

## God, Disagreement, and Difficult Issues

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Matthew 18:15-22

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In a recent TED talk, NPR journalist Celeste Headlee cited a recent Pew research survey that engaged 10,000 adults in America and revealed that we are more polarized and fragmented now than at any time in our history. I am not sure how such measurements are calculated or compared, but she also reminds us that Henry Higgins advises Eliza Doolittle in the musical *My Fair Lady* that she should be able to engage anyone in conversations surrounding non-controversial topics like health and the weather, but Celeste Headlee rightly points out that even those topics may not be safe for conversation at the Thanksgiving Dinner table with our strongly held opinions regarding vaccines and mask mandates and climate change. Nothing is safe anymore in terms of disagreement, polarization, and personal differences. Headlee reminds us that these studies reflect divisions in which we are less likely to compromise and more likely to make decisions on where to live, who to marry, what friends we have, based on what we already believe. Our minds are completely made up, we are never wrong, and no person or big idea is going to change that. This is not a malady that only the difficult people out there suffer from; this, as they say, this is us.

About twenty years ago, I heard the author Tom Wolfe speaking and discussing one of his recently published books. He took some questions from the audience and somehow, he got on the topic of comparing his current life in cosmopolitan New York City to the town where he was born and raised in rural Virginia. He didn't like to drive in the city, but one day he was out and about driving on the streets of Manhattan. Not always sure of his bearings, he was driving at a leisurely pace when suddenly he noticed a very large SUV about to swallow him whole in the rearview mirror. As quickly as he could, he put on his blinker and then moved to the right and as the SUV passed, he gave a gentle wave, as if to say in a friendly way, sorry for holding you back. His wave was met by its own more aggressive in-kind hand gesture as the SUV sped on ahead and into the busy-ness of the day and out of his life. Wolfe, reflecting on this incident, and its larger implications guessed that something like that would not have happened in his native hometown in Lexington, Virginia. Not because everyone loved each other and liked each other and were always on the same page, but because living in the small town you wouldn't want to tailgate your butcher and run them off the road because you depended upon them for your meat. You wouldn't want to tell your barber to go to hell because you were going to depend on them for the next haircut. On the seemingly anonymous streets of Manhattan though, Wolfe surmised, you could be free to aggressively dismiss

someone out of the way, because you were probably never going to see them again, and most likely didn't depend on them for anything anyway.

Perhaps that is the initial push back we hear in our scripture lesson from Matthew with Jesus demanding that those who claim to follow him engage the person they are in disagreement with rather than dismiss them or find them expendable. We have created a society that has sold us on the notion that there are places we can live or places we can exist where we will only have to be around like-minded un-difficult people who do not make us uncomfortable in any way. In a recent article in the Atlantic about evangelical Christianity in America, it ended with an acknowledgement from a pastor of Flood Gate megachurch in southeast Michigan. The pastor acknowledges that 'churches like his have grown in direct proportion to how many Christians 'felt betrayed by their pastors.' That trend looks to be holding steady. More people will leave churches that refuse to identify with a tribe and will find pastors who confirm their own partisan views.' In other words, the trendy option is to appeal to one demographic and tribe to maximize our segment and use messaging that will appeal to confirm and resonate with that segment's partisan views. The article points out that this phenomenon is already happening and has been happening in our society, so why not embrace it, ride the wave, and become a community that only exists to reinforce what you have already made up your mind about. No need to engage in conversation with people with whom we disagree because we will have sifted them all out. No need for theological reorientation and a careful listening to scripture's witness and the mandate to be faithful to Jesus Christ in our own time. No need to worry about forgiveness or trying to live as a community of flawed, forgiven, and forbearing sinners, when all it takes to make a 'successful' church is to simply reinforce the partisan views of our target audience. No need to worry about superfluous or spare people, they are going to be collateral damage on our pursuit of the right niche market for the like-minded community we hope to create and that we hope will become a religious success and phenomenon.

So much of Jesus' ministry happens among people a self-respecting first century religious person would not have wanted to be caught dead with, much less people with whom we would want to share a life. But Jesus does not use Nielson ratings or demographic niche market research or social media algorithms or so many of the other tools available to sift people. Disciples of Jesus Christ often think our greatest danger is outside of us rather than within us. We think if we can just tighten the circle or bottle up the sin or find the right scapegoat, we can wipe the slate clean and get on with the successful life, but it seems like we are pointed to a community in Matthew where disagreement and conflict are inevitable and the solution is not to cut our losses and dismiss those with whom we disagree or are in conflict, but to engagement them as far as we possibly can and perhaps even more challenging, to engage ourselves. Or to quote the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, 'everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody

thinks of changing himself.' Celeste Headlee in her TED talk channels her inner Tolstoy reminding us that there may be no more important skill in our world right now than learning how to take time to sustain a coherent, confident, engaging conversation and when we do it with those we disagree or those we find difficult, we must set ourselves aside, assume we have something to learn, and refrain from trying to impose our agenda or spend our time preparing our ammunition to fire back. Far from letting us off the hook or blessing our misguided efforts to create a community based on our personal preferences, Jesus calls us into a community that sees the dignity in every human being and refuses to dismiss any, a community that is willing to bear with those with whom we disagree, and people willing to ask for their forgiveness, not only seven times, but seventy times seven times.

