

“No Distinction”  
Acts 11:1-18  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

May 19, 2019  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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A little over three years ago, I was coaching a rec league basketball team full of kindergarteners.

It was our younger son’s team,  
and I was enjoying the team, enjoying the season.

I considered it a big success when all five players from our team were able to run the right direction down the court at the same time and keep their jerseys on...

But then we got caught in a game that gave me pause.

We were playing another team of kindergarteners, and they were bigger and they had a couple players that could have been playing for any second grade team, never mind kindergarten...all of which was fine, except at one point I thought they started playing too rough.

One of our kids ends up on the floor in tears...  
Now this is kinder basketball, right?  
Just there for the boys to have fun, teach them the game, right?

I complained to the ref, “They’re clobbering us!”  
The other coach, not pleased with my complaining, yelled to the ref, “That’s basketball!”

And immediately this world I had created in my head where we could play and have fun and learn and all get along...it disappeared.

At that moment, in a game of kinder basketball, my world became...  
US....and THEM!!

Do you know about that world?  
Do you know what it’s like to live in a world of “us” and “them”?  
My hunch is you do.

We all do.

Even when we don't like to admit it,  
we gravitate toward this world,  
make our home in this world,  
set up our lives around this world.

For example...

- People who move to Greenville and are glad that Greenville is growing.
- People who have lived in Greenville many years and want to reign in all this growing.

US....and THEM....

People who supported Justice Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court last fall.

People who were deeply troubled by Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court last fall.

Who is us? Who is them?

I recall when I first moved to Dallas over 20 years ago.  
I had spent my entire life up north, living in the Midwest or the East Coast.

And I said something to a member of the church I was serving about how I really liked living in the south.

And this person said to me, "Ben, you're not in the south. You're in Texas!"

Yankee mistake, right?  
Do you see what I mean?  
US...and THEM....

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Not a new problem.  
This US and THEM problem.

It's an old problem.

We hear about this problem in Acts, chapter 11.  
Peter is giving a report to the church in Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem church is composed of Jewish-Christians, if you will... folks who were Jewish, still see themselves as faithful Jews, but they have come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

What they DON'T believe is that Jesus has come for the Gentiles too.  
In the Jerusalem Church, Jesus is the Messiah that faithful Jews have been waiting for...but heathen Gentiles?

Uncircumcised Gentiles?

No Sabbath, no Torah, no Ten Commandments...Gentiles?

No, they don't belong in the church.

And Peter tells the Jerusalem church how three Gentiles showed up at his door, asking him to go with them, and at that moment, what does Peter say happened?

*"The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us."*

Now that's a hard assignment.

The Spirit has given Peter a very hard assignment.

Make no distinction between us and them...

The Bible is replete with stories about how hard this is to do.

Do you remember the story of Jonah?

God comes to Jonah, and God says, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it..."

And what does Jonah do?

Jonah goes as far away from Nineveh as he can.

He gets on a boat to Tarshish.

Now why is Jonah running the OPPOSITE direction of where God told him to go?

Because Nineveh is full of...full of...well, it's full of THEM!

But God says to Jonah: go to them.

Make no distinction.

I want to give these people, my children, a chance to repent.

Stop talking, Jonah, about US and THEM...

It's a hard assignment.

I've got an idea.

I'd like to give you an assignment.

I can tell by the looks on your faces you're just thrilled with this idea...

But here's the assignment.

Can you think of someone in your life right now—who constitutes a THEM?

Someone whom you really don't want to spend time with,  
or spend energy trying to love?

Anyone who, if they showed up today in your church, you would very quietly make sure you didn't sit next to them in church?

Is there anyone like that for you?  
Who in your life is a THEM?

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In his book *The Culture of Disbelief*, Stephen Carter describes how, when he speaks to civic groups, he often addresses the topic "The Most Dangerous Children in America."

To introduce this theme, Carter tells two stories.

The first is about the terrifying day that his daughter,  
who was 5 years old at the time,  
was caught in the crossfire of a gun battle between rival gangs.

