

“Leaving the World of They”**Isaiah 2:2-4****Ephesians 4: 1-6****John 17: 15-23**

Intro.

It took WW2 to keep my family from being Lutheran.

My parents were married in a Lutheran church outside Baltimore city: Mom, Jewish-Baptist (imagine all the great holiday choices); and Dad a divorced Catholic, (imagine all the days threaded with some pain , some guilt) ... and would have been Lutheran the rest of their lives, but the war came on & a new military base was being built in southern Maryland offering good jobs--and so they went – got there and no Lutheran church yet, but Methodists had a going concern right outside the gates, so Methodist it was and would always be from then on.

Now, my parents were the kind of people that bring clergy, who have any sense at all, to their knees in thanksgiving. Saw the most important part of their job as loving, encouraging and supporting their pastor.

Pretty convinced their pastor could do no wrong, so if something was askew, there surely was a neurotic member, or more often a whole group of petty parishioners behind some smiling mischief.

Church became my second home. Took our faith seriously. At Sunday dinner the sermon was reviewed. We children were asked age-appropriate questions, not just about content, but what we thought. I grow up assuming this was normal! At our table it wasn't just pass the peas!

With this in mind, I want to tell you about my first dark and delicious opportunity to go and live in “the world of they” ...introduce the person I assumed I could, in all good conscience, hate. My Uncle Irvin. Married to Aunt Esther, Mom's side. Lived in Baltimore, but visited us “country folk” frequently.

Uncle Ervin was a man who loved his job, but shouldn't. His foreclosed on poor people who couldn't pay their rent, and repossessed cars. Perfectly suited, it seemed.

Brought us kids, especially us boys, to fury on occasion, with his cruel teasing. Egotistical, crude and unkind. Made fun of most everything we valued. Could find the soft spots in a boy's heart and press down hard.

For instance, we were Baltimore Colts and Oriole fans ... so he, out of spite, was all Jets and Yankees. Can you imagine? Johnny Unitas, quarterback of the Colts and Brooks Robinson, All-Star third basemen of the Orioles, holy men to us boys.

I believed with all my heart when Jesus returned these two men would be chosen for the new team, first string. And it did not take much imagination to think, in years to come, a Gospel of Brooks would be added to the cannon, or The Epistles of Unitas.

And here was our uncle sitting in our living room, eating our food, and singing out of the Mickey Mantel, Joe Namath hymnal. ... His presence to me was like a constant pinch.

So, one Sunday night, after another exasperating weekend visit, I said to my Mom. "I hate uncle Irvin. Why can't Dad tell him to not come again. Stay home."

That made her cry. Sat me down Then said, We can't ask Uncle Irvin to stay home because this is his 2nd home. Son, he had a very difficult childhood. So he spends most of his time acting in a way to keep people distant because he is sure family will just hurt him, disappoint him, betray him, abandon him, like his Mom and Dad did."

"He treat Aunt Esther like he does us?"

"Some of the time, yes. So, Son if we don't love him, who will? See he's God's and he's ours even when he doesn't act like it."

"Do I have to like him?"

"His bad behavior, no. But understanding can be the beginning of caring. In a way he's a gift to us. We get to really practice being Christians."

“Oh, for goodness sake, Mom!”
“Exactly!” she said.

I think of my uncle often when I’m about to get trapped in the world of they. It’s so hard no to --us vs. them...such a hostile, threatening, adversarial world. Commentator Lauren Oyler says, “Wading into contemporary discourse today, you need a hazmet suit.”

World of they....my formal education in it, began with John Kennedy. “What have they done to my husband,” Jackie asked pleadingly. A few years later, a few more layers of “the world of they” were laid upon my heart and mind: horrible ‘68, losing Martin in April and Robert in June.

So human to ask: “What have they done? How could they do this?” “How can they call themselves a part of humanity and think and act like this? Why do they hate us so much?

Twin Towers, seem to be still collapsing & still incinerating a lot of living people’s souls. Add Sandy Hook & Charlottesville, & Mother Emmanuel & The Pulse and Parkland, family separation policies, and pipe bombs...add just yesterday, O Lord my God! Tree of Life synagogue. To be reconciled?

The Southern Poverty Law Center tells us since the year 2014, the number of hate groups in this country has grown by 20%.

Our national discourse seems stripped of poetry, hope, no shining cities on hills: no norms, decency.... all grievance and revenge all the way down. All this adds fuel to the world of “they.”

But Jesus knows that world...will not participate on its terms. And he prays to God in John’s gospel that we won’t either... “They do not belong to that world, just as I don’t- I’m not asking you to take them out of the “they” world, no, no, I need them in, just save them from the evil of it...make them one with me, give them Father,...my suffering, compassionate heart and my mind brimming over with lavish hospitality and generosity.

Did you know that Jesus preached an ordination sermon? He did and you'll find it in Matthew 10. Was about to send out his disciples; gathered those first men and women around him; gave them a sermon full of "theys".

"Beware of them, for **they** will deliver you up to councils...**they** will flog you in their synagogues....drag you before governors and kings for my sake. They will haul you up in court. They will beat you, hate you, throw you in prison, call you names...families will be destroyed. That is what they are going to do. Sound familiar?

Then Jesus said, "Do not be concerned about the world of they. It is not your world and it is not to be your fear."

