



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

July 21, 2019

# **Our Country: Diverse or Divided?**

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

# **Our Country: Diverse or Divided?**

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

© 2019 by Dr. Bruce Lancaster and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: July 22, 2019

## Our Country: Diverse or Divided?

---

*2 Corinthians 5:16-21*

*Ephesians 2:11-22*

Is our country diverse or divided: YES!

There was a Coca-Cola ad in the Super Bowl a few years ago celebrating America's diversity by featuring a beautiful rendition of "America the Beautiful" sung in English, Tagalog, Spanish, Hebrew, Hindi, Keres, and Senegalese-French.

I saw it as a very moving picture of what makes America beautiful, but many Americans reacted negatively.

Our diversity divides us. We have to confess that all of us struggle with diversity at some level, but the hard fact is we settle on our divisions.

There's a song from my generation sung by Sly & the Family Stone titled "Everyday People" that touts our diversity, "different strokes for different folks..."

But the hook for that song is a verse that seems to be just as relevant today as it was some 50 years ago:

*There is a long hair  
that doesn't like the short hair  
For bein' such a rich one  
that will not help the poor one.  
There is a yellow one  
that won't accept the black one  
That won't accept the red one  
that won't accept the white one...*

We set up our groups, our blogs, our websites, our walls, our arguments, our tweets, our ammunition to prove our point, defend our division, destroy the diversity.

President John F. Kennedy, in a commencement address, said "If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can make the world safe for diversity."

So how do you feel about making the world safe for diversity?

For all of my life, I've seen one ideological battle after another: political, religious, social.

People believing that what matters most are the positions we've staked out: left, right, liberal, conservative, middle ground, status quo, progressive, anti-this, pro-that.

But listen to what Guy Sayles says to us Christians: "...what really matters are the postures of kneeling to serve and opening arms to welcome."

God's love in Jesus Christ is more than a matter of loving someone simply because they are a human being. That kind of love is a generic love, not love in the particular, love for that person and that person and that person.

And that's so hard. Paul tried to deal with it in his churches; Peter and James wrote about it; and I think it's at the bottom of John's focus on Jesus' command to love.

But the walls of hostility that Christ broke down are being rebuilt every day to keep us apart, and I wonder how my life contributes to the mortar that holds the bricks together.

## Our Country: Diverse or Divided?

---

My friend Jim Moss says that “we worship the idolatry of skin color.”

However it is or has been, we isolate ourselves from people whose views differ from ours, whose culture is different, who look different; and once isolated from them, they become adversaries and "others" whom we caricature and demean.

For every one of “us”, there is a group of “them.” What happens when one of ‘us’ meets one of ‘them’?

Like a Montague meeting a Capulet on the streets of Verona, like a Jet meeting a Shark on the streets of New York, like an Alt-Right meeting an Antifa on the streets of Charlottesville, like any one of ‘us’ meeting any one of ‘them’...

We identify with our group and feed off each other’s fear and hatred with vitriolic slogans and biting, chewing innuendos until we meet, and we feel the tension rising, the rage choking inside, venom rising to the fangs!

It happens in the hallways of our Capitol, on the streets filled with angry people, along the cubicles of our offices, among the hallways in our schools, we hear it in the words of our opinion-masquerading-as-news programs.

We feel it as we treat others as less than the person God loves; and people die: emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

You see, way before I learned that song from Sly & the Family Stone, I was taught by Mrs. Mack in our 3 & 4-year-old Sunday School class:

*Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Red and yellow, black and white  
They are precious in His sight  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

I didn't know it at the time, but that was my introduction to Pauline theology as that is what Paul was writing to the Corinthian and Ephesian churches, in particular, how reconciliation is the work of God in Jesus Christ.

He encouraged the church to spread the gospel by bearing witness to the unity, harmony, and peace that Christ ushered into the world through the Holy Spirit.

Listen again to what he wrote to the church in Ephesus, this letter I believe a summary of his faith: *For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us... thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.*

He had made that same point in his earlier letter to the divided Christians in Corinth: *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."*

I confess I don't understand all there is about reconciliation, but I do know it has a lot to do with accepting the fact that our commonalities are more important than our differences.

## **Our Country: Diverse or Divided?**

---

I think it was William Sloan Coffin who said something to the effect that it's not so much how we are different from 'name your enemy', as it is necessary that we recognize the common bond we share in our sinfulness.

