



The Whole Crowd

Jer 23:1-6; Ps 89:20-37; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56; Eph 2:11-22

In Pennsylvania this week, racial tension and racism raised their heads. As news outlets pointed out, the “City of Brotherly Love” was found to be wanting with racial concerns over the presence of minority children at a swim club. Though exactly what happened may be fuzzy, statements were made indicating fear, anxiety, and distress over the presence of non-White children in the club pool. Children from area daycares coming to swim under a paid contract were hurt, angered, and sorely disappointed. Regardless of the re-issue of an invitation for the children to return, damage was done. The children were classed as inferior, dangerous, or otherwise unsuitable—a lesser class of human being. Such attitude of exclusion stems from fear and anxiety, not knowledge or love. It fails to grasp the inclusive love of Christ Jesus for all people, regardless of our differences.

Racism and ethnocentrism are not new issues. We know them from our national history. They were part of interactions among nations the world over in this century, last century, and millennia before. Darfur, Rwandan genocide, Hitler’s extermination of Jews, Pol Pot’s killing fields, Armenian genocide, and Charles Taylor’s war crimes do not stand out enough in the annals of human history. Native American populations from the US and Mexico to Brazil suffered extermination attempts by invading forces. African, European, Asian, and Australian histories tell the same tales. We fear those who are different. We clash with those we consider not our own, different, or inferior. We want to keep them at bay, at a distance, removed from our presence.

In times of social or economic stress, such tensions are higher. Economics is what paved the way for Hitler to rise to power. The Jews were identified as an enemy on whom to pin responsibility for the disastrous economic situation in pre-war Germany. The Native Americans were perceived as a threat to settling immigrants from Europe, to say nothing of the threat posed to them by the invading force taking over their lands.

In the Jerusalem of Jesus’ day, there was a wall in the temple courtyard. It was only about three feet high and had several openings to allow people through. Its purpose, however, was to mark how far a Gentile could go upon entering the temple marketplace. They were allowed into the outer courtyard, but not beyond this wall of division or separation, as Paul calls it. Up to this point, the wall stated, and no further. It was kind of like the “Whites Only Beyond This Point” signs seen in the South in years past. There were grave tensions surrounding the presence of Gentiles in the temple area. The book of Acts tells the story of a riot in Jerusalem, begun when someone mistakenly thought Paul had taken a Gentile beyond this wall of separation.

If there was civil unrest in the South during the 1960’s, it was not much different from the potential conflicts around that wall in the Jerusalem temple. In A.D. 70, a Roman General marched past the wall, entered the Temple and made a sacrifice on the altar within the Holy of Holies. In response the Jews torched Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. The presence of a Gentile and the associated actions of sacrificing a pig were considered a complete desecration to them. In their view, God could no longer inhabit the temple. In the aftermath, Jerusalem was wiped off the map for centuries.

Well, it was different in one sense. The Jews felt they had religious reasons for keeping Gentiles from entering the temple. They understood *Yahweh* to command separation from the other peoples of

the world. As evidenced in the gospel of Christ Jesus, however, this was a faulty understanding of God. Isaiah, Elijah, and others had spoken of God's care for all nations, but the people had not understood the willingness of *Yahweh* to extend grace to all peoples. They were too hung up on their own position, merits, and standing before *Yahweh* as a special people. In actuality, they were using God's name to uphold concerns that were not God's at all.

During my first semester back in the US for college, I thought racism in Mississippi was ancient history. I invited a friend from Sierra Leone to go with me to church. I had no idea of the conflict I was stirring. A casual comment to a friend about my inviting Abraham to church sparked her phone call to a deacon, a meeting of the deacons, and the decision by several of them to meet Abraham at the door and usher him down the street to a different church.

I was astounded. I could not understand how this church could raise money to send missionaries with the gospel of Christ Jesus to Africa, yet not allow an African to enter the door of the very sanctuary where those monies were raised. On one hand, they paid lip service to God's love for all peoples. On the other hand, they excluded those who were different from fellowship under God's love. Fear of people they had learned to consider inferior would not allow them to open the doors of their sanctuary to provide a place for Abraham to hear and learn the gospel they claimed. Social concerns outweighed the concerns of God and John's words about God loving the entire world.

It is the same issue that has fueled violence against Hispanic immigrants in recent years. It is the same concern that has led to the push to build a fence along the US border with Mexico. It is the same concern that fuels Mexican sentiment against immigrants from Guatemala and El Salvador. When we are anxious and insecure, we react by looking for an enemy. Like Hitler's Germany, we pin our insecurities on some group who is different. We paint them as responsible for our concerns, our anxieties, and our uncertainties.

Insecure in their standing before *Yahweh* and *Yahweh's* provision under the presence of Rome, the Jews of Jesus' day pinned their fears on Gentiles. Uncertainties in the aftermath of the Civil Rights era in Mississippi and the changing neighborhood around their church, fueled my church's anxieties toward their neighbors and a student from Sierra Leone, rather than shifting their attention to God's love and faithful provision.

When Jesus taught and fed the crowds, he cared for them all, without exception. There was no distinction for him to make between the worthy and unworthy, the acceptable and unacceptable. His compassion was for one and all. Jeremiah understood that *Yahweh* is our righteousness. Our standing before God is not impacted by heritage, tradition, genealogy, or other human considerations. It is about God being our righteousness. Paul stated that in Christ all are brought near to God. There is no more valid wall of separation, for we are called to reconciliation into one body, regardless of our differences.

It is not easy to live as one body. It is not easy to trust God when we see our differences so readily. It is not easy to go beyond our upbringing that so often spurs us to distinguish between those who are and are not acceptable. It is not easy to embrace the other. Yet that is the gospel. We are in Christ reconciled in one body to God. We are then to live as one body—not just the few like ourselves, but they whole crowd. Are we ready to set our fears aside to allow Christ's love to touch all through us?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*