

SIX-FOLD TEST FOR MULTIETHNIC MINISTRY

SERMON SERIES: POPULATION | PARTICIPATION | POWER | PACE-SETTING | PURPOSEFUL NARRATIVE | PRACTICING SOLIDARITY

TJ SMITH

Practicing Solidarity

#6. In what ways are we standing with and advocating for the multiethnic mosaic? How are we sharing in the suffering of others on both an individual and communal level?

Luke 10:25-37, NIV

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey,

brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Hi, my relatives. My name is TJ Smith, and I am Lakota. I want to acknowledge the land I am sharing on today is the land of the Dena’ina people, and I’m honored and privileged to be on their land as I share with you. I’m the pastor of New Song Covenant Church in Anchorage, Alaska, and I’m also the president of IMA (Indigenous Ministers Association), which is part of the Mosaic Commission. We’re all part of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

I want to ask you to do something. This is going to be a little bit different. But Covid is a different time, anyway, right? So just go along. And even thinking in this realm that this is a different way to share—via video—but I thought this would be a great way to connect. At the count of three, I want you to take a deep breath with me and then when I point at you to let it out. Here we go: one, two, three.

How did that feel?

Think about that. Maybe that’s the first time you’ve taken a breath with another, in many ways, due to Covid. I know some churches are just coming back into having in-person services. We’re not sitting and having coffee with others, but we’re still all breathing. I love the words of Chief Seattle. He says, “All things share the same breath—the beast, the tree, the man. The air shares its spirit with all the life it supports.” I love how in Indigenous cultures everything is sacred to us. Even the breath, as Chief Seattle said, because for us it should bring us back always to the One who created it—the Creator.

I think about my Uncle Bob. If you ever go to Torrington, Wyoming, and want great biscuits and gravy, I’ll



tell you where to go. It's this place where we always eat when I visit him. My uncle was in there—he's 80 and he was eating there—and a Lakota elder came in. And God's Spirit said, "You need to go buy him breakfast." So my uncle bought him breakfast, and he went and sat and talked with the elder and they had conversation. After a period of time, the elder asked my uncle if he'd like to smoke a pipe with him. Well, my uncle smokes pipe and is Lakota, so he understands the relevance of this invitation. As the elder packed the tobacco and lit the pipe and took some puffs, he turned and gave it to my uncle. As my uncle smoked it and he gave it back, the elder said this to him: "We are now brothers as we have breathed the same breath as we've taken this pipe together." A short time later, my uncle was honored to be invited to come to this elder's service because this elder had walked on. (In our culture, that means he had passed; he had died.) And my uncle was invited not only to come as a family member and as his brother, but to share.

So I want us to do the exercise again, please. Take a short breath, so that regardless of where you are, we are in this together as sisters and as brothers. I want us to take a deep breath again—this time not as individuals like we did the first time but as family. Scripture says, "We are all God's children." On the count of three, ready? One, two, three.

Great job. I appreciate you doing that with me. What if we saw each other as sisters and brothers, not "us" and "thems"?

I think about our world and the turmoil and the stress and anxiety in our world and in this country of the United States. It's okay if we disagree; but it is not okay when we allow issues to divide us—to separate us—so that we don't talk to each other or that we become "us" and "thems." What if we could take a stand for the family—and not just the family we know, but also the family we don't know? What if we begin to treat each other as family, to treat each other with the respect we each deserve, not as we see happening in the world—"us" and "them"?

I think about those times when the Creator put me in a place and called me to stand up for my family that was being attacked, that I didn't even know. If they walked by me today, I wouldn't even know who they are, but they're my family. I was in a place and I was in a time where I

could step in and help when others may have turned away, driven by, or walked by and not seen it—but God had put me in a place to minister to help family.

When I was coming back from a high school where I did ministry often, all of a sudden God says, "Look to the left." I looked to the left, and there's this First Alaskan male who was beating on this woman. And God says, "Flip your car around. Go!" So I flipped the truck around and there was no traffic, which was amazing on the road I was on. As I pulled up to him, I hit the brakes; the road was gravel, the dust flew, and the man turned around. I jumped out of my car and I got between them. I made sure the lady was okay and sent her on her way. Then I chewed him out for the next five minutes to give her time to get away.

I think about when I came home one time, and at the intersection near the corner of my house a guy had rear-ended a teenage mom. (I found out later that she was nineteen years old and had a young child in the back of her car.) This guy was 6' 6" and yelling, "You ruined my life; you ruined my car," and on and on and on; and this teenage mom was just in tears. And as I walked across the street asking the Creator to give me strength to know what to do, I got in the guy's face and said, "Sir, you have two choices: sit down or I'll put you down." And he sat down. Later on after the police had come, a neighbor was saying, "Man, your calming influence there was amazing."

I think about when I worked in a homeless shelter, and I was a life skills coach and did security at lunch. An African American man on spice stomped and pushed another man. He stomped his chest and pushed him over a piece of cake. As security, I had to do something. (I'll call him Fred because that's what I call males in my story.) As Fred stomped on him, I was asking, "Creator, what do I do? How do I contain and control this?"

I knew Fred, and he knew me. I tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Fred."

He says, "I know, TJ, I screwed up. I'll leave."

As I escorted him off, I was thinking, "God, how do I help this brother?"

To treat each other as family and with respect is getting harder and harder in our world. The world is more divided; it's more "us" and "thems." We don't see each other as family. We see each other as you against me, my people against your people, my culture against your



culture, and my country against your country.