A few years ago, the Conference of National Black Churches hosted an interracial religious gathering in Charleston, SC, in response to the massacre of those nine worshippers at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The president of the group, Jacqui Burton, said, "We really see this convening as a launching pad for at least a three-year focus on race and reconciliation and to look at convening these kinds of conversations across the country."

What saddens me is I was in that kind of conversation at Montreat Youth Conferences in the 1960s.

Then I was in that same kind of conversation with civic leaders in Canton, Mississippi, as a young minister when the bi-racial Ministers Association wanted to have an integrated Easter sunrise service on the courthouse square.

As a child I drank from water fountains labeled 'white' and right next to it one labeled 'colored', both fed by the same water pipe coming out of the wall.

As a teenager, in the parish where I grew up in Louisiana, there was a honky-tonk that was a gathering place for members of the Silver Dollar Club, a special group of the KKK, identified by the Silver Dollar each member carried.

Their specialty was the murder and disappearance of the bodies of African-Americans.



When they were eventually identified, they were church members, parents of kids we went to school with, one was a deputy sheriff.

As a child, as a teenager, as a young adult, I have heard the words, seen the snarling anger and hate, and now I'm almost 70 years old, and I still hear the words, I know the code.

We can keep turning back the pages on our country's history and see that we have been having these same kinds of conversations for over 200 years.

Who's in? Who's out? Who belongs? Which group doesn't fit?

When I wake up on the cynical side of faith, I have this crazy picture in my mind where we are the Wile E. Church Coyote chasing the Road Runner of Reconciliation, always getting close but then the Acme Anvil of Divisive Distrust and Violence and Vitriol drops on our dreams and leaves us choking in a cloud of despairing dust!

The fact of the matter is that contemporary conflicts surrounding race and any of the other issues that divide us like gun control, environmental stewardship, war, immigration and refugee policy, and gender and sexual orientation did not suddenly appear out of nowhere.

Like the good people of Ephesus and Corinth knew, the empire then and now nurtures inequality for its pecking order of power and prestige to divide and, I wouldn't so much say conquer, as I would say to divide and keep things as they always used to be.

## Our Country: Diverse or Divided?

---

I sometimes wonder if Paul was writing these words about breaking down the walls of hostility and reconciliation and peace because the people then, as it happens too often now, wanted the church to insulate them from the ambiguities, shelter from the anxieties that the day brings. Because according to Paul, being "in Christ" makes a radical, revolutionary, and transformative difference: *"...a new creation...everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"*

It is not a modest difference. It is not a subtle difference. It is not a partial difference. For Paul, this "if" changes "everything."

If we are in Christ, if we accept the forgiveness that God freely offers in Christ, if God is truly loving, holy, forgiving, gracious, and able to create new life in Jesus as proved by the resurrection, then something different takes place for us, with us, in us, and is possible through us.

That's what I think Paul wants us to discover. In other words, when a person becomes a Christian, redeemed by Christ, brought into a relationship with God, we identify as a new creation, not named by our culture or society any longer.

As a new creation, we become a citizen of the kingdom of God.

We are part of God's scandalous grace that embraces prodigal children whether they are prodigal like us or prodigal in different ways.

We embrace them because they are like us in Christ, like us in being forgiven, and like us in being beneficiaries of the grace of God that will not be held hostage by religious traditionalism, political power, economic class, or anything else.

That's the horizon Paul saw as he began to pioneer a path into these difficult conversations with the Ephesians and Corinthians and you and me by reminding them and us of who we are, why we do gather together...

Because God is in the forgiving and reconciliation business, God has not simply forgiven and restored us to the divine family, but has given us stock in the family business with Jesus.

As Paul said, "We are ambassadors for Christ since God is making his appeal through us."

That's what it means to be "in Christ." We are licensed to be agents, promoters of reconciliation in a diverse and divided world: to love people shunned by others, embrace people who others declare untouchable, and celebrate reconciliation because this is God's dream for us.

Yes, our country is diverse and divided, and I fear the dividing walls will give us a hollowed democracy.

But we are called and we can, we must, as someone said, "...Live the better story", the story of Jesus Christ.

You and me, in the family business with Jesus, who continue to pioneer the ministry of reconciliation in a diverse and divided world where:

## Our Country: Diverse or Divided?

---

*Red and yellow, black and white  
They are precious in His sight  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

I leave you with the words of St. Basil: *“I cannot persuade myself that without love to others, and without, as far as rests with me, peaceableness towards all, I can be called a worthy servant of Jesus Christ.”*

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630

[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)