are often misunderstood and wrong. We live in a world where people are shunned because of their beliefs. Several congregations will only admit members who believe politically the way they do...vote one way and you are no longer welcomed. We make decisions before we know the person(s). We want to lump everyone into categories. That is another tragedy of faith.

Jesus is NOT talking about our divisions with one another. He is talking about our divisions with the world. He is referring to our stance against the world. As far as we are concerned, he says these words, "*By this will all people know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another*" (John 13:35 NIV). If we are to be known by our love then why don't we love? Why can't we look beyond our differences to the very foundation of our faith: Christ came and died for us that we might live as one.

We are forgiven so that we might forgive.

We are loved so that we might love.

We are saved not because of what we have done but because of what Christ did.

Reading Dave Roberts' newsletter this morning (wish I had had it earlier). He writes about building a vanity and the problems encountered in an old house where there are few level floors, straight lines are non-existent, etc. He writes of the tensions involved not only in remodeling a place for a vanity but in our relationships with one another.

“We have a picture in our heads of what the relationship ought to look like. Everything goes well as long as the other person(s) stands up straight and lines up with my ‘walls.’

“The problem is, the other person(s) is taking their own measurements and deciding what looks plumb, level and square to them. When we meet at the corner where our lives intersect, things may not be what we expected. (We may not be able to describe our expectations until something happens to disrupt our ideal.)

“Everyone building something knows that, as much as possible, you use the same measuring tape throughout the project. But when you make judgments in relationships we all use different standards and expectations. Your standards probably are somewhat different from mine.

“Who among us has not asked the question the young man asked Jesus, ‘Who is my neighbor and to whom do I need to act neighborly?’? What is your answer to how you ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’?

“If my neighbor would just match my ideal, if he would be ‘straight’ and never move, I might be able to make things fit, or work, in our relationship. But, while I hold that ideal in my head, that’s not the reality the other person gives me to work with. (Nor is the reality I give the other person to work with.)

“While the temptation is there for me to use my ‘tools’ to make the other person fit into my ideal, the reality is that the best person for me to use the tools on is me. ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ implies that the work begins with me.

“The first great commandment, ‘Love the Lord your God...’ reminds me of the ideal that I need to measure against. Then I’m aware of the tension between God’s ideal for me and my own reality.”

A house divided against itself cannot stand—Why can’t we follow in the pattern of the one who so loved us?

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985

NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989

Roberts, Dave, Measure twice, cut once, Connections, Vol 1, No 8, August 2010