

Text: [Luke 6:12-19](#)
Date: November 20, 2020
Title: Crossing the Divide 3: “Zealots & Tax Collectors”
Theme: Differences of opinion are expected – what matters is that we submit our egos to the outcomes.

1

Fifteen years ago, historian Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote a book that I treasure among all the books I’ve ever read. It was called *Team of Rivals*, and told the story of how Lincoln assembled his cabinet from those who ran against him for the Republican nomination in 1860. The book was an inspiration for me, and told the story of how he was able to effectively harness (for the most part!) the egos and drive of four bitter rivals in order to lead during the most difficult time the nation had ever known.

Why did he do it? You could cynically say that in taking this approach, he was just following the old adage, “keep your friends close, and your enemies even closer.” Reading the book, you begin to see just how much it cost him to try and manage those personalities. You come away with a respect for Lincoln’s genius but also a sense of his country-boy naiveté.

I know I spoke about Lincoln in my sermon two weeks ago; I guess I’ve just been thinking about him a lot in these challenging times and wondering what it would be like to see that kind of leadership in America today.

2

We all long to build institutions: families, organizations, churches, a nation – where everyone can have their voices heard, can disagree without being disagreeable, find consensus, and then genuinely back whatever decision the team makes.

Sounds great, doesn’t it? But is it achievable in real life? Close to never.

There are a couple of reasons why.

I think it’s important to recognize, first, that disagreement, even on major points – is unavoidable. No two people will agree on everything – best

friends, romantic partners, members of the same political party, doesn't matter. I am well aware that often I don't even agree with myself. Ask me the same question tomorrow, and I may give you a different answer than the one I give today.

Now, scale that up from one person to a nation of almost 330 million people – and is it any wonder we're in the kind of political mess we're in?

When we ask why it's so hard to achieve a state where disagreements don't get ugly, we need to recognize how ready our egos are to take control in any situation. We get so invested in our opinions that disagreements rapidly turn into battles of will.

I remember when my kids were small, at times going toe-to-toe with them over very silly things – whether that was bedtime or meals or whatever. I recall thinking at the time: "I need to be clear that I'm not going to let a 4 year old dictate how things are going to be. I'm the parent here." The end result, though, wasn't necessarily a lesson learned. It was often just a lot of tears – theirs first, and then mine. Sometimes, as it turns out, the right thing to do may actually be to say, "Ok. Today we'll have ice cream for lunch."

When everyone has a healthy dose of both opinion and ego – how can we ever hope to bridge differences and divides?

3

I talked briefly about Lincoln's cabinet...today's scripture is about another kind of cabinet, Jesus' twelve apostles.

And like Lincoln, Jesus brought together some unlikely people to serve alongside him – unlikely people to serve alongside each other. What we know about Jesus, based on the kinds of crowds who came to hear him, is that his message had an appeal across all kinds of boundaries. Here we read that those who came out included Jews AND Gentiles – that is, not only those from Jerusalem, but those from Tyre and Sidon, non-Jewish cities, as well.

We also know that among Jesus' disciples were several fishermen – Peter and Andrew, James and John – who would have been uneducated, lower class people. At the same time, legal experts like Nicodemus (John 3) and

Joseph of Arimathea (John 19) – well educated, higher class people – are also named among his followers.

Perhaps most striking is Jesus' calling of those who would otherwise be very much at odds politically. Jesus had a well-documented affinity for tax collectors, who were hated by Jews of the time because they collaborated with the occupying Romans in order to make their living. We read, for example, how religious leaders rejected Jesus specifically because he was willing to share meals with tax collectors (Matthew 11:19). The gospel writers also include the story of how Jesus called Matthew directly from his station at his tax booth (Matthew 9:9).

Today, we find a surprising name in the list of the Twelve: Simon the Zealot. Now, we don't know 100% for certain what's meant by this. It could be that Simon was just a very religious dude. Maybe. But we do know that the Zealots were a recognized political faction in Jesus' day. They despised Rome and were ready to do whatever was necessary – including using violence – to resist the occupation.

