

*John Docherty, August 20, 2017*

## **“Identity”**

***Disclaimer : I don't usually begin my meditations with a disclaimer, but I think I need to alert people to the fact that some of the language I'll be using will likely be offensive to some.***

Mary-Lou and I were thankfully on vacation for much of the last few weeks. Disconnected from the goings-on of the world; unaware of the news; blissfully ignorant of the day-to-day expressions of ignorance and intolerance that seem to be more and more common in our world.

Our return to Montreal a week ago on Friday night, however, marked the end of our idyll.

The events in Charlottesville were bad enough. The response of the president of the United States was less than inspiring. The only redeeming elements of the week, from my own perspective, were the direct and forceful responses of so many others to the president's remarks, and his lacklustre, almost begrudging acknowledgment of the blight of white supremacy and neo-nazi movements.

The only moment of positive inspiration, again, from my perspective, were the words of the mother of Heather Heyer who was killed on Saturday. At her daughter's funeral on Wednesday, she said, among other things : “... I would rather have my child, but by golly, if we've got to give her up we're going to make it count ...”, this, within the context of encouraging people to look around them and find ways to make the world better in their circles of influence.

And then, on Friday of this week, we had the carnage in Spain, with the murder of 13 people, and multiple other injured victims, as well as stabbings in Finland and Russia.

It's been a disheartening week; a week of head-spinning images and uncomfortable doses of reality. The images we've all seen on TV over the last little while have challenged my sense of how far we've progressed in the last few generations.

In some ways, I feel like I grew up in a bit of a secure bubble, in a time when it felt like peaceful co-existence was more or less the norm, at least where I was living. I was born in 1955 when the first and second world wars were already behind us. Before we emigrated from Scotland I was somewhat aware of the effects of the second world war – across the street from our tenement was an open field that had once been the location of another tenement building that was bombed during the war. Some of our family was

killed in that bombing, and my aunts and uncles still talk about the loss. I remember finding a gas mask while playing in some of the rubble when I was about 6. But, for a 6 year-old, this was a relic of ancient history. It wasn't part of my present reality.

As I grew up here in Canada, I was sort of aware of various conflicts around the world, but they always seemed remote, localized, limited : the Korean war was already finished before I was born; Vietnam was in full swing, but it affected people in the US, not here, as far as I could tell. I saw news reports about the Biafran war, and its effects on Nigerians – but that was away over in Africa. So was the problem of apartheid in South Africa, and the colonial system of Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe.

There were assassinations in the US : John Kennedy and his brother Robert; Martin Luther King; Malcolm X; but the US was also putting people on the moon – how cool is that?! I was much more personally affected by moon landings than I was ever affected by the civil rights movement.

Besides, here in Canada we didn't have a problem of race or bigotry. For one thing, we had hardly any negroes. Our school *did* have one negro teacher when I was in grade 8, and my parents' circle of friends included a couple from Trinidad and Guyana, but I don't remember having any of my own friends or acquaintances who weren't white – though there were some wops and polacks. I didn't have any friends who were oriental either, though we did have a chinese laundry in our neighbourhood. I remember thinking that was pretty exotic – after all, they were chinks, not japs.

I was in high school before I learned anything about homos and fags, and, as far as I knew, the indians had all died out long before my family came to Canada, though I had this impression that there might still be a few eskimos around. Mind you, I *do* remember playing cowboys and indians, but I don't remember ever being an “indian” - I was always one of the good guys.

As far as handicapped people go, I don't remember ever actually meeting any retards (your friends don't really count - that's just innocent fun), though I knew about the existence of people who were mongoloid and truly retarded. I *did* know someone who was blind and some people who were deaf and dumb, but it's not like they were crippled invalids or anything.

So, as I say, I feel like I grew up in a bit of a bubble. I was surrounded by people who were pretty much like me. My sense of identity was reasonably strong. I had my insecurities, sure, but prejudice, bigotry and ignorance were someone else's problem. *My* insecurities were more related to being short, red-haired and freckled. Besides, I was a smart kid. My first year of school in Canada, in grade two, I came in top of the class and was given a book as an award : “Augustus helps the navy”. I loved that book and I

still have it. It's the story of a young boy in Maine (originally from Kentucky) who helps the navy intercept an enemy submarine in World War II – a kraut submarine, of course – the japs were in the Pacific.

Have I pushed enough buttons? Have I missed any? Japs, chinks, krauts, retards, wops, polacks, homos, fags, negroes ... we never used the other 'N' word, but one of my friends thought it was pretty funny to refer to people of colour as 'mars bars' – chocolate on the outside, caramel on the inside.

