

Which Side Are You On?

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There are many times... when Christians may disagree... But some issues are so fateful that no disagreement or compromise is possible. The signatories of the Barmen Declaration clearly felt they were living in a time when no one and no church could any longer says “we affirm both Christ and Hitler.”
—Robert McAfee Brown

Ancient Witness: Matthew 25:31-36, 41-45

We live in a dangerous time that has often been described by pundits as “polarized.” Our problems, some people say, stem from too much partisanship. And the solution, they say, is to compromise, to find some middle ground.

There is, no doubt, some truth to this. We are deeply divided in this nation. There is too much tribalism, too much “us vs. them” thinking.

However, this does not tell the full story. Because there are times when we must choose which side we are on. There are times when we must choose sides. There are times when there is no middle ground and compromise is not the answer. There are times when we are actually called to be opposed to someone or something.

The Greek word for such a time is *kairos*. It is a time when saying “yes” to the God of compassion and justice requires that we say “no” to powers and principalities that dominate and oppress our sisters and brothers, who are all precious children of God, created in the divine image. *Kairos* is a moment of truth, a time of reckoning, to stand up and be counted, to let our “yes” be yes, and our “no” be no.

It seems to me that we are living at such a time in this nation. We must challenge the false equivalencies that blur the distinction between right and wrong, between truth and lies. We must challenge a relativism that ignores injustice. Phrases such as “fine people on both sides” and “all lives matter” are meant to obscure the vital truth of our moment. They attempt to cover up the ugly reality of white supremacy, bigotry and racism. On this issue, we cannot stand by idly, committing the sin of omission allowing the sins of commission of others. On this issue, we must choose which side we are on. As Edmund Burke famously said, “The only necessary thing for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

We heard from certain leaders and members of congress attempt to minimize the riot and siege of the Capitol Building four years ago, when Senators and Representatives came perilously close to violent harm. But certain members claimed that there was no difference between that violent mob and the Black Lives Matter protesters earlier that year.

But this is a false equivalency meant to confuse and deflect. The Black Lives Matter protests were overwhelmingly non-violent and peaceful. Of the tens of millions who participated in these protests across the nation, including some of us here, only a tiny number of people destroyed property. And it has been documented that some of this was in fact instigated by right wing groups who had infiltrated the protests to discredit them. And we must remember that some of the property damage was the result of the anger and frustration about unprovoked police brutality toward peaceful protesters. There was video after video of police in body armor knocking down and killing an elderly man who posed no threat, of macing children and grandmothers, indiscriminately beating protesters with batons, shooting them with rubber bullets, causing severe injury and even death. We cannot forget the violent police repression of what started out as peaceful protests.

We should also remember that the BLM protests began after an unarmed Black man was publicly killed by police in Minneapolis, one in a very long line of killings at the hands of police through the years. Those protesters were calling for an end to police violence against Black people. They were calling for justice and fairness.

The mob on January 6, however, was motivated by a Big Lie that the election was stolen and fraudulent. And it was an attempt to circumvent a free and fair democratic election.

This is not a case of both sides being equally wrong. No, one side advocated for justice and fairness, and the other advocated for injustice and unfairness. Which side are you on? These are times when we must find the courage to choose.

The holocaust survivor and writer, Elie Wiesel, said,

We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

From a biblical and spiritual point of view, God takes sides. God is on the side of fairness and justice, of compassion and equality. God sides with the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, the dispossessed and the powerless.

In our passage from the gospel of Matthew this morning, Jesus is shown saying that there are two sides—the sheep and the goats, the righteous and the unrighteous. Which side are you on? You must choose, he said. The side of Jesus, the side of God, was the side of the least of those in our society—the hungry, the poor, the imprisoned—

the side of the workers and unions struggling for fair wages and working conditions,
the side of slaves yearning for freedom,
the side of immigrants seeking safety and livelihoods,
the side of African Americans calling for equality and an end to racist policies and practices,
the side of indigenous people pushed off their land,
the side of the earth and future generations besieged by global warming,
the side of democracy where every vote is counted,

of those who have to stand in line for hours because polling places are shut down,
those who have been wrongly purged from the rolls,
those in districts that are gerrymandered, and
those who don't have lobbyists to influence law makers.
the side opposing an oligarchy that is taking over, controlling policy and passing laws to enrich themselves leading to an obscene concentration of wealth, a vanishing middle class and a growing chasm between the haves and have-nots.

Which side are you on?

In Germany 90 years ago, Hitler was consolidating unlimited power and most of the country had capitulated—businesses, universities and churches—buying into the Nazi vision. But a minority of Christians resisted, calling themselves the Confessing Church. Some of them signed a declaration in the city of Barmen, saying Yes to God and No to the Nazis. They chose sides. We'll never know what would have happened if they started organizing earlier.

Theologian Robert McAfee Brown refers to this as a *status confessionis*, a confessional situation, one of the times in history when people of faith have to choose which side they are on, when saying Yes to God means saying No. No to slavery, no to apartheid, no to genocide, no to greed and oppression, no to fascism.

We recall the prophet, Joshua, the successor to Moses, challenged the leaders and the people of Israel, saying, "Today you must choose whom you will serve." (24:15) It seems to me that we are finding ourselves in such a time.

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in amazing "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," saying

But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."

So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime--the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

Over a half century later, we now find ourselves in need of not a false unity with no accountability, of not a neutral middle ground and compromise between truth and lies. No, we find ourselves in need of extremists for the nonviolent path of love and justice.

Which side are you on?