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“The Radical Center”

1 Corinthians 1:20-25  
Lakewood UMC

September 28,  
2008

A Republican and a Democrat were walking down the street when they came to a homeless person. The Republican wanted to help in his own way, so he gave the homeless person his business card and told him come to his office and apply for a job. He then took twenty dollars out of his pocket and gave it to him. The Democrat was very impressed, and when they came to another homeless person, he also decided to help in his own way. He walked over to him and wrote out directions to the nearest food and clothing bank. He then reached into the Republican's pocket and gave the man fifty dollars.

Well in just 38 days we will have a new President and I don't know about you, but I will be so relieved when this endless campaign is finally over because these days all of the things which divide us seem so pronounced. It seems that our country is more conflicted than ever along the lines of red and blue, Republican and Democrat, liberal and conservative.

I read an interesting article recently in The Denver Post which said that some scientists are convinced that being liberal or conservative is not something that is learned, it is innate. It is literally in our DNA. I always assumed political preferences were learned in families, acquired through one's environment, life experience, and shaped by education, age, socio-economic status. This research suggests otherwise, however. Quoting a study published in the journal Science, researchers tested whether there is a biological basis for human political preferences. They found to their complete surprise that opinions on such contentious issues as gun control, immigration, war and peace, capital punishment are strongly associated with certain traits that are present **at birth**. Identical twins who share the same genetic inheritance think alike on political issues far more often than non-identical siblings. The brains of conservatives and liberals process information very differently. One of the researchers said that this study added to the growing research suggesting that over millions of years, humans have developed two cognitive styles—conservative and liberal. He said, “Cautious conservatives prevented societies from taking undue risks, while more flexible liberals fostered cooperation. For the species to survive, you need both.” (Denver Post, September 19, 2008)

Now, this division between conservatives and liberals is nothing new in

politics and it is certainly nothing new in religion. It has been going on since the beginning of time as human differences manifested themselves in every area of human endeavor. In the early church conservatives and liberals were known as legalists and libertines. The first 8 chapters of Romans, the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Philippians, the letter to the Galatians, and most likely the letter of James, were written to address this debate in the early church between these liberal and conservative groups.

Conservatives were called legalists because they were conserving the law, they were holding on to the law of Moses. They said that to be a follower of Christ you had to obey Jewish law and follow all 613 Old Testament commandments. This was the way it had always been, and there was no room for dialogue or digression from the Law. Then the libertines came along to say that Jesus came to set them free from the law so that they did not need to follow the old covenant at all anymore. It was sort of a “get out of jail free” card and they were released. Now they could do pretty much whatever they wanted to do, because in Christ they have been set free.

Paul wrote that neither the legalists nor the libertines got it right. He wrote that yes, Christians did not have to follow the letter of the Old Testament law to be faithful to Jesus Christ. He said the law is a guide and helps us in our faith, but we need to respect and adhere to certain parts of the law. Likewise, our freedom in Christ is a great gift, but that does not mean we are free to do whatever we want whenever we want and make up the rules as we go along. That freedom must be tempered with restraint and boundaries. Paul was able to clarify this delicate balance quite well throughout his letters, combining faith and works, freedom and the law, the best of what might be considered conservative and liberal together.

But throughout the history of the church we have had this liberal-conservative debate, which resulted in the development of denominations and continues within them into this day. You know, today there are more than 3000 different Christian denominations in America. And there are thousands of others that are not even labeled as a denomination. There are three major divisions within Christianity--- Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. There are 2 Billion Christians in the world, and they are primarily split among those three branches of our faith: 1 Billion are Roman Catholic, 300 Million are Orthodox, and 700 Million make up the various Protestant denominations. Within these major categories we have some very interesting and unusual ways of looking at each other and some terrible ways of treating each other.

For instance, last year Pope Benedict issued a statement on how Catholics should view other non-Catholics. Pope Benedict wrote that all Protestants were:

“Wounded Christians, defective in their faith, and that their churches should not be called churches because they were not a part of the apostolic succession, the authority of the Pope, or a certain way of understanding the Eucharist.” Now I have some very close friends who are Roman Catholics, and I know that they do not feel that way at all. But when I read those words I felt just terrible. “Wounded Christians, defective in their faith?”

But this sort of thing is not just from the Pope, it’s everywhere. I have a United Methodist clergy colleague who interviewed an Orthodox priest in Kansas City several years ago and this interview was videotaped. He said to this Orthodox priest, “I am so happy to get to know a part of the Eastern Orthodox family of Christ that I am not familiar with. Tell me about your part of the family.” That Orthodox priest’s response was “First of all—we are not in the same family. You are not a part of our family at all.” That is one Christian talking to another.

