

ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

There's a word I'm hearing a lot lately—a word that has become embedded in our lexicon in this deeply divided society we live in.

Tribalism.

I looked the word up in the dictionary. "Tribalism" is "the behavior and attitudes that stem from deep loyalty to one's own tribe or social group." Tribalism is what you call it when a group of people with likeminded interests, opinions and points of view bond together and create a community among themselves. It's like being in an exclusive club. If you don't share the same interests, opinions and points of view of the tribe, you're not welcome. You can't be in it. You have to go and find your own clan to belong to.

For some reason, tribal communities often bond around hot-button issues, where the beliefs are strong and intractable and emotions run high. I'm referring to those intimidating subjects we're always warned to stay away from and never, ever bring up around the dinner table, such as politics and religion.

It's pretty much inevitable, I think, that conflicts are going to arise between different "tribes." And those conflicts can bring out some pretty nasty, dare I say unchristian behavior in people. "Your tribe is wrong and mine is right." "My tribe is better than your tribe." "I don't trust your tribe." "I don't like your tribe." "Your tribe is up to no good. It's conspiring against my tribe." "Your tribe and everyone in it is foolish. Worthless. Dangerous." And the definitive attitude. "Your tribe must be defeated and destroyed."

Does what I'm talking about and describing sound at all familiar to you? Have you seen such attitudes and behavior in other people? Do you see such attitudes and behavior in yourself?

I was trying to think of an antonym, a word that has the exact opposite meaning of the word "Tribalism." I thought of words like "Universal." "Collective." "Communal." "Mutual." "Joint." "Shared." And I also thought of the word "Christian." Christianity is, in my opinion, totally contrary to tribalism. They're polar opposites, and they stand for two totally different ways of looking at other people and the world.

In sharp contrast to tribalism with all its division and exclusivity, I hold up the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

There’s not a trace of tribalism in those words of Paul. Nada. Nothing. There is only Paul’s call, Paul’s plea, for the church at Ephesus to strive to become a loving, caring community whose uniqueness and differences as individual human beings don’t lead them to divide up into various tribes, but instead utilize their oneness in Christ to surmount those differences, focusing on their commonalities to forge a bond of unity grounded in Christian love.

I believe the first and most important characteristic of a Christian church isn’t its theology, doctrine or style of worship, but its unity—in other words, the way its members work together and support and care for each other. A Christian church is a community about whom outsiders say, “Look at how they love one another.” That’s what was said about the very first churches that came into existence, because it was a characteristic about them that stood out like a sore thumb. “Look at how they love one another. They’re not divided into tribes. They’re united in love.”

Sadly, that period of Christian unity was all too brief.

It’s a real challenge for a community of people, even a church, to attain unity, because let’s face it, there’s something attractive about tribalism and its lure of belonging to a group of homogenous, like-minded people. We tend to enjoy being around others who are similar to us, who think the same way we do and believe the same things we believe and like the same things we like. It makes us feel good. It’s like an affirmation of our value and self-worth. So, if we’re going to stay together, if we’re going to maintain unity with one another, we need something or someone greater than ourselves, to remind us that, even though every human being is unique and has individual ideas and opinions, we all originate from the same cosmic, creative power and share the same divine spark within that makes us who we are and who we’re meant to be.

The trouble with many of our efforts to create unity in the world is that we tend to use sentimentality as the catalyst. I like you because you like me. You like me because I agree with most of your strongly held beliefs and opinions. We like each other because we make each other feel good, and we can support and get our views supported by one another. But that kind of unity is built on a foundation of sand. What we need is a way to be together and

choose to stay with one another even with our differences and disagreements.

We need something greater than ourselves that enables us to accept or overlook any disparities and remain united.

One of the things that can help us do that is called baptism. In baptism, all of our distinctions—male, female, black, white, rich, poor—no longer apply because we’ve been washed with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and cleansed of our divisions and differences. Baptism is the commonality Christians share that’s able to transform them from people who have no earthly reason to live together without cutting each other’s throat into people who’ve heard the same call, answer to the same God, and come away from the same font to follow the same Lord.

Baptism is also God’s way of saying to us that we’re not strangers or adversaries to one another. We aren’t members of one tribe pitted against members of another tribe. Rather, we’re all family—God’s family. We all share the same world and breathe the same air. And whatever challenges and struggles we experience in life and in our mortal existence, we don’t have to go it alone. We can and should help one another because we’re all in this together. And God is right here with us.

I read a story in the newspaper a number of years ago, and I want to share it with you for three reasons: one: I think it illustrates the point I’m trying to make in this sermon that we’re all in this together; two: it’s summer here in Maine; and three: for many people, summer in Maine means lobster!

When lobsterman Charles “Chub” Doughty badly cut his fingers and couldn’t haul his traps, his competitors did what any islander would do: they pitched in and helped a neighbor out of a jam. “Wonderful things happen in this community when something bad happens to an individual,” says Chris McDuffie, president of the Long Island Civic Association. “If there’s an illness in a family, everyone will rally around to help them.”

McDuffie says that kind of caring attitude—a trait that all islanders share—is one of the major differences between life on the Casco Bay islands and in the city of Portland. Doughty, a native of Long Island, says the help he received from his fellow islanders was touching when he nearly cut off his left thumb and index finger while working on his table saw this summer. Another lobsterman, who heard other islanders calling on the radio for the city fire boat to take Doughty to the hospital on the mainland, stopped hauling his traps, came to shore and raced the injured man to Portland.

A plastic surgeon reattached Doughty’s thumb and finger, but ordered him not to haul his traps for three weeks. This was in August, the peak of the lobstering season. Doughty didn’t know what to do. Then he says, “The boys

started calling me and asking me if they could haul for me and give me a hand.”

The island’s other lobstermen took turns hauling Doughty’s 200 traps and delivering him the lobsters to sell. “It was a sacrifice to them to say, ‘Gee, we’ll give Chub a hand and haul ‘em for him.’ I appreciated it. It kind of brings a lump in your throat when you think about it,” he says.

Doughty says the same help-your-neighbor attitude is also extended by year-round islanders to summer people. “Even those, if anything happens, you’re close-knit because it’s such a small island and so you’re always running to help each other,” he says.

For the residents on Long Island, it was their common bond as islanders and, in this case, lobstermen, that united them, washed away any tribal differences they had, and reminded them that they were all in this together. For Christians like us, it’s our baptism and our unity of the Spirit, as the Apostle Paul put it, that reminds us of that.

I’ll conclude my message this morning with one last story.

A man spoke with the Lord and asked about heaven and hell. “I will show you hell,” said the Lord. They went into a room that had a large pot of stew in the middle of it. The smell was delicious, and all around the pot sat people who were famished and desperate. They were all holding spoons with very long handles that reached the pot, but because the handle of the spoon was longer than their arms, it was

“Now I will show you heaven,” said the Lord. They went into another, identical room. There was the same pot of stew, and the people had the same identical very long handled spoons, but they were well nourished and happy.

“I don’t understand,” the man said to the Lord.

“It’s simple,” said the Lord. “You see, here in heaven they have learned to feed each other.”

Now there’s a heavenly concept. In place of selfishness, people learned to feed each other. Rather than disunity and thinking they were in it for themselves, which resulted in no one being fed in hell, there was unity and an understanding that they were all in this together, which resulted in everyone being fed in heaven.

So, instead of tribalism, my friends, may we feast on these words of the Apostle Paul: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Thanks be to God. Amen.