

As a parent who feels as if he is constantly prompting his kids, “There you go. Now what do you say?” There’s a part of me that is drawn to the simple yet profound notion that today’s gospel is a reminder of the deep importance to be thankful, to give thanks and praise to God from whom all blessings flow. It is the central act of our worship each Sunday and it is the defining posture of the Christian life. And we do so, not out of duty or obligation, not to stay in God’s good graces, not because we’ve been cajoled or prompted, but out of a spontaneous spirit of joy at those moments in life when we stop and turn and humble ourselves before God’s amazing grace.

But I cannot help but be drawn to one small yet monumental detail in the story where Luke points out that the one leper who turned was a Samaritan. And while I wouldn’t blame you if Samaritan brings to mind those good people that helped strangers on the road, we should remind ourselves that to the early Christians, Jewish Christians, Samaritans were the enemy. But they were more than just an enemy, they were heretics to be despised, to be avoided, to be shunned. And the feeling was mutual.

Although they shared a common ancestry and a common faith, their respective forms of Judaism would begin a long and bitter divorce when Israel divided into two kingdoms, and Samaria became the capital of the rival Northern Kingdom. And after the invasion and in simulation with pagan cultures, Samaritans would develop their own religious traditions, build their own temple and claim a more authentic devotion to Torah. Jews, for their part, publicly cursed the Samaritans. They believed you would be contaminated if you were to enter their territory. And, in fact, would add days, if not weeks, to the travel just to go around the region.

So why all this about Samaritans? New Testament Professor Ira Driggers, points out that the gospel of Luke draws upon the Samaritans because they are the most unlikely suspects to demonstrate for the disciples both sides of the great commandment; love of God and love of neighbor. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, we are invited to see our worst enemy as the exemplar of what it means to love your neighbor, as it is the Samaritan who alone helps the stranger that the faithful had ignored.

In today’s gospel, our worst enemy is now the exemplar of the other half of the great commandment as he demonstrates for us what it looks like to love God with all your heart. Unlike his fellow lepers who are healed in body, he alone turns and demonstrates a humility of gratitude and praise which Jesus immediately can recognize as evidence that he has been healed in spirit as well.

Luke is reminding us that our worst enemies can be both agents of God’s love and exemplars of what it means to love God. And I would add, a people deserving of God’s love. Who are the Samaritans of our day? Who are the people with whom we have so much in common yet hold in such disdain and contempt? Who do we increasingly avoid? Who do we de-friend on Facebook? Who, according to pew studies, do we increasingly see as a danger to our country? Perhaps, the titles of some best-selling books might give us a clue.

Liberalism is a mental disorder. Our insane, clown president, demonic of a liberal mob is destroying America, arguing with idiots, treason, liberal treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism, and it goes on. Lies and the lying, liars who tell them a fair and

balanced look at the right, on both sides of the political spectrum, and if you're keeping score, I drew evenly from both.

And the vitriol in these titles, of course, it's just a symptom of something that we have been seeing on the rise for years as study after study has been telling that we are more divided, more partisan, and most importantly, I think, more prone to demonizing those who disagree with us, perhaps since anytime since the Civil War. Even in the turbulent 1960s, barely 5% of Americans cared which political party their child marries into. Today, 60% would be concerned or upset if they were to marry a political outsider.

And it shouldn't be surprising our elections have evolved into multi-billion dollar enterprises designed to paint the other as so thoroughly unacceptable, so thoroughly un-American, and even criminal that you're left with no choice but to vote for the other side. Cable news and internet news, and now social media keeps the drama going. With 24-hour and seven-day a week streams of new outrages, new investigations and new conspiracies keeping us all jimmied up while blurring the line between journalism and opinions so much that it's hard to separate.

And what's worst, studies show that this doesn't actually bother most Americans. It turns out we are actually far more interested in having our pre-existing opinions affirmed rather than challenged. And so, we've sequestered ourselves into Balkanized information and opinion bubbles that increasingly resemble alternate realities of alternate Americas.

In his book, *The Righteous Mind*, why good people are divided by politics and religion, Dr. Jonathan Haidt reminds us that it wasn't always this way. Although there are many factors that have contributed and drawn us to where we are today, he says that one of the biggest is the retirement of the great generation. Figures like Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill, leaders who could not have been more far apart ideologically but could still govern, could still make deals and trade horses, as they say. And at the end of the day, they could still share a glass of scotch and a good laugh. Haidt argues that having lived through the depression and World War II, the great generation gained a kind of moral humility. They could disagree, absolutely, but they managed to stay on the same team because they never doubted that both sides wanted what was best for the country.