If Simon was THAT kind of Zealot, then we can say this: Jesus' movement was big enough to include both those who collaborated with Rome and those who were in violent opposition to it. And as further evidence of that reality, I'd point to a few instances in the gospels where Jesus actually ministers to Roman soldiers and their households (Luke 7). At the very minimum, we see Jesus reaching out to show God's love and care even to members of an occupying army.

Friends, that's a big tent.

4

Now, I should point out one thing about this big tent Jesus pitched: it had a hole in it – a giant, gaping hole.

Luke points to that hole in naming the last apostle in the list of twelve: “and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.”

One of the things that fascinates me in plays or movies about Jesus' life is how the writers portray Judas' motivation for betraying Jesus. Most of the time it goes like this: Jesus is playing too small. Judas turns him over to

force his hand, so that the Son of God will have to finally reveal who he really is. It's kind of normalized by portraying the other disciples in ways where they too are expecting Jesus to take power and then, in turn, to give them seats at the table. So Judas is still a believer in the movement, he's just in disagreement with Jesus' methods – and unlike the other disciples, who are willing to sit by and wait for their reward, he takes matters into his own hands.

In the gospels, however, we see a different picture – a much simpler one. What little information we receive about Judas' motivation makes the issue purely about money. We learn, for example, from John's gospel that he served as a kind of treasurer for the disciples, and helped himself to the money in the purse (John 12). So when the temple officials offer 30 pieces of silver, that's enough for him to turn traitor.

But regardless, what we see here is a clear case of one person's ego undermining a whole movement. Whether that ego need is rooted in money, in a desire for power, or a desire to be right, the result is the same. Because one individual can't set aside what they want, even for a second, everyone suffers. Jesus certainly suffers. All those who had been blessed by Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing suffer. The disciples, who now have to hide out for fear of being arrested themselves, suffer too.

5

It strikes me that one of the keys to unity - one of the keys to crossing the divides between people – is recognizing that there are times when our individual needs and desires have to take second place to the needs of the whole. This is often the only way to bring all of our differences of opinion – all of our egos and vanity – into some sort of harmony with each other.

In the church, this sometimes means setting aside our preferences – maybe for the outward forms of worship, mission and ministry that we prefer – in order to reach people more effectively with the gospel. Sometimes it means that we, very simply, don't get our way, because the Spirit is moving the body in a different direction.

In our families, what it often looks like for our individual egos to take second place is to set aside our need to justify ourselves – to prove that we are absolutely 'right' and don't need to apologize for hurting someone's

feelings. In the family, the relationships have to matter more than being 'right.'

Politics is perhaps a more difficult challenge. What I believe submitting our ego to the needs to the whole looks like is recognizing that sometimes others have good ideas about how to solve problems too – and that maybe multiple, even competing, approaches, might yield the best results for the most people.

Important in all of this is the notion that we're all on the same team, working toward the same goal, the same big idea. In the church, that's the idea of bringing the hope of Jesus Christ into people's lives. In the family, that's the idea of creating an environment of love and care and support. In our political life, that's creating an environment where we can enjoy equal opportunity and access to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Without that understanding of a higher purpose, we have a hard time letting go of ego. We have a hard time letting go of our own opinions.

It's also true that at times our problems are caused by fundamental disagreements about what our purpose actually is...and that our egos get wrapped up in arguing about the purposes.

It's important that we always find ways to keep the main thing the main thing: Jesus came into this world to show people how much God loves them. Whenever the twelve lost sight of that, they failed. They argued with each other. They betrayed the movement and their Savior. The Bible hides none of that from us.

But this is also true: when they did manage to stay focused and submit their egos to the outcomes, the result was nothing short of glorious. And suddenly, Jesus' plan to bring together fishermen and Pharisees, Zealots and tax collectors didn't seem so crazy after all. I pray we – as a church, as families, as a nation – can remember this. Happy Thanksgiving, everyone.

Amen.

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