

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who think people can meaningfully be divided into categories, and those who think they can't be. I'm the second kind... mostly. The urge to categorize people seems to be a primal one, and indeed, our hunter-gatherer ancestors needed to be very clear on who was a member of their tribe or clan, and who wasn't. But the urge has outlived its usefulness. Categories trick us into thinking we know more about people than we really do. They trick us into believing that we are better than other people, and not even because of anything we've accomplished, but just by being on one side of an imaginary line. They can also cut us off from life-giving relationships and new understanding and insight, for we can learn more from people who are different from us.

While sports rivalries are great fun, and loyalty to a team can bring a divided city or region together, more often, the categories into which we sort ourselves and others do great harm.

In America, certainly, racial categories have done an appalling amount of damage to lives, families, communities, the nation, and all our souls, and those categories not only have no biological basis, they are also culturally specific — other cultures have divided themselves in other ways, though seldom matching the ferocity and persistence of American racism. Political polarization, too, turns us against each other and, perversely, prevents us even from accomplishing goals that are popular on both sides. And most perversely, religious differences are used as a pretext or an excuse for further divisions.

I say most perversely because while race teaches nothing and parties teach different ideologies, most religions teach the very opposite of division: peace, love, and harmony. Although they present those ideals in very different ways. As far as I know, Christianity is the only religion that includes the idea of incarnation as a person being simultaneously fully divine and fully human, and includes it as a core teaching, where our central figure unifies the profound categories of humanity and divinity, and does so in his very being. So while his actions astonished and shocked the people who witnessed them, we shouldn't really be surprised that he ran roughshod over the categories and barriers that the world maintained.

Some people insist that we are human be-ings, not human do-ings, but Jesus was not content merely to *be* unity, he *did* a great deal to transcend categories and tear down barriers between people. Mark Davis points out that in Jesus's time, Judaism was practiced in two different ways. One was focused, not only mentally but also in terms of where its practitioners lived, on the Temple in Jerusalem. "The holy of holies, at the center of the temple, was where the most highly concentrated deposit of purity was. Radiating out from there, the temple itself was holy, particularly the portion where only undefiled priests could enter, then ... the outer courts ... then the city of Jerusalem itself (the 'holy city'), then the whole region of Judea, emanating outward in decreasing intensity. Galilee, sometimes called 'Galilee of Gentiles' by Judaeans, was certainly

better than far-off and non-Jewish lands like Assyria, but likewise was certainly no Jerusalem. For Mark to say that Jesus was sent to preach in synagogues in Galilee is to write a defiant theology of God's presence and holiness, where the beloved [one] is sent to the hinterlands of purity. Even after the resurrection, the disciples were to join him in Galilee, as he had instructed them."\*

Later on, of course, Jesus would go on to Jerusalem and cross some of those lines, but we are early yet in Mark's Gospel, and the action is in Galilee, too distant from Jerusalem for regular Temple worship to be feasible, so people worshipped God in a decentralized way. At this time, services happened in synagogues, which weren't so much buildings or institutions as village congregations, meeting wherever was feasible. It's easy to imagine a sense of congregationalism, where individuals and their congregations were more or less equal, but if modern experience is any guide, they may have all been doing their own thing, with little coordination. Remarks like "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" suggest that geographical prejudices exerted a certain divisive power, just like we have today. And of course there were many other more serious divisions in the ancient world.

Today's Gospel begins with Jesus crossing two or three lines at once. He was not only healing on the sabbath, but touching a sick person, who was also a woman who was not related to him. That led to other lines being crossed. Clearly, the word got out, for as soon as the sabbath ended, "the whole city was gathered around the door." Now I've read an estimate of the population at 1,500, but still, that's a lot of people to be right outside your house, wanting something from you. Most people would say that crosses a line. Nevertheless, Jesus healed them, which erased the barriers that prevent the demonized, sick, and unclean from participating in society and worship. Then, understandably needing a break, Jesus crossed over from the city to the wilderness to pray alone.

Either he didn't tell the disciples or they didn't listen, for they went to find him, as if he had forgotten that he was in demand. Perhaps he had taught them too well; they just couldn't respect the boundary Jesus was trying to keep between private and public, prayer and action, perhaps sanity and madness. Indeed, not all distinctions are bad; the Bible itself begins with God creating distinctions between day and night, earth and sky, land and water, and ultimately, work and sabbath. But those distinctions create a shared space for life, and life itself; human defiance of God's peaceful, unified order creates toxic divisions. And so Jesus had his work cut out for him but did not shy away from the task of proclaiming a message of profound hope, that God would soon begin the ultimate reconciliation between God and humanity, a transcendent new reality that healings and exorcisms could only hint at, and invited people to their own new reality with God through repentance into radical new life. So Jesus and his disciples went with urgency on their mission of proclaiming the Good News from village to village, geographical boundaries serving as Jesus's checklist.

Ultimately this journey would bring them to Jerusalem, where Jesus didn't merely cross the line between life and death, but destroyed the barrier between sinful humanity and eternal life through his resurrection. And it's not for nothing that St. Mark says that was when the veil in the Temple, which separated the divine Presence from humanity, was torn in two, *from top to bottom* — that is, by God's initiative. It was a tall curtain. And a powerful symbol of a division that God chose to abolish.

But the point is, to follow Jesus is to join in his unifying mission, crossing lines in order to tear down barriers. The effect can be contagious, as those in the Civil Rights Movement discovered their symbolic and local actions won them new allies, momentum, and national victories. Things like this happen because God's will and our destiny is reconciliation of all humanity to itself and to God. This will happen in God's good time, but all of us are better off if we participate in God's work, the life, of unity, hastening the kingdom's arrival, like the disciples did. So hug a Gator today, if you can find one, but tomorrow, find someone who is different from you in a more meaningful way and show them the love that God has for one and all.

\*<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/02/the-holy-one-in-unholy-places.html>