

Christian Identity versus Identity Politics

Hebrews 2:11-13

February 18, 2018 Roger Barkley

The past couple of years, you haven't been able to turn on the TV or open your news feed without hearing furious pundits shouting at each other.

You open Facebook to find friends you thought you knew airing attitudes you never imagined their having.

Our nation is fractured into groups that demonize each other, and that polarization has been strategically enflamed by some politicians so they can build a loyal base.

Investigations revealed that Russian efforts to disrupt our elections included planting false news stories whose only purpose was to further antagonize and polarize us – and, we are told that those efforts continue for the 2018 elections.

Often a single word or phrase can label what side of the divide you are perceived to belong to, and with that, what kind of person you are and motives you have.

So, it is particularly important right now to remember who we really are ... what our Christians identity means in the midst of this turmoil.

Being a follower of Jesus trumps all the other labels society tries to pin on you.

You can be a Republican or Democrat, a hunter or an urban dweller and live as a Christian committed to peace and reconciliation in your world.

This morning I'm going to tell you about a woman who nearly lost herself after she innocently tumbled into our cultural divide.

About ten years ago, eighteen-year-old Laci Green launched a YouTube series she calls *Braless*.

Laci had been raised in the Mormon church, which she found had to be stifling and repressive – so when she broke free she was passionate to identify herself as a feminist and to openly discuss sexuality topics.

Her YouTube series quickly gained over a million followers, and *Time* magazine named her as one of the thirty most influential people on the Internet.

She spoke frankly about sex – nothing titillating or pornographic – just frank answers to the kinds of questions young people have.

Once she used the word “feminist” in a video, she instantly triggered an avalanche of anti-feminist trolls who filled her e-mail and Twitter feed with vile comments, and spawned dozens of YouTube episodes ranting against her.

She said that she’d expected some blowback, but nothing like the hatred and threats directed at her.

The thing is, if you aspire to be an anti-feminist, then you have to find a feminist to attack ... and all of a sudden, Laci was their target.

Some YouTube commentaries against her got a million hits, and they directed viewers to Laci’s Twitter account.

One was Chris Ray Gun, a popular and charismatic anti-feminist YouTuber.

He even wrote a put-down song specifically for Laci he calls, “The Patriarchy is Raging.”

Such is the world we live in.

But, despite the hostility from the right, she was a celebrity among young people, and was greeted with enthusiastic cheers whenever she spoke at colleges around the country.

Except for one day when she walked to the campus stage to the sound of boos.

She was dumbfounded, but proceeded with her talk in front of an inexplicably hostile audience.

Before I continue, let me tell you about one phenomenon that is driving our cultural polarization: Identity politics.

Identity politics links a political position to a person’s cultural identity.

Identity politics assigns us a cultural tribe, and then makes all sorts of assumptions about our other beliefs and our morality and motives.

Just say that you are “pro-life”, and the “pro-choice” tribe will reflexively dismiss you as a conservative, evangelical, anti-science, and anti-gun control.

They will be almost unable to listen to the nuances of your argument ... they will label you as “one of those”, the “other”.

And, of course, it works both ways.

Just say that you're a member of the ACLU, and politically conservative people may label you as a coastal elitist who looks down on working class people and who is plotting to confiscate their guns.

As the world has become more diverse and in flux, we have become more tribal because our tribal instinct leads us to seek a safe place to belong.

Tribalism is in our DNA, although until very recently a tribe was something we were born into and lived with all our life.

Now, tribes spring up out of nowhere and are defined by our beliefs, our music, or how we dress.

Since it is natural to defend our tribe and to demonize the other tribes, identity politics is fueling the polarization and discord in our country.

So, what had Laci done to raise the ire of her own tribe of progressives?

Well, a few years earlier she had used a term for transvestites that had started to be considered insulting – she just hadn't gotten the memo.

