

THE “THEM” IS US

Matthew 18:15-20

I remember playing a lot of sandlot baseball as a boy. To decide who got to bat first, I would take a bat and throw it in the air to my opponent who would catch it. Then I would put my hand over his hand which he had used to catch the bat. Then he put his other hand over mine. Then I would put my other hand over his until someone got to the knob of the bat, which was on top. That person would decide who batted first.

It is nice to be on the top—to be in control of our daily schedule, our grades at school, our families for our future, or our relationships with others. The pandemic has threatened that control, just as we felt that way for the time we were blacked out after the storm on August 10th. But we’ve learned to adjust to using face masks, the internet, and social distancing to stay on top of things.

In Jesus’ time the way to be on top was to knock down those who were different. The people Jesus dealt with often did that with their laws and traditions. They came up with 613 laws which “brought low” all kinds of people so that only a few were left standing, the few who would consider themselves the chosen people of God. You could “eliminate” people who didn’t have the right family tree, who had jobs working with the Roman government, and those who had to deal with “unclean” things like garbage or dead bodies. What you ended up with was “them and us.” The “them” were all the wicked people who God condemned in the law, and the “us” were the few who would receive all the wonderful promises of God.

Haven’t we grown up from that kind of separation and thumbing our noses at other people? Haven’t we in our society freed slaves, championed civil rights, emphasized a world in which all are equal, and promoted tolerance for all? The unrest this year over incidents with the police has shown how bad things can still be. It is still a world of “them” and “us.”

In the world in which Jesus lived people were ready to point out others’ faults. You could use those 613 laws to bring down others and make yourself look good. But don’t we emphasize in our culture acceptance rather than blaming others? Isn’t most quoted words of Jesus today not John 3:16, but Matthew 7:1, “Judge not so that you will not be judged”?

Why do we emphasize tolerance and being non-confrontational? The old saying goes, “If you point the finger of blame at someone else, then three fingers are pointing at you.” If I confront other people with their wrong, I might pull them down, but I also risk that others will point out my faults. Most Americans say that they think abortion is wrong, but they don’t want any laws against it. Why? Because they might have to fall back on it in the future. If I tolerate others, then they will tolerate me. If I don’t knock them down, they won’t knock me down. If I don’t make a fuss about them, they won’t make a fuss about me.

We might say, “Then there is no “them and us.” Everyone’s the same. But while we may not confront others and judge

what they do wrong, instead we distance ourselves from them. We look the other way and keep quiet about their wrong, so we can keep separated from them. The result is that it is still “them and us.” No, we may not point out the evil of others as they did in Jesus’ culture, but we do separate ourselves in other ways. Race doesn’t separate people in our society the way income does. More and more in our culture there is a dividing line between “haves” and “have-nots.” Our grandparents and great grandparents probably had a lot more in common with the poor than we do today. Do we see the poor in our church?

Jesus’ directive is that we are to confront evil. “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault just between the two of you.” We don’t do that to knock other people down. Jesus said, “Just between the two of you.” We pray to God that the problem stops with just me and the person I confront. We do it to help the other person. That can only happen when we aren’t competing, when it isn’t about “them and us.” And we won’t get to that point unless we first see that we are forgiven. Jesus speaks about confronting someone else in Matthew 18 between two stories—the parable of the lost sheep and the unforgiving servant. The parable of the lost sheep emphasizes how much God wants to forgive. The story of the unforgiving servant tells how a servant who is forgiven a huge debt by his master is unmerciful to a fellow servant who owes him much less. When the master hears of this, he throws the unforgiving servant in jail. Jesus says God will thus punish us if we fail to forgive others as God has forgiven us. It is with the attitude of forgiveness that we confront others in their sin. It isn’t “them and us” because we realize that we are “them.”

There is no competition because it is no contest. We don’t stand a chance. We are sinners who fall short of God. But as people who are forgiven by Jesus, we care enough about others to not overlook their evil. We don’t worry if that makes our own shortcomings more visible. We don’t have to hide that we are “them.”

Mortimer bought a new area rug for his living space. The bright color cheered up his little cottage. The day after he got it, he was eating dinner while watching his favorite TV program. He spilled some of his macaroni and cheese on the floor. So he lifted up the edge of the rug and pushed it under the rug. The next day his friend Sydney came to visit. Sydney left a clod of mud by the door as he entered. “No problem,” said Mortimer and he pushed the clod under his rug. Two nights later Fred and Marty joined Sydney in coming to Mortimer’s house to play cards. Marty accidentally knocked over a glass and broke it. Mortimer just brushed it under his rug. This went on for months and then years until one could see the lumps under the rug. But Mortimer didn’t seem to notice much because the top of the rug still looked good to him. Then a young man came by and noticed the mess. While Mortimer was gone on a walk, the man entered the cottage, picked up the rug, took it outside, shook it, and then started cleaning up all that had been under the rug. He got filthy cleaning up the mess and cut his fingers on all the broken glass. He was exhausted by the effort. When Mortimer came back, he looked at the man and said, “What happened to you?” The man explained how he had cleaned up the cottage. Mortimer thought, “It didn’t look so bad.”

When we try to ignore others' sin, we do it with our own. We pretend like Mortimer that if everything is "under the rug," no one will notice. We try to make other peoples' sin small so that our sins will look small. But then like Mortimer we don't see how great it is that someone came to clean up our mess. When we make our sins small, then our Savior is small. If we aren't that bad, then it is no big deal that Jesus died for us on the cross. But when we stop hiding our sins and ignoring the sins of others, we see how great it is that God forgives us. When we see that love, we don't want sin to ruin other peoples' lives. We confront them, because we know the "them" is us. As we deal with our sins, we so deal with others—we direct it to the cross where Jesus wants to nail it there forever.

In the past weeks many of us have had to face driving down a street in town and suddenly having to stop and turn around because an orange DOT truck is blocking our way. It might at first seem frustrating, but then we realize that they are clearing the branches away after the storm. It may be an inconvenience for us, but good because it means the damage is getting cleaned up.

Being confronted about sin may be like having a big orange truck placed in front of us. But it is what we need to realize

that sin and turn to God for forgiveness. It is what helps to turn from "them and us," to "us" all as sinners and even more "us" all as forgiven.

When Abraham Lincoln ran for president, one of his worst detractors was Edwin Stanton. Stanton derided Lincoln and said he looked like a gorilla. When Lincoln got elected, some of his advisors recommended that he try to silence Stanton. Others told him to ignore Stanton. But Lincoln arranged to meet with Stanton and ended up appointing him Secretary of War. Stanton at first continued to say critical things about Lincoln, but grew to respect him more and more. When Lincoln was assassinated, Stanton was at his bedside until he died. Stanton wept and said, "There was the greatest man I ever knew. Now he belongs to the ages."

Jesus has freed us from having to compete and make it "them and us." The "them" is us. We can take our sin to Him. As we do, we want others to have that forgiveness. That moves us away from avoiding or ignoring them to caring for them as Jesus has done for us. Then it is no longer "them and us," but all of us in Christ Jesus.

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