I can recall in my early days of dabbling in politics, I was working to recall a member of the city council. He had voted against inviting a navy ship to our hometown of Santa Cruz to celebrate the Fourth of July. It had been a long standing tradition and it was very controversial that he would take the stand. And I was very young and I was very ideological, and I was an activist so I led a protest on his front lawn. It made the news. We were all ginned up. We questioned his patriotism. We shouted out whether he was a loyal American. I've since mellowed.

But then a week later, Santa Cruz was hit by one of the worst earthquakes in our history, collapsing entire buildings in our downtown. And I'll never forget that night volunteering to help evacuate residents of a retirement community who had no power and no water, and didn't have access to the medications, that I was unloading this truck of emergency supplies I turned and I noticed the person working next to me was that very city

councilman, standing there in his jeans and his tennis shoes, just another volunteer trying to lend a hand.

And to this day, I can never – I’ve never been able to fully shake the feeling of shame that I felt that night as I realized the political circus that I’d helped organize on his lawn and all the vitriol that had surrounded it, that it all seemed so small, so petty. Here we were together in real life working together to help fellow citizens of a city that I had grown up in and I was embarrassed that I had buy-into a caricature that we had painted of him that was so not true. And while we never became friends, from that night, he was no longer my enemy.

Is that what we need? Was it going to take another World War or disaster for us to turn and find once again our moral humility? Or might we start to repair our divides by imagining that like the Samaritans, our fellow Americans might not be the enemies they’ve been made out to be. And if that sounds optimistic, perhaps the research into moral psychology by Haidt and others might give us some help. Because their research has identified that across cultures across the globe, there are six basic foundations to human moral psychology. Principles like caring for others, fairness, proportionality, liberty, respect for authority, group loyalty and so on.

And what I found so fascinating is that liberals, and conservatives and independents, we agree on all of them that no matter how much research is done, no matter which country is tested, we agree on all of them. Across the political spectrum, we have them in common. Where we differ is how we rank them. Where we differ is on the relative importance we place on them. But the point is, at the core of our political debates are not the machinations of criminals and traitors, and demons and deviants. They are, for the most part, well-intentioned fellow Americans drawing perhaps upon different moral foundations. Moral foundations that hate argues, are not just valid but are all necessary for human civilization to thrive. In other words, we need all of the tools in the toolbox. We need each other.

I stumbled upon this reality a few years ago when I was working against Proposition 8. This was a measure in California that would have banned same-sex marriage. And the slogan we adopted was “No on 8, no on hate.” And while that might have had an alluring ring to it, it rhymed nicely, the word hate bothered me because I had friends and I had family members who didn’t agree with me on this and I wanted to stay in relationship with them no matter how the vote turned out. And so I needed to know, I needed to understand them.

And as I listened, I discovered that what they were concerned about were things like what this might mean for their own marriage, what this might do to a sacred tradition in a beloved institution of marriage, what this might mean for their own freedom of religion, or what about the legitimacy of how judges interplay with the democratic process and all those kinds of things. They had all kinds of reasons, all of which I can now see today I could map to one or more of those moral foundations. And although they weren’t the principles that I thought were most important in that moment, none of them had anything to do with hate. And while it was rocky going at first, by resisting the temptation to demonize, most importantly, we kept open the door of our relationships.

As Episcopalians, should we not be experts on this as we model every Sunday what it looks like to set aside our differences, long enough at least to kneel, shoulder to shoulder in common prayer? Could we be the catalysts for a movement toward a new moral humility? Perhaps, it's time for us as a country to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and go to Samaria, to leave our opinion bubbles and go out of our way to connect with those who believe differently, to set down our arguments, to resist wrangling over words, as Paul says, and truly listen so that we might discover and appreciate their moral foundations, and discover that while we might not agree, we are indeed on the same team and indeed we've been all along.

Might we come to see them as someone who can be both an instrument of God's love and someone who can teach us something about how to love God and each other? Might we come to see that in that healing, in their healing, that they might heal us as well? And together, in so doing, turn and give thanks and praise to God in the only way that He would recognize. Amen. Thank you for the book.

[End of Recording]