"So have no fear of them, are not two sparrows sold for a penny. Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father."

Matthew 10: 26, 29

"And even the hairs on your head are all counted.

So do not be afraid. You are of more value than the sparrows." Matt. 10: 30

God knows your name.

Almighty God chooses to fall in company with sparrows, take on the sorrow of the most insignificant creatures in the world's eyes....not separation between a sparrows death, and God's heartbreak over it! God numbers the hairs of your heads.

Creator God is not a distant God – around, beneath, beside in a very personal way.

The world we are invited to live in, the world in which we are intimately known,
is not the "they world".

God in Christ Jesus has vowed God's self to this creature filled place and we are at the top of the love chain.

One of my peaching mentors, Fred Craddock coined this phrase. I heard him talk about it often. **"The world of 'they' is not the Christian world." Fred Craddock**

We are in a dangerous season for Christians...political season. Dangerous not because we are asked to pray and listen and choose...no. Not dangerous because we are called to vote our values, and seek to persuade others to our choices...no, no.

The great danger is that through it all we might leave the Christian world of "we" for the dark world of "they." The danger is we begin to believe in red state or blue state when for us there is only one state, worth our while, and that is the state of grace....

On this reformation/reconciliation Sunday we celebrate there can be no space between Lutherans and Methodist about "The Way" ...we can't tolerate any "they" between us and High Episcopalians, on this, or rinsed in the blood of the Lamb Baptists...all shoulder to shoulder, or should be, Mercy God, one in Christ with raised hands, praise-chorus evangelicals, bead worrying Catholics, or anti-technology Mennonites...nothing even between other major religious traditions who share the Way's values without pledging their hearts to our core story... and yes, our latte drinking, spiritual but not religious Seattleites....all under the same roof, before the same holy fire, everyone who carries within them this vision:

of putting more leaves in the table and removing locks from the doors.

All a part of Jesus's loving conspiracy...As the founder of my path John Wesley said, "If your heart is like my heart, give me your hand."

Paul begs this morning in his letter: lead a life worthy of your calling--humility, gentleness, patience, bearing one another up in love...one God and Father of us all, who is above through and in all...not some ALL -Here is not the creed of some cult, but rather a poetic, DNA test result for all creation---declaring all of us cherished kin.

Vote your values and not live them....?

Danger is that we see people as "they" instead of kin and kindred....danger is when we forget we are called **of all people**, to be the people of the "great welcoming table," the people of the open heart and door...the people called to blessing.

To my mind, when Jesus said go into all the world and baptize, he did not mean go out with a franchised kind of water and secret word...when Jesus sent them out to baptize...wasn't some hidden, private spring and a new booklet of beliefs...no he sent them out to offer an anointing introduction to the one who falls with the sparrows, and is dying to love each of them with unconditional, joyous love...bring them home.

When Jesus prays that we all may be one....it is a terribly wonderful thing. Give to them Father, a part of my heart, my mind...give them my sight, my healing touch....my love willingly, glad to suffer....

Surely you know that the furnace at the heart of Christian love, is the willingness to suffer. You know this...you practice it close...suffer for my son Andy, of course, Sierra, of course, my Alice, whatever to takes...my grand kids, you kidding...I would stand in front of a train for them without hesitation. ..and the rest of human crowd...these who Jesus calls kin? Well, that's hard....yes,

You know who is the one, faithful preacher-prophet is right now. Michele Obama. "Go high she says, still."

You see, possibly the greatest heaven destroying lie, is that violence can be redemptive. Jesus rejected this at every turn...think I don't have a legend of angels...but only suffering love will get me off this cross....only suffering love can preform the miracle of changing swords into plowshares....

How to live in unity? Well, on our knees

For our country, our world...letting our hearts break ...country and world..grieving the dark...but also standing as light and salt and bread...saying no....a thundering NO, a clear, deep, gospel fed, strong NO, **but without withdrawing compassion**....which is the hardest and holiest of work...but the only way to bring life out of death.

Final, favorite grace story....

About 20 years ago now...UM's PNW asked retired Bishop Tuel, to chair a gathering help us pray and talk through painful issues dividing us at the time...as we came back from a break...story of Benedictine Abbot. ...

Many of you know that the Benedictines live by a rule of life a core value is to welcome everyone who presents themselves at their door as Christ. So he got to know an abbot and asked him if this was true. Do they really take everyone who comes to them? The Abbot paused for a moment, searching for just the right words to honor the reality of their life of hospitality and finally said: "Yes, we welcome all, but sometimes we look out at who is at the door and say to ourselves, Oh, Jesus not you again!"

"On you and us and we and me," Jesus says, "I will build my church." with people willing to suffer for love.

If you are in the "world of they", get out. You don't belong there.

My mother, who has been gone two decades now, still stirs God's holiness into my imagination. I am confident of what she'd say about today...so will give her the last word:

So, Mom, have you been keeping up? Do you really know what we've been through the last two years?

Oh yes, we watch all the networks? Very good reception, you know.

All? You watch all?

They're all our children, Son.

Right. Fine. Okay, so what do you think.

I think what an exciting time to be alive, what a perfect time we live in, to practice being a Christian!

Oh for goodness sake, Mom!

Exactly! Son. For goodness sake. Exactly!