

The Road Less Traveled – October 11, 2019

My neighborhood has a Facebook group, as do a lot of neighborhoods do these days. When I first joined the group I considered it a good way to stay connected with people in a pretty large neighborhood and to stay up to date with any relevant neighborhood news. Over the past five years, I have gotten way more than that.

To be fair, the Facebook group has proven useful at times. We've located the owners of wayward dogs, found a last-minute video to use in a sermon and even made new friends. But far too often the site is used by neighbors to bash each other, often saying things publically that I suspect would not be said face to face, even in private. I've seen neighbors eviscerated publically for suggesting that barking dogs be taken inside, that young children be supervised and, most recently, that possibly too many sports teams are using the neighborhood park for practice. Often the most innocent comment or suggestion evokes a firestorm of sarcasm and bitterness.

It's sad to see what should be a useful tool abused in such a way. I have found myself at times choosing to stay uninformed rather than have this stuff show up in my newsfeed. There have been times when I have been tempted to post something, only to decide against it because I simply did not want to deal with the backlash. I have spoken to people who live in other neighborhoods with Facebook groups as well, and, sadly, the situation is not unique to my little slice of Aledo.

I guess it's a symptom of a much larger problem, one that I hear decried all the time. Our culture has become downright inhospitable. We can no longer disagree. We can no longer consider the possibility that we may be wrong. We can no longer hear differing opinions. We no longer want to engage with people who are different than us. Our first instinct is no longer to listen and understand, but rather to attack and defend.

I'm not really sure when it happened, but it has. And it seems to be getting worse, not better. Social media has made confrontation easier, but the attitude that sparks it comes from within us, not online.

The other day I saw an article shared on Facebook in the aftermath of the Amber Guyer verdict. Guyer is the former Dallas police officer who was convicted of second-degree murder in the death of Botham Shem Jean. Much was shared on social media when Jean's brother hugged and forgave Guyer in court during her sentencing. The article I saw, shared by a colleague of mine, was a plea to pastors who were tempted to use the scene as a sermon illustration on grace to tell both sides. To consider the whole experience of the African-American community and its relationship to the police, etc. And to ponder the minefield of forgiveness without repentance. It was a compelling read, but I knew what was coming. I suspected my colleague would pay dearly for offering an alternative narrative. And I was right.

The sad thing is that as we cling to our rightness, as we shut down those alternative narratives, we are shrinking the world around us. Because it is through exposure to opinions other than our own, narratives other than ours, that we grow. It's why I celebrate the diversity of theology and worldviews in our church. There are people within our local church with whom I disagree. And yet I never leave a conversation with them that I don't have something new to ponder. Sometimes my position moves a bit. Oftentimes it doesn't. But at the very least I come away understanding a little better *why* I believe what I believe.

It is an opportunity for growth that we as a people cannot afford to lose. Evolution – whether of a species or of a belief – is a linear thing. In other words, if you are not moving forward, you are losing ground. May we be a people who yearn for forward.

See you Sunday.