

BEYOND POLARIZATION<sup>1</sup>  
I Corinthians 13: 1-13  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
January 31, 2010

Few people would argue over the assertion that we are living in a time of deep national polarization and anger. The Washington Post this week said, “The American people know what they don’t like, which is: everything.”<sup>2</sup>

I

This polarization is not just in politics, but it is worth noting that the days are long gone when Republicans and Democrats could wage fierce debates on the floor, but remain friends after the debate. There seems to be a detesting of the other side, a desire to annihilate the other side, and it shows up in the language they use about one another.

No one is trivializing the fallout from polarization. It spills over into every area of our lives: our homes, our churches, our schools, our workplaces. There is a pervading sense of all or nothing, my way or the highway, my side or no side, love it or leave it. Compromise becomes a dirty word. Empathy for the other side becomes a sign of weakness. Compassion becomes a character flaw. And hosts of people have a new

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<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, January 31, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Joel Achenbach, “The Audacity of Nope,” *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2010.

fundamental rule of life: never apologize. When people become so angry and so divided, it is no surprise that violence becomes a more common response to conflict than seeking better communication or peaceful protest or negotiation.

## II

This is the sea in which we swim, the air we breathe, the lay of the land in which we live. We didn't ask for it, and we wish it was otherwise, but this is the world into which the church is called. It is a divided world, a polarized world, an alienated world, a world at odds with itself.

Nathan D. Baxter, who served for a decade as Dean of Washington National Cathedral, was an army combat medic during the Viet Nam War, and he later taught at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge. In his position as Dean of Washington National Cathedral, he addressed this polarization with a sermon entitled "What the Christian Community Can Offer a Polarized Society." It is a sermon worth reading, for Nathan Baxter maintained that a time of polarization is a great time for the Christian church to witness to something greater.<sup>3</sup>

The Apostle Paul called it *a more excellent way*.<sup>4</sup> More excellent than what? Watch the news...read the papers...go to work...; more excellent

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<sup>3</sup> Nathan D. Baxter, "What the Christian Community Can Offer a Polarized Society," [http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Baxter\\_3825.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Baxter_3825.htm).

<sup>4</sup> I Corinthians 12: 31.

than much of what we see in those places! *A more excellent way*--those are the words that lead into the famous love chapter, the one that reminds us of weddings or funerals. But it is worth noting that when Paul wrote those words, he had neither in mind.

He was writing to a church so polarized that the various factions in that congregation would hardly speak to each other. When they had church dinners, one faction would eat most of the food before the other faction arrived. One faction bragged that they were more righteous than the others. One faction boasted that they must have the Spirit because they could speak in tongues. Another faction declared that they were better because they could perform healings or work miracles. For them, church was all about ME and MY SIDE! Who is the best? Who is more spiritual? Who is more orthodox? Who is closer to God?

It was a desperate situation. Paul knew that a polarized church was a paralyzed church! He knew that he had to present to them *a more excellent way*. And through that crisis came one of the most inspired pieces of writing the world has ever known. He began with a laundry list of their bragging points.

It reminds me of a friend who went to an accomplished woodcarver to get whittling lessons. One day they were carving a little dog, and Roger just

couldn't seem to get it right. Finally, in frustration, he asked his teacher, "How do you do this? What's the secret of carving?" And the teacher looked at him thoughtfully and said, "That's easy; you pick up a piece of wood and just cut off everything that doesn't look like a dog."

This is what Paul is doing. He cut away everything that didn't look like love! He whittled away at their ego-driven bragging rights. Envious? Boastful? Arrogant? Rude? Cut it all out! That doesn't look like love! And when he finally cut away everything that didn't look like love, what did he have left? He had patience, kindness, endurance, trust, humility.

That looks a lot like love, all right. But Paul pulled out the sandpaper and began sanding, getting it down to the essence of love. He worked and worked until finally he sanded it down to just three things: faith, hope, and love. Then he took out the fine-grained sandpaper, looked at faith and thought, "Even that is not the essence of love!" So he sanded some more because no doctrine, no set of rules, no creed, no denomination, no tradition is the essence of love. But there was one thing left: hope. Surely hope is the essence of love! But even that was sanded off because even if you have lost all hope, God's love is still with you!

There it was...the finished product. Love in its essence, in its purity, in its beauty. And what did that final product look like? What remained

after all the peripheral concerns were whittled away? What remained was a face, the face of Jesus. There was absolute, unambiguous, undiluted love.

The New Testament writings are just filled with the necessity of loving one another above all else. *Owe no one anything, except to love one another.*<sup>5</sup> *For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that you should love one another.*<sup>6</sup> *We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another.*<sup>7</sup> And Jesus himself said: *This is my commandment, that you love one another, even as I have loved you.*<sup>8</sup>

### III

Easy? Heavens no, it's not easy! That's why we have church! We bring together the most diverse crowd imaginable and we go beyond polarization! To get beyond polarization there must be a momentous task to unify us.

Do we have such a task before us? I think so: to nurture and grow a loving community among people who look and sound different, who speak different languages, who were raised with different standards, who listen to different music, and who care nothing about what denomination we are. Chances are they don't really care whether we are conservative or liberal, or

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 13: 8.

<sup>6</sup> I John 3: 11.

<sup>7</sup> I John 3: 14.

<sup>8</sup> John 15: 12.

where we stand on all the hot-button issues. The challenging task before us is articulated in our Vision Statement: to build and nurture a “community of believers who seek to grow in our faith and understanding as we live the Way of Jesus Christ.” All kinds of people want and need that.

And do you know what they really care about? They want to know if we love each other! And do we love this community enough to get out there and express that love in tangible ways! They care, in other words, about whether or not we offer *a more excellent way*.

#### IV

I believe we do. Next week we will gather for our annual meeting, and you will have before you the annual reports of all our boards and committees. You can read of the many ways we are reaching out in love and living above and beyond the polarization so rampant in our society. But that is not enough!

I want you to go home and spread the word to your friends and family, your colleagues, your neighbors: you need to be here. Something exciting is happening here. Tell them they need to be here to be part of it. Wherever you can, start a conversation. Do you think there is something that can bind together a community of faith in love? Do you think we can continue in this polarized culture to nurture a community that sees one

another as human beings, made in the image of God, who all need the care and compassion and love that Christ offers?

If the Washington Post is right and the American people know what they don't like, and it is everything; together let us live something else, *the more excellent way*. A time such as this is the right time, the crucial time, the essential time, the critical time, the imperative time, the compelling time, the necessary time for the church to bear witness to the way beyond polarization.