

Holy Trinity Sunday, Gospel Year A

Tribalism Reborn as Ministry

Matthew 28:16-20

Holy Trinity Sunday

Analysis by James Squire

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Author's Note: The Jewish Annotated New Testament (based on the Oxford Annotated NRSV) indicates that Matthew presents a shift in Mission. Early on, Jesus instructs his disciples to go only "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:6). In 15:24, he tells the Canaanite woman, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And yet, Matthew presents us with a genealogy at the beginning that includes some gentiles, most notably Ruth. Hence it is not terribly surprising that at the end of his gospel, Jesus has now expanded the mission to include all nations (Jews and Gentiles). Almost as if that were always the plan in the end.

Then again, when the Canaanite woman persists, he heals her and praises her faith. Jesus is apparently flexible – a lot more

flexible than we are. I wonder if Jesus thought his disciples were not ready to evangelize outside of the house of Israel yet – not until the pivotal event of his death and resurrection. Are we ready?



DIAGNOSIS: Mission Narrowness

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Tribalism Out in the Open

They say fear and panic are kind of like truth serum. The more we fear, the less we hide our true feelings. This pandemic is, among other things, one particularly potent truth serum, at least for the most tribalistic among us. Our communal engagement has always been mostly for the “lost sheep” of our own tribes.

But now we are “saying the quiet part out loud” because we have encouragement from high places to do so.

Even those who claim the mantel of “Christianity” are guilty of this. (I have no basis personally to commend or criticize the disciples of any other world religion, so I am not going to try.) The worst of us are insisting that our current president is anointed by God, and anyone who says otherwise is of the devil (misusing Matthew 12:30 – “Whoever is not with me is against me”). If they had been with Jesus, they too would have been inclined to send the Canaanite woman away.

But even the best of us are not terribly inclined to reach out beyond familiar tribal boundaries to bring aid and comfort. We all have our comfort zones, and this pandemic, with the stay-at-home orders that accompany it, exacerbates such tendencies.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Tribalism as Survival Instinct

If you are Jesus’ disciples, you may well be thinking that your own house is fractured and desperately in need of repair. Therefore, it is good to concentrate your efforts there. We likewise embrace tribalism out of fear of our own collective demise. We gravitate toward the hurts and pains and crises we are most familiar with, and that will preserve us.

The Jewish authorities certainly did not view Jesus or his disciples as loyal. But his disciples probably felt that people like them were the ones being destroyed by the government. They felt most comfortable focusing their efforts in their own communities. They did get tacit approval for this from their Lord and master (Matthew 10). But they missed the moments here and there where he broke ranks and ministered to a gentile or two. What they remembered was their need to admonish him about it.

Jesus makes us uncomfortable from time to time as well. We get the feeling he wants us to serve the needs of someone who we were sure he should want us to disdain. Sometimes it is an irrational inference on our part, but sometimes we just do not understand what he is trying to do in our world. So, we go our own way, secure in our own tribal mindset.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Terminal Tribalism

In Matthew, such tribalism ultimately puts its practitioners on the wrong side of Jesus' father in heaven. Christian tribes die out for various reasons: (1) they do not add enough new members to offset those who die, (2) stronger tribes outmuscle them to claim power, but (3) mostly because Jesus is constantly operating against such impulses, and without his blessing their strength and longevity and health diminish and dry up. To limit ourselves to only our own tribe is to cut ourselves off from his power and that leaves us starving far too often.

PROGNOSIS: Mission to All the World

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Tribalism Baptized

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ours is not foreign to him. He was a full-fledged member of the house of Israel, and even knew how to talk that way (Matthew 10). It is not clear that he trashed the whole concept of

tribalism completely. Arguably, he transformed it – baptized it, you might say – into something defined by unconditional love. After all, he came from the Father with a specific objective: to bring salvation to sinners (Matthew 1:21). He invaded the tribe of sinners to recruit for the tribe of saints. His mission field may have seemed at first limited to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” but in the end we learned it was “all nations” (28:19). He saved sinners by dying in their place. He recruited them by allowing their sins to be charged to his account instead. He completed his transformation by rising from death to new life and then giving that new life to them as a gift for them to enjoy. The only target the gospel of Jesus Christ discriminates against is evil itself.

Jesus binds humanity together not by customs or denominations or skin color or sexual orientation or gender identification or nationality or any of the other nonsense we dream up. He binds us together by his love for us as precious children of God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Anointed Truth: Jesus' Ministry Embraced

Still, it is better we do not call it tribalism anymore, now that it has been baptized. Jesus' ministry has showered love upon us despite our narrowminded interactions with those who are strange to us. After all, we had become strange to him in a way. Our ways were not to his liking, but he took the fallout from our destructive relations. He identified with the victims of our destructiveness and restored them to health and wholeness. He also forgave us and restored us to a healthy relationship with God. He did both at the same time – on the cross and in his resurrection.

So, we embrace this new way of being, where all nations are to be included in the gospel of Jesus Christ, because we understand

that none of us, regardless of our cultural affiliations, has earned even an iota of that gospel. In a sense, the gospel of Jesus Christ flattens us all so all can be lifted to joyous heights. We think about our own past discomfort as something to be baptized and transformed into a call to serve those whom that gospel has not yet reached. Now we are uncomfortable when we see people excluded from that gospel, and we desire to breach that kind of wall with good news of forgiveness and love.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Our Ministry Out in the Open

Notice how Matthew's Jesus waits until he is ready to turn over the entire ministry to his disciples before finally spelling out the global nature of that ministry? The ministry "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" was sort of like a practice run, an initiation of disciples. Now that salvation for all has been secured, the ministry is ready to expand, and not simply in baby steps. Jesus expands it at once to include "all nations" – effectively without limits. No one is to be excluded. No more "only go to" in the ministry call.

We therefore recognize, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer helpfully explained in *Ethics*, (pp. 57-59), that "Whoever is not with me is against me" refers specifically to those who hinder the spread of the gospel, and can be counterbalanced by, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40), which refers specifically to those who help spread the gospel even though their appearance or method may not be the same. It is in those rare encounters shared in Matthew, such as the one with the Canaanite woman, that we find inspiration to break our patterns and expand our ministry horizons—to celebrate the love of Jesus Christ out in the open by our actions and interactions, if not by our noisy proclamations.