

Well, the presidential campaign is heating up – and only a year and half to go before the election. Yippee. Maybe you watched the debates a few weeks ago. It figures to be an increasingly tense time in America. We don't seem to like each other very much these days. Some of this is normal politics. But, as many have noted, it seems to be getting much worse very quickly. Americans are dividing along ideological lines concerning health care, immigration, climate change, sexual identity, race, abortion, etc. But the division seems deeper than the sum of these individual issues.

I think that such divisions in societies, and in people's minds, evolve in four stages as they deepen. First, I can start by thinking those who disagree with me are mistaken. They've made a bad evaluation of the facts and come to a mistaken conclusion. Next stage; my opponents are, not merely mistaken, but wrong. It's not just a judgement that is mistaken. Their basic ideology, philosophy, religion, how they view the world, is wrong. It doesn't match reality. Now I would say these first

two mental labels of “mistaken” and “wrong” that we put on people are part of ordinary political and cultural life.

But if the divisions become deep enough, I begin to see my adversaries as, not merely wrong, but dangerous. Their ideas are so wrong that I think they’re a threat to me and the society’s very well-being, maybe survival. And if I’m to survive culturally, or even physically, I will need to treat them as the enemy. And, so, after going from being mistaken, to being wrong, to being dangerous, my enemy finally becomes seen as evil. And, of course, we must defend ourselves against evil by any means whatsoever. That’s where I’m afraid we’re going. We Americans are beginning to see one another as dangerous. How long until we see each other as enemies and evil? The next stop after that is political violence.

And that brings me to our Gospel parable of the Good Samaritan. In light of this parable I want to begin today by looking at how Jesus and His society viewed the Samaritans. The Samaritans were a mixture

of members of the Israelite tribes of the northern Kingdom who survived the conquest by the Assyrians in 721 BC, and gentiles the Assyrians transplanted to the region. The Samaritans believed that the true and original holy place of God was Mount Gerizim, not the Temple in Jerusalem. Theologically, there was a lot of similarity between Samaritans and Jews, but enough differences to be perceived as dangerous. Both Samaritan and Jewish leaders taught it was wrong to have any contact whatsoever with the other.

This is the context for Jesus' own interaction with the Samaritans in the four Gospels. Jesus recognized the differences and friction between the Jews and Samaritans. That was the whole point of using a Samaritan in this parable. And a couple of weeks ago we had the story from Luke 9 of the Samaritan village not letting Jesus and His Disciples pass through their town because they were going to Jerusalem – in the Samaritan's eyes, a place of false worship. Jesus, indeed, calls out the Samaritans as being theologically mistaken – even wrong -- in the story

of the Samaritan Woman at the Well from John 4. The woman says to Jesus, “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain (Mt. Gerizim); but you people (Jews) say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus responds, “You people worship what you do not understand; we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews.” So, Jesus recognizes the differences and frictions between the peoples, and even proclaims the Jews to be correct in theological matters – so He’s not a relativist for the sake of a false harmony.

But Jesus never treats the Samaritans as dangerous or as enemies. He interacts with the Woman at the Well, even though He breaks all sorts of cultural barriers in doing so. He rebukes James and John when they want to cast fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritan village that wouldn’t let them enter. And in this famous Parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus makes the person who shows mercy, and is the real neighbor to the weak, a Samaritan.

That should make us stop and consider about how we think of those divided from us these days. Wherever we are on the political spectrum, there is a lesson here for us. If I'm a progressive member of the anti-Trump resistance I should envision this Parable with the Good Samaritan character being an anti-gun control, build-the-wall, white male wearing a red, "Make America Great Again" hat. He is the righteous neighbor. Whereas, if I'm a Pro-Trump Populist maybe I imagine the Good Samaritan as a Socialist, transgender, undocumented immigrant from El Salvador. She is what a godly neighbor looks like. That's Jesus' point in telling this story of the Good Samaritan to a bunch of Jewish people. Those would have been the feelings evoked.

"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." That was the correct answer to the scholar's question about the greatest commandment of God. It's what we're called to do in these times. And it's not easy because there really is a lot

at stake. And Jesus is not telling us that getting things right is unimportant any more than He was telling His listeners that day that the Samaritans and Jews were both right, or that it didn't matter.

But He did insist that the Samaritans weren't the enemy, and they weren't evil. In fact, they were capable of great virtue – more virtue than the Chosen People sometimes (we remember the Samaritan Leper who came back and thanked Jesus for being healed while the nine Jewish Lepers didn't). In these next eighteen months – and beyond, because our divisions aren't going away any time soon -- we Disciples of Christ must remember this. The parish, country, Church, will be torn apart if we can't resist the temptation to see them, our own personal Samaritans, as enemies and evil, rather than made in the image and likeness of God, and is His beloved child.