And with that one word, all that she had done in the past was wiped away by the fury of one group of people who felt insulted and therefore victimized by her.

You see, in the world of identity politics, the group feeling victimized is given *carte blanche* to define what is offensive, and no one can counter their claim because they respond by saying you can't understand their pain because you haven't shared their experience.

So, in the world of culture wars, saying your tribe has been victimized is strangely empowering.

This has naturally led people to look for where they have been victimized, which is why we now see traditionally dominant groups in society declaring that they, too, are victims.

For example, conservative evangelicals see themselves as under attack by the secular culture, and white men see themselves as victims of affirmative action.

Everyone is a victim, so everyone gets to feel self-righteous and to lash out – unchallenged – at everyone else.

And, as we know, their feelings are reinforced by the social media echo chamber.

So, using just that one-word branded Laci as one of the “other” tribe – and for months her inbox overflowed with hate-filled messages from anti-feminists as well as pro-feminists.

It actually got frightening when people began taking pictures of her house and of her in public and posting them along with threats of violence.

One blogger listed 93 accusations of how she had been offensive to feminists, trans-people, millennials, people with mental illness, and vegans of color.

It was crazy.

Before she finally cancelled all of her college engagements, her talks were picketed by anti-feminists, and booed by pro-feminists.

Here’s the deal:

These days, political opinions are not just political opinions.

Our politics and words associated with politics have become totems for what tribe we identify with, and the red badges of courage we wear for how we think our people have been victimized.

But, before all this turmoil, we already had a tribe we committed to: the Jesus tribe.

If you are part of the Jesus tribe, then you’ve committed to something bigger than any label assigned you by identity politics.

If you are a professed follower of Jesus, then you’ve committed to being a peacemaker and a minister of reconciliation.

That’s who you are.

You may not agree with everyone on every issue in your Jesus tribe, but you have committed to love like Jesus loves.

So, here are three things – each of them “easier said than done” – to build bridges to others as Jesus taught, rather than walls around our hearts like identity politics does.

First, see everyone’s **Dignity** – even when it takes some effort.

God created *every* person with dignity.

Psalm 8:5 *God made people just a little lower than the heavenly beings, and he crowned us with glory and honor.*

You know that NRA guy with the rifle mounted across the rear window of his Dodge Ram?

The same God who created you, crowned him with glory and honor.

You know that immigrant who slipped under the fence to work as fry cook at Burger King?

The same God who created you, crowned her with glory and honor.

You know that snobbish humanities professor with his tweed jacket?

The same God who created you, crowned him with glory and honor.

You can’t give anyone dignity.

But you can discipline yourself to recognize and respect the God-given dignity in each person.

There is a Buddhist practice of greeting people with the word “namaste”, which roughly translated means, “the divinity in me, greets the divinity in you.”

It’s a practice to put ourselves in a higher place than the judgmental, defensive state we may habitually live in – “the divinity in me” – and then recognize that every person we meet carries the spark of God ... they all were created in the image and likeness of God.

Even people wanting to defund Planned Parenthood; even people advocating for free abortions.

The flip side of the coin is that the first step people take before committing violence is to objectify their opponents.

When we label groups as “the Jews”, or “the illegals” we no longer see them as people loved by God, people with the same dreams, needs and hurts as ourselves.

First, deny their dignity, then see them as less human than ourselves, then we suspect their motives – and from there it is a small step to demonize and even destroy them.

Second, celebrate **Diversity**.

I sometimes walk our dogs around Lake Balboa.

The water lapping the shore, trees bursting into bloom, the gentle breeze ... it is a refreshing time for all of us.

It seems that immigrants congregate in parks, and with just a single lap around the lake, you may overhear a half-dozen languages – Eastern European, Asian, Latin American and Indian.

I sometimes get chatting with people when they admire the dogs – which is a natural thing for such cuties as these - and when I comment about all the different ethnicities I often get a knowing head nod and raised eyebrow as if to say “those aliens” are taking over the park.

