

Voices: Deconstructing our ‘us vs. them’ mindset

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We have become a society of “us vs. them.”



Meredith Stone Every day, lines are drawn to separate us from them. Sometimes, others draw these lines. And sometimes, we take out the pens and do the drawing ourselves. These lines of separation are based on race, gender, socio-economic status, politics, views on social rights, the ways we live and love, and the things we believe.

When we watch video of yet another shooting of a black person, and when people struggling for their lives are compared to a brand of candy—a society of “us vs. them” is difficult to deny.

On the “us” side of things, we often talk about loving whoever our “them” is. After all, Jesus did say we should love our enemies. White people may say they love black people. Middle-class Americans whose way of life is not threatened may say they love Syrian refugees.

We love “them.”

But when we refer to people who look, think, act or believe differently than us as “them,” are we really showing love? Is not the act of drawing a line

between groups of people opposite to love?

Erasing lines



How can we become a society that erases the lines between “us” and “them” and consequently sees our commonality as divine image-bearers while also respecting the distinctions that form our identities?

In Luke 7:1-10, a Roman centurion sends two groups of friends to Jesus so Jesus might heal the centurion’s “highly valued” servant. The first group of friends, Jewish elders, declare the centurion is worthy of this miracle. The second group of friends tells Jesus the centurion considers himself unworthy. Without ever meeting the centurion, Jesus commends his faith, and the servant is healed.

If first century Rome was a society of “us vs. them,” then Jesus and the centurion would have been the epitome of what an “us vs. them” dichotomy looks like. The wealthy, elite Roman centurion represented the political empire that had conquered Jesus’ land and continued to oppress Jesus’ people—Jews. And Jesus was a conquered, homeless Jewish itinerant prophet.

In the story, Jesus certainly demonstrates how to shatter the lines between “us” and “them.” Jesus declares the faith of this centurion—his religious, socio-economic and political opposite—is greater than Jesus has found among his own people (verse 9).

But, frankly, Jesus is divine. Jesus is supposed to be awesome.

More like us

The human Roman centurion, on the other hand, is a lot more like us. If you're a white person, or you live in the United States, or you do not suffer from food insecurity, or you exist in a position of power or privilege in any way, then you—and I—are much more like the centurion, and we can learn from his example.

In describing the centurion's worthiness of Jesus healing his servant, the Jewish elders tell Jesus the centurion "loves our nation and has built our synagogue" (verse 5). They tell Jesus the centurion loves Jews, one of Rome's conquered enemies. But more than simply loving "them," the centurion also helped build the Jewish synagogue.

The centurion had put down his sword and picked up a hammer and nails to build a place where "their" God could be worshipped, even though "their" God was different from his god, the emperor. He respected Jewish identity and worked for their welfare.

But the centurion's second group of friends tells Jesus the centurion does not consider himself worthy for Jesus to come under his roof (verse 6). For a centurion—a person of great social status and wealth—to say he was unworthy for a homeless, conquered, itinerant Jewish prophet to enter his home was utterly revolutionary.

The centurion went beyond loving "them." He respected and worked for the wholeness of a people who were in a position of less power and privilege. He even relinquished his own power to someone who his society would have deemed unworthy.

The centurion demonstrated how the lines between "us" and "them" can begin to be broken down.

WWCD

So, to co-opt and adjust a common maxim, what would the centurion do

(WWCD) if he were living in the United States today?

- He wouldn't wield the sword—justifying killing—but instead would pick up constructive tools to work for the wholeness of black communities.
- He wouldn't compare people to candy, but instead would join in efforts to find homes, health and security for Syrian refugees.
- He wouldn't only love “them,” but also would work to deconstruct the lines our society builds between groups of people created in the image of God.

May we all have the courage to do the same.

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