I grew up with all of these terms as part of our everyday speech. As kids, I don't remember them being used in a particularly mean-spirited way – we didn't have enough contact with, or know enough about, any of these groups to have anything like a fully-formed opinion about them one way or the other. Though they're wildly insensitive and derogatory, they were just expressions of others' identity as opposed to our own sense of identity.

But, of course, they're obviously much more than just an innocent, playful use of language. They're an expression of difference in identity, and, more specifically, an expression of superiority of identity.

A strong sense of identity.

A sense of who you are.

That's not such a bad thing, surely. We all need a healthy self-image, and one that is based on our legitimate and necessary appreciation of our qualities, strengths and values.

But, as I think we've all seen over the last little while, and as I've tried to demonstrate in my uncomfortable introduction to this meditation, it doesn't necessarily take much to slip from a perfectly healthy sense of self-worth to a position that finds that worth in the diminishing of others who are unlike us.

And, as I think we've also seen lately, that shift can be even more pronounced when we feel somehow threatened by those who are unlike us.

So how are we to approach this idea of identity, especially as it pertains to us as Christians?

How are we supposed to self-identify, and how is that sense of who we are to affect the way we relate to others who self-identify differently?

Well, as you might have guessed, I tried to take a bit of a run at answering that question

with the children's story.

We have any number of ways of choosing to self-identify.

Into our sense of self, we can incorporate our skin colour, our gender, our age, our marital status, our sexual orientation, our profession, our nationality, our political leanings, our family relationships, our church or religious affiliation, our mother tongue, our ethnic background, our sports preferences, our taste in films, our hair colour, our eye colour ... I could go on, but with just that list of identity markers, I would describe myself as :

... a left-leaning, 62 year-old, white, blue-eyed, white-haired, straight, married father of three and grandfather of two, comedy-loving, English-speaking Scot holding Canadian citizenship, with no particular interest in professional sports, who is the pastor of a Mennonite church and who coordinates a network of therapists working with survivors of organized violence.

I also love mint chocolate chip ice cream, but that's a whole other sermon.

Those descriptors are all part of who I am, and I suppose I could choose to highlight any one of those at different times to define myself in contrast to someone else. They've also morphed over time as I've aged, as my hair colour has become more blond, as my working life has taken different turns, as my family has evolved.

But let's take as our starting point that as followers of Christ, we are first and foremost to identify as just that : followers of Christ.

But what does that mean?

What does being a follower of Christ mean in terms of identity and how we're expected to behave towards each other?

Well, Paul answers it in part in the passage we read from Ephesians : he says "... I therefore ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace ..."

Humility, gentleness, patience, trying hard to maintain a spirit of unity.

Well, that's a good start, but it addresses our relationship to those who also self-identify as followers of Christ. How are we to relate to those who make no such claim?

For that question, I think we're best served by going directly to Jesus himself, and I'll make this brief. I think Jesus makes it very clear that we have only one over-riding commandment that we are expected to follow.

When asked what is the most important way for Jews to behave, he doesn't dance around and give a complicated, intricate analysis of the Law and the Prophets. He doesn't pick one of any number of rules and regulations observed by the Jews of the day. Neither does he say “they're all important – you've got to follow everything to the letter!” He keeps it simple. He doesn't make it easy, but he keeps it simple, saying “Love God with everything you have, and love your neighbour as much as you love yourself.”

When then pressed to define who fits the description of “neighbour” he tells the story of the Good Samaritan; a story about a man who is clearly not “one of us”. In chapter 4 of the Gospel of John he meets the woman at the well in Samaria and tells her “... believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth ...”

Love your neighbour.

Love your enemy.

Do good to those who hate you.

When I was a kid I don't think I ever consciously felt any superiority towards anybody. I was a Boy Scout, trying to do my good deed every day. If asked what I thought about people who were different from me, I think I probably would simply have said, “well, they're different – that's all.”

And yet, this good kid didn't mind joking about people of colour, Italians, Poles, etc. But I was fortunate enough to have been raised in a home where that kind of language wasn't tolerated : I might get away with it in the schoolyard among friends from whom I'd picked it up, but I would never have gotten away with it at home. I *do* wonder how many of my schoolyard friends did get away with it at home, or even picked up the language at home.

I've worked hard as an adult to try to correct some of that ignorance and unconscious bigotry that I embodied as a child. I've struggled as a Christian to let God show me how to behave with respect and integrity towards everyone, and I've struggled to find the wisdom and humility to know when I've fallen short.

When Luke Martin spoke some weeks ago, he quoted his father as saying that every pastor tends to preach the same message over and over again, regardless of what scripture he or she is speaking from.

I think that is probably true in my case, and the message is that it matters how we treat each other – regardless of who the “other” is.