

## The Road Less Traveled – June 2, 2017

I love to argue, at least I used to. When I was in high school and college, I argued competitively as part of the debate team. In fact, that's how I met Melissa, at a high school debate workshop the summer before our senior years in high school. We both loved to argue. For that same reason, I have always been a political junkie as well. I loved politics, not just for the process of governing and the promise of making things better, but for the political arena. It was a place where ideas were exchanged, where arguments were won and lost. And the underlying promise was that the truth was somewhere in the argument. That in the free exchange of ideas, the right idea would somehow emerge. Not just compromise for the sake of ending conflict, but compromise that moved us forward into a promising future, because it was the right answer.

But truthfully I really don't argue much anymore. And I am no longer a political junkie. In fact, I avoid politics as much as possible and almost never talk politics with anyone. Because something changed along the way. I don't know exactly when, but something changed. We as a people seem no longer capable of argument. Oh we fight plenty. We bicker endlessly. We posture, it seems, as naturally as we breathe. But we don't argue anymore. And so for me at least, the arena of debate no longer holds any allure.

I'm no sociologist, but what I sense is that we've lost the ability to embrace the possibility that we might be wrong. Our culture has become so polarized – and let's be honest here, when I say "our culture," I mean us ... you and I – that we no longer consider the possibility that our position on any issue is anything but 100 percent right, the good, righteous, God-ordained truth. Someone who disagrees with us isn't just wrong, they are bad, flawed and motivationally suspect. Our ideology – whether political, theological or social – is often so dogmatic that anyone whose paradigm is different than ours is simply dismissed.

You don't have to look very far to find it. Hop on social media at any time of the day, and it won't take you long to find a political argument that, within a few posts, degenerates into insults and name-calling. Not a debate over the merits of a particular policy or decision, but personal attacks on the one making the policy, attacks that by extension are leveled against anyone who supports him or her. Our ideology tells us that this leader is bad, therefore any real debate over real issues is quashed.

And it's not just the political arena. Our denomination, The United Methodist Church, remains mired in dissent and, many argue, on the brink of schism, because those gathered on one end of the theological spectrum are convinced that the folks on the other end are less faithful, less committed and less inclined to really follow Jesus than they are. It's hard to imagine them ever finding common ground because everyone is convinced that they are absolutely right and that those who disagree with them are absolutely wrong.

In short, our dogma is threatening to destroy us.

What is interesting to note, as followers of Jesus, is that it was that very dogma that got him killed. Jesus' ministry was an invitation to take a closer look at longstanding beliefs of what following God really looked like. It was a challenge to conventional wisdom and to the best religious thought of the day. Much of Jesus' time on earth was spent engaged in debate – arguing – with those best minds, urging them to look deeper and to open themselves further to who God was calling them to be. And ultimately they killed him for it. Because those best religious minds could not conceive that theirs might not be the only answer, they destroyed the truth of God that was right in front of them.

That's the point I fear we are nearing. The point where the truth no longer matters. The point where being righteous is less important than being right. The point where two people can no longer earnestly disagree, and yet search together for the larger truth that occupies the common ground between them. The point where the thought of listening to you becomes nothing more than a waste of my time.

But I'm not ready to give up the fight completely. Because I think the ability to search for truth in the mist of disagreement lies at the heart of who we are as a church. By design, we are a community that cuts a wide swath across the theological spectrum. And there is power in that diversity. So in our worship, in our fellowship, in our study together, let us embrace that diversity and embrace the debate that it inevitably sparks. Because that's the way we grow together.

See you Sunday.