But if you belong to the Jesus tribe, then you’ve got to celebrate the diversity around you.

Galatians 3:28 In Christ’s family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ.

And by the way, God doesn’t want you to be color blind; God wants us to be color-blessed.

God gave you sight to see many colors, all the shades of black, pink, brown and yellow that God created.

And each of those people has different experiences of society, and different cultures.

We aren't asking everyone to become like white mid-westerners so we can pretend that there are no differences.

We are called to celebrate diversity, not just tolerate it, because God loves diversity.

And if you have a hard time with diversity now, just wait until you get to Heaven!

Revelation 7:9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb....

So, if you've got a problem with people who are different from you, you've got a problem with God.

You are not one-in-million, you are one-in-7.6-billion because God never created anyone like you before.

So, no matter who you are – your skin color, your weight, your sexual orientation, your height, your interests, your talents – God created you that way.

God loves diversity.

And third, be and agent of **Reconciliation**

Just like teachers give an overview of the semester's curriculum when class begins, Jesus laid out his essential message when, early in his ministry, he gathered people on a hillside just north of the Galilean Sea.

Mathew 5:9 You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

I don't know how to reconcile with everyone, but I do know how to be civil, how to ask questions, and how to listen.

I have a long-time, dear friend who a couple of days after the Parkland shootings was posting slogans from the NRA.

“The problem isn’t guns, it is a God-less society.”

“The deaths wouldn’t have happened if teachers carried guns.”

Now, I don’t agree with her perspective at all.

But, because I’ve had relationship with her for many years, I know that she is a kind, generous and loving person.

I trust her as a person of integrity.

That comes from letting go of the easy knee-jerk reactions of identity politics.

Laci had many anti-feminists attacking her, especially after she lost her temper and Tweeted an inflammatory message the night Donald Trump was elected.

Now she was fair game, and everything escalated.

She said that she was really bothered by the gleeful willingness people on both sides have to hurt one another.

So, Laci decided that something had to change.

One of her critics was Blaire White, and after a lot of consideration she decided to follow her on Twitter.

Instantly Blaire tweeted,

“Laci Green just followed me. Was that an accident, girl? lol.”

Laci replied, "Ha ha, nope. Been watching your vids and appreciate your perspective. Sometimes, I agree. Sometimes, I'm confused. Want to chat?" Nerd face emoji.

“Yes, honey. Let's talk.”

Which they did – publicly on Twitter.

People were confused.

They warned Blaire that this was some kind of trap.

Some were angered.

Now, they're not going for Chipotle any time soon, but they talked, clarified, agreed to disagree.

Heartened by this meager success, Laci spoke to other anti-feminists and even found that with a few of them, if they just re-languaged their issues that they could find some common ground.

Yes, a left-wing feminist found common ground with right-wing anti-feminists.

We don't have to see eye-to-eye in order to walk hand-in-hand.

We don't have to hurt, threaten and retaliate just because we see politics and culture differently.

Oh, one more thing.

Remember Chris Ray Gun, the YouTube anti-feminist?

He's the one who wrote the antagonistic song about Laci.

Well, he and Laci are now dating.

They still argue politics, but she says he is smart, charming and a lot of fun to be with ... and together they've grown and matured their understanding of this crazy world.

There are 280-million Christians in the United States – that's quite an army.

Imagine if this army of Christians devoted itself to the work of reconciliation that Jesus commissioned us to do.

Even if you only do this in your little corner of the world, then you are being a faithful Christian, because your purpose in life is to learn to love God and love your neighbors.

That's not idealism ... that is the direct command from Jesus,

Matthew 22:37-39 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

If we don't attempt that, then we've missed our purpose on this planet.

We can be agents of reconciliation with people who are completely different from us when we *listen* to them, *look* them in the eye, *learn* from them, and *laugh* with them.

It's a little like living in the Kingdom of God.