To make matters worse, Carter was separated from his daughter and could not get to her until the shooting stopped.

Then he tells of another personal experience.

Riding the train from Stamford, CT to New Haven one day, he happened to overhear a group of girls having a conversation.

They were on their way to private schools, and came from homes in the polished communities of Westport and Fairfield.

They were debating which community was more fashionable and exclusive. One girl mentioned a wealthy person from her town. The other mentioned a wealthier person from her town.

Back and forth it went, until one of the girls claimed that “so and so”, this world-famous entertainer, lived in Westport.

Not true, said a Fairfield girl. The entertainer does not live in Westport, but only has a friend there. She knew this because she had met the entertainer at her father’s store.

Hearing this, the Westport girl hooted disdainfully:

“Your father has a *store*?”

The Fairfield girl cringed, but the Westport girl smelled blood and went in for the kill: “What does he sell there?” she crowed. “*Hardware*?”

Carter goes on to ask his audience which group of children—  
the gangs or the girls—are the most dangerous to America?

Most groups say the gangs, but Carter argues it’s the girls. After all, the reality is that most of those gang members are closed in by their neighborhood and will probably never be in leadership roles in this country.

But those girls...they will go to elite universities, get prestigious jobs with power, and make decisions that affect many other people.<sup>1</sup>

Now my question to you is NOT which group you think is most dangerous. My question is about the girls.

When you heard what they did, did you think to yourself—how awful?

Did you think...I would never raise my child that way?  
Did you think...thank goodness I'm not like them?

I know I did.

And yet...as soon as I think that, I am like them.

When it comes to girls like that—snooty and mean—  
when it comes to teenagers like that—  
privileged and cruel...I think to myself:

“Thank GOODNESS they are their parents’ problem, not mine.”

And what world am I living in?

US...and THEM.

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Have you been thinking of a “them” in your life?  
That’s our assignment this morning...to consider who is a “them” in your heart and in my heart right now.

Sometimes, when I find myself splitting the world up into US and THEM, another story comes to mind.

It’s a true story about another girl, a six-year-old girl named Ruby.

Ruby Bridges...do you recognize the name?

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Thomas G. Long’s book *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), for this citation from Carter’s book. The original source is Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

As Robert Coles describes it, Ruby Bridges was one of four African-American children who were the first to be sent to previously white schools when integration began in New Orleans.

Every day for months, escorted by a Federal Marshall, Ruby would walk past a screaming mob of people yelling all kinds of names at her and telling her they were going to kill her.

Dr. Coles, as some of you may know, is a psychiatrist who has studied children and written extensively about them, particularly those who were a part of the Civil Rights movement. So Coles befriended Ruby, but became very puzzled by her.

Every day, she walks by this mob.  
And yet she shows no stress from this experience.  
She shows no symptoms from this experience.  
She's stoic, she's a happy kid...

Then one day, Ruby's teacher noticed something as Ruby was walking past the mob. It appeared that Ruby was talking to the people in the mob.

Coles questioned her.  
"Ruby, your teacher told me you were talking to those people today."

Ruby responded, **"I wasn't talking to them.  
I was talking to God."**

"Why were you praying to God?"  
**"I was praying for the people in the street."**

Coles was astonished.

"Why were you doing that, Ruby?"  
"Because I wanted to pray for them."

"Why would you want to pray for those people?"

Ruby Bridges responded, **"Don't you think they need praying for?"**  
"I pray for them every morning," she said,

“and every afternoon when I go home.”

**And then she said, “I hope God will be good to them.”<sup>2</sup>**

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Whew...how did she do it?

How did a six-year-old girl, born to illiterate Christian parents, living in a cauldron of bigotry and social upheaval in 1960...how did she articulate the gospel so clearly?

It’s the message of the gospel and the mission of God’s church:  
   no more us and them, bring together us and them,  
   tear down the walls that divide us and them.

Now...I want you to remember your assignment.  
 Think right now about anyone in your life who constitutes a THEM...

It can be a very personal THEM.

