

**“You have no friends. You have no enemies. You have only teachers.”**

--Buddhist Proverb

We seem to be mired in a society which has divided itself into friends and enemies, good and bad, right and wrong, stupid and smart, enlightened and ignorant. Many find it impossible to have civil conversations when there are differing opinions. This has torn apart families, paralyzed congress, and sown distrust and fear throughout our country, and the world. It is a plague that may very well be more destructive than Covid-19. In fact, this dynamic has been greatly to blame for society's inability to effectively deal with the pandemic.

To fix problems, we humans have a tendency to try to eliminate what's wrong. We often conclude that other people are “what's wrong.” To fix the problem we attempt to eliminate those people, either by trying to change them, bully them, silence them, imprison them, marginalize them, excommunicate them, or kill them. The result of such efforts is always polarization, pain, and death.

To free ourselves from the grip of this plague, we need to redefine the relationship between ourselves and others. Instead of separating people into friends and enemies (or us vs. them), we could consider each person as a teacher. This could be more constructive and life-giving for all involved.

What do our “enemies” have to teach us? Every mental health worker knows that what we dislike most about another person is usually what we dislike about ourselves. We could consider our dealings with such a person as an opportunity to learn about ourselves. This might help us discover how to mitigate our tendencies to inflict pain, and how to increase our abilities to bring life. Seeing a difficult person as a teacher would mean we would spend less time demonizing them and trying to get rid of them. Our growth in our ability to bring life as a result of their “teaching” would in turn invite them to join in the same work.

Our “friends” could teach us that we are valuable and precious. They help us know the value of loyalty and support. But even when they let us down or abandon us, they can teach us that no one is perfect, including ourselves. When we learn to accept that about ourselves, we will be more able to accept that about others, and see them as like us.

We are called to be people of Reconciliation. But we can't give what we don't have. That is why our foundational work has to be within ourselves, to change the way we perceive others. We have to resist the tendency to pigeon hole people into convenient categories (friends/enemies, good/bad), and somehow come to a different way of seeing, a different understanding. Considering every person as a teacher is one practice that could help us in this regard.

There is only one real category everyone falls into, i.e. the people of God. The more our perceptions of others match that fact, the more reconciliation becomes who we are, not just what we do.

Garry