We all do it. Methodists judge Baptists and think we are better than some denominations, and Lutherans judge Presbyterians, and fundamentalists would say that all of us, by worshiping in a Methodist church are not sufficiently Christian or even saved. How did the followers of Jesus become judgmental and intolerant toward one another, just like the Pharisees, the very people he was condemning? “Woe to you Pharisees, Scribes, hypocrites, you neglect mercy, justice, true faith. You strain at gnats and swallow camels,” Jesus said.

Yet today so many people look at Christianity and see that we do not even seem to get along amongst ourselves, so how can we expect to have an effective witness in the world? Non-Christians often assume that you have to be either a rigid fundamentalist, (taking every word of the Bible literally and condemning and judging others), or a hypocrite (who goes through the motions, but really doesn’t believe in much of anything at all). The night before he was crucified, Jesus prayed a prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, asking God to make his followers one. He wanted those who believed that he was God in the flesh to be united, to work together to promote his values of compassion, justice, mercy, and love. That would be a wonderful thing to see both in religion and in politics, people coming together to work for the common good.

Now, there has been an encouraging movement in recent years toward this very thing. Once again, I have been so inspired by Rev. Adam Hamilton and his book *Seeing Gray in A World of Black and White*. He describes this movement toward this middle path the Radical Center. It is not a middle-of-the-road moderate position, because moderation implies safe, cautious. No, the Radical Center is a passionate perspective, bringing together the best of both the right and the left, distilling what is best in both perspectives. It promotes an open minded

spirit, a faith with head and heart which embraces evangelism and the need for all people to know the love and grace of God. But it also embraces the social gospel which seeks to address the problems of poverty, oppression, racism, the environment, and war and peace. It holds, in the words of Hamilton, "...that the gospel is incomplete without both its evangelical and social witness. It holds together a **liberal** spirit that is open-minded, searching for truth, generous, and always reforming, with a **conservative** spirit that is unwilling to discard historic truths simply because they are historic. It is willing to question anything but requires a very high level of evidence before setting aside what has been treasured as truth by previous generations." (233)

Perhaps most distinctive of all, the Radical Center avoids criticizing and condemning either the right or the left, although those in the center are often condemned by both extremes because they are neither conservative or liberal enough. (234) It is a way of seeking what is positive, good and true and leaving the judgements to God. It seeks to build bridges of understanding and compassion, reaching out to those who have often avoided and rejected, affirming along with John Wesley: "Although we cannot think alike, we can love alike. We may not be of one opinion, but can't we be of one heart? Without all doubt, we may. Let all the children of God unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences."

Which brings us to our Scripture lesson today. If there is any example of a Christian who tried to do this very thing I believe it would be the apostle Paul. In trying to promote this newfound faith he was beset by extremists—the Jews on the one hand, who thought he had sold out his Jewish heritage for a crazy cult, and the Greeks or Gentiles who wanted freedom from the oppression of the Jewish law. They disagreed over dietary laws, worship, theology, circumcision, you name it. This division was so pronounced that it resulted in angry debate, name calling, and general nastiness. Sound familiar?

Writing to one of the most conflicted churches in his care, the church in Corinth, Paul is pleading for a more civilized approach and exposing the folly of rigid positions and inflexibility of opinion. He asks, "Where do you find someone who is truly wise, educated, intelligent when such people often reject the way of God? No, God has exposed it all as pretentious nonsense." Paul is suggesting that this hateful division is not pleasing to God. What the followers of Jesus need to do it to keep proclaiming Christ the crucified, to remember his weakness, his humility and love. Paul says Jews will dismiss it and Greeks will pass it off as absurd, but for those who believe it is life, it is hope, it is salvation. Human knowledge, power and strength cannot begin to compete with God's weakness and love for all people.

You see, Paul was so profoundly touched and so utterly transformed by the self-giving love poured out by Christ on the cross, that he wanted everyone to share in that experience. He wanted everyone to know God's forgiveness, hope, and grace. And he believed that when they experienced that for themselves, they would become far less rigid in their opinions and their reliance upon human wisdom alone.

I think we could learn something from Paul and the Radical Center in the final month of a very long and divisive political season. We will never agree on everything, we will never think alike, but we can love alike. God in Christ has first loved us, and we are called to manifest that love in our lives.

Ultimately all of us—Christian and non-Christian, liberal and conservative, Republican and Democrat are sinful and fallible human beings who do **not** have all the answers. What saves us is the never ending mercy and grace of God.

Let us pray:

Help us gracious God to be peace makers, bridge builders and seekers of your truth in a divided time. Forgive us when we are intolerant, rigid, and closed to those who differ from us. Bring us together, and help us remember that we must always and everywhere rely upon your grace, a grace that is amazing indeed. Amen.