If there is a THEM in your life—  
   THOSE neighbors...  
   or THAT side of the family...  
   then the question today is very personal:

What is the Holy Spirit saying to you?

Long ago, the Holy Spirit spoke to Peter, and said MAKE NO  
 DISTINCTION between us and them...so what is God’s Spirit saying to you?

I wonder if you’ve heard the story recently of Derek Black.

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<sup>2</sup> This conversation is described in an interview with Robert Coles that can be found on YouTube by searching “Robert Coles, Ruby Bridges”, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPK3zQM2dHU>.



Derek Black is the son of Don Black. Don is the founder of a white nationalist radio show and website, and Derek is Don's son, as well as the godson of David Duke, the former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

Derek was being groomed by David Duke to be the future face of white nationalism. And Derek was, for many years, helping with his father's radio show and website—in fact, his advice to his father about the website was a primary reason that the site grew from 30,000 users to 300,000. He was talented at “mainstreaming” white nationalism. The site was even used by Dylann Roof as a resource before Roof went on his murdering rampage four years ago.

Derek Black went to New College in Florida as a committed white nationalist, and he kept that part of his identity hidden from his fellow students.

Of course, Derek was still active online with the website and the radio show and his beliefs...and one day, a fellow student discovered who he really was.

On a campus-wide online message board, someone posted:

“Have you seen this man? Derek Black. White supremacist, radio host...New College student?”

Of course, the reaction was swift.

“At one point after being exposed, Derek ventured out during a campus festival and was heckled by fellow students. Another day, a student [posted] on the schoolwide online forum... ‘Violence against white supremacists will send a message that white supremacists will get beat up. That’s *very* productive.’”

And yet a few students, as appalled as they were by Derek's beliefs, refused to ostracize him.

Matthew was Derek's friend. Matthew was an observant Jew. And Matthew had “already experienced enough shaming at New College to believe that exclusion only reinforced divides.” So what did Matthew do?

He continued to invite Derek to Shabbat dinners, “which on any given night might include a few Orthodox Jews, an immigrant and a gay student.”

And then Derek began dating a Jewish woman.

And Derek did not change overnight.  
And his friends at school began to wonder if they were doing the right thing.

But Derek did change.  
The change happened not in days, not in weeks...but over the course of a few years, he changed.

He ultimately renounced the movement, he broke away from his family.

He lives, he now says, with “an infinite sort of guilt...The only way I can sort of wrestle with it is to realize that I can’t take things back, but I can keep pushing against [white nationalism].”

And what caused this change?

According to Derek Black, it was those students at his former college who stayed connected to him.

“Through many talks with devoted and diverse people there — people who chose to invite me into their dorms and conversations rather than ostracize me — I began to realize the damage I had done.”<sup>3</sup>

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Long ago, the Holy Spirit said to Peter:  
No distinction...no distinction between us and them...

What is the Holy Spirit saying to you?

You see, the assignment that we had this morning...admitting that all of us have a THEM in our lives...that’s the easy part.

The hard part is answering this question:  
What are you going to *do* about this THEM in your life?

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<sup>3</sup> This summary is taken from three sources: “Renouncing Hate: What Happens When a White Nationalist Repents,” by Wes Enzinna, *The New York Times*, September 10, 2018; “Why I Left White Nationalism,” by R. Derek Black, *The New York Times*, November 26, 2016; and “Former white nationalist talks about conversion at Holocaust Memorial Center,” by Kayla Dimick, *Southfield Sun*, April 10, 2019.

Are you going to pray for them?  
Are you going to reach out to them?  
Are you going to risk being hurt by them?  
Are you going to forgive them?  
Are you going to talk to them?  
Are you going to love them?  
Are you going to be persistent with them?  
Are you going to refuse to give up on them?

As you and I leave church today, we have a new assignment...

How will you and I help make  
the US and THEM of our world,  
the US and THEM divides in our country,  
the US and THEM that divides us right here in our city...

how will we turn us and them—  
into WE?

Amen.