What does that look like? In the cocksure certainty and pride of our own time, it looks counterculturally like a willingness to admit we might be wrong, it looks like a stubborn resistance not to dismiss or give up on anyone and looks like a willingness to see ourselves and others first as flawed imperfect sinners in need of forgiveness and also capable of redemption. Why in the world would anyone admit they could be wrong---author Chuck Klosterman tells the story in his book *But What If We're Wrong*, of Herman Melville's book *Moby Dick* which was published in 1851, 'basing the book on the real-life 1839 account of a murderous sperm whale.' Klosterman writes that Melville, a moderately successful author at the time of [*Moby Dick's*] release, assumes this book will immediately be seen as a masterwork.' But instead, the reviews are mixed, the book sells poorly, and at the time of Melville's death, total sales were below five thousand copies. Klosterman reminds us that the 'failure ruined Melville's life: he became an alcoholic and a poet, and eventually a customs inspector.' He died destitute in 1891 and Klosterman says that we must assume his perspective on *Moby Dick* must have been something like 'well, I guess that didn't work. Maybe I should have spent fewer pages explaining how to tie complicated knots.' Klosterman goes on to say that for the next thirty years, nothing about the reception of the book changed, but then after World War I, 'for reasons that cannot fully be explained, modernists living in postwar America began to view literature through a different lens,' and by 2005 Columbia University's American studies program classified *Moby Dick* as 'the most ambitious book ever conceived by an American writer;'<sup>1</sup> a book that commercially tanked in its own day and an author who died in his mind a failure are capable of radical reassessment and redemption in other time.

Perhaps that is a long way round to the notion that we are called to live with lightly with our moral certainties and righteous indignation and ironclad opinions, and what may feel fairly clear and certain in the moment or just because conventional wisdom may be on our side, we could also be wrong. To be a community of Jesus Christ is not to

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<sup>1</sup> Chuck Klosterman, *But What If We're Wrong?*, 8-9.

dismiss our opponents and preen in our self-righteousness on this or that issue as though we are infallible and final on anything, but rather to engage other people, particularly those with whom we disagree with a posture of humility and a willingness to admit that we could be wrong. That means we talk about abortion or women's rights or the rights of others in our country, or policing and gun violence and the challenges to legislate morality, knowing that we may be wrong, no issues will be perfectly resolved this side of eternity, everyone has something to teach us, especially the people whom we think we could not possibly think we could learn anything from, and sometimes Christ calls us to be something more than our individual quirks and opinions and attitudes and sometimes calls the church and leadership to take a stand or make a statement even it makes us uncomfortable.

Joe Small reminds us that the mid-second century Greek philosopher Celsus derided the Christian community for their lack of prerequisites and for appealing in his words to 'illiterate and bucolic yokels, children, and stupid women.' Celsus was astonished that these Christian communities saw these people worthy of Christ's love and 'they themselves admit that these people are worthy of their God.'<sup>2</sup> You can almost hear the highly educated and highly cultured Greek philosopher saying to himself under his breath: 'what a band of losers, they'll never amount to anything.' In addition, Rowan Williams former archbishop of Canterbury, reminds us that followers of Jesus Christ and members of his community called church owes reverence to every person, because of our belief that God brought them into being, defined who they are, has called them, and will give them what they need to fulfill their calling. Therefore, Williams reminds us, 'there are no superfluous people, no 'spare' people in the human world. Everyone is needed for the good of all.'<sup>3</sup> It means we cannot dismiss or self-select or airbrush people out of our lives.

Lastly, all our disagreements, all the difficult people, not to forget the difficult person within, all must be seen first and foremost as people deserving of Jesus Christ's love and forgiveness and people always capable of redemption. Whatever stubborn, challenging, head scratching, mind-numbing, nausea-inducing qualities those with whom we disagree, those we struggle to love, and those we are in conflict with may present, they are and will always be bracketed by Christ's forgiveness on the one side and Christ's redemption on the other, just as we are when we are stubborn, challenging, head scratching, mind-numbing, and nausea-inducing. But more than that, what we seek to encounter when we try to engage and listen and bear with those with whom we disagree or with whom we struggle to love, is not the triumph of our moral certitude or theirs, not that all problems will be solved and all issues resolved on this side of eternity, but that in

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Small, *Flawed Church, Faithful God*, 178.

<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of Christian Life*, 64-65.

seeking to listen, to bear with each other, to not write anyone off even when we are goaded into doing so, we catch a glimpse of and maybe bear witness ourselves to the grace of Jesus Christ that promises always to be made manifest to the world through the strange, flawed, stubborn, morally compromised community of Christians, who for some strange reason have been 'graced, in and through our sinful existence, to bear witness to the one who promises to love us to the end, forgive us to the end, and call us to account to the end, seventy times seven and counting, until we become the people who embody, even in our disagreements and difficulties and half-finished efforts to not give up on each other, in all our fragile and flawed humanity, until we become people who embody the world for which Christ died and for whose sake Christ rose again.<sup>4</sup> May that same crucified and risen Christ manifest himself through us a way of life that is more interesting than a sect of people who all think the same way, may Christ raise us up to be a community that listens to understand, and produce disciples humble enough to admit we may be wrong, may Christ equip us to be a community that sees value in every human life and makes room for everyone, not just seven times, but seventy times seven times.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> James Wharton, 'Three Confidences,' in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, 119.