As a person of color, as a Lakota man talking with my sisters and brothers in the Mosaic Commission, “us” and “them” is even deeper and more obvious because we’re more divided in our nation; and in Canada, it’s the same. We are “them.” Or worse yet, as Indigenous people, we’re invisible. We’re not accepted in a Western culture because we’re not white enough. I think differently. Even as I introduced myself, I gave a traditional protocol welcome—an acknowledgment of who I am and the land that I’m on. When I traveled before Covid, I had an app on my phone that tells me whose land I’m on. I acknowledge and thank them that I’m on their land; I thank those people who have given that land and taken care of that land for us.

I think of the Midwinter Conference a couple of years ago when a Nubiak brother and I sat and listened and looked at each other with grieving in our eyes as a brother was talking about a church plant in Oklahoma. He listed all the people in his community he was reaching out to—all the different ethnicities and people of color and those of Western culture. My brother and I looked at each other with tears in our eyes, and he said, “He didn’t mention us.”

I don’t know if you know your history of the U.S. In Oklahoma, there’s a place that we call Trail of Tears where five nations were removed off their land so the plantation owners could have those lands to bring slaves in to work their fields. There are five nations there, and yet we’re invisible. I think of our own journey, especially as being invisible as Indigenous people.

There’s a person I know socially, and his name is Fred (a different Fred). I was at a fundraiser for my wife’s school, and I’ve known Fred for a couple of years. He asked, “Oh, did you just get back from Hawaii?”

In Alaska, a lot of people go to Hawaii in the winter. There’s some sun, some warmth, and it’s not cold. But I said, “No, I haven’t been to Hawaii. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He goes, “Oh, you had to be in Hawaii. You’re so tan.”
“Uh, no, I haven’t been in Hawaii.”

After about 30 seconds of exchange in this discussion, my wife says, “Fred, you know TJ’s Indigenous, right?”

“No, he’s not, he can’t be.”

He doesn’t know me. Again, we’re invisible. We don’t fit. “Us” and “thems.”

Please understand, we see this in every one of our cultures. We all have an implicit bias. I think of the words that Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah wrote on page 99 of their book, *Unsettling Truths* from the Kirwan Institute of Ohio State University, defining implicit bias as “the attitude or stereotypes that affect our understanding and actions and decisions” (here’s the really important line) “in an unconscious manner.” Our implicit bias isn’t even conscious. It’s something we’ve grown up with. It’s something that because of where we grow up or the music we listen to or the news we watch or the TV shows we watch—we have this unconscious bias of who we are. It goes on to say, “Implicit bias reveals how our brains create an association between ourselves and those around us.” Implicit bias creates an “us” and “them” in an unconscious manner and way.

My hope as we share this is to start to change that perception, to change the color of our lens a little bit, to start to see our unpleasant biases. See, I believe the evil one wants us to have “us” and “thems” because if we’re not united, if we’re not the body of Christ together, if we’re divided, we can’t stand. Ecclesiastes says, “A strand of three cannot be broken.” If we’re all singulars, we can be broken. But if we’re the body, we’re a strand of three. We did, in the very beginning, a breath as an individual and a breath as community. We can’t be broken. The evil one wants us to be individuals.

In the time of Christ, there was implicit bias. This is a passage I know you’ve heard before, but I want to look at it through a new lens of what may be your bias and look at it through the lens of my eyes and my culture—of how I, as a Lakota, see this passage.

It says in Luke 10:29, just before the parable of the Good Samaritan, “But he wanted to justify himself, so he” (in the NIV it says “expert in the law” and the CEV says “certain lawyer” and the *Message* says “religion scholar”) “asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ In reply Jesus said: ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho’”

I want to stop here because I love the way Jesus answers this. Jesus answers a question with a story, and that speaks true to my heart. If you and I have a conversation and you ask me a question, I’m probably gonna tell you a story because in telling you a story, as Jesus did, is this hope and this prayer: Instead of me telling you, it’s us having the Holy Spirit speak to you what you



need to hear, what you need to listen for, and what you need to wrestle with.

Back to Luke: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite . . .” (And a Levite is a temple helper, right? Today, maybe it’s someone who is an associate pastor or youth pastor or work pastor or elder or deacon. This was a man from the tribe of Levi, whose job was to work around the temple.)

“When he came to the place and saw him, he passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.” (Again, in the time of Christ and the New Testament, oil and wine was medicinal.) “Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii” (a day’s wages) “and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expenses you may have.’”

We look at this passage and we think about who should have responded. It should have been the religious leader, it should have been the temple worker, but it wasn’t them. It was the one who wasn’t accepted by the dominant Jewish tradition and culture. That is the one who took care of him.

Maybe we ask ourselves this: As a church, how do we respond if we are in that scenario? Do we reach out to that neighbor who is different from us, that person who may be hurting or homeless on the side of the street, or that widow or orphan who can’t respond in these times of Covid, that person who can’t go to the store who needs extra help? Understand that we all can’t respond to every crisis and need, but that’s why God has put us as a body: To each respond in the way we’re gifted and the way we’re called. Who are you called to respond to? Who are you called to serve? Who are you called to help that’s alongside the road? Who are you to walk alongside of—to walk with, not to walk for but to walk with? Who are you to share your story with to help another heal in theirs?

“Us” and “thems.” As an Indigenous person, as I said before, I don’t belong. I’m different. I’m not accepted

as an equal. Look at our Declaration of Independence, where we are called “merciless savages.” African American sisters and brothers, in the Constitution it says you’re 3/5ths human. That is not the *imago Dei*. That is not who and how God created us; it is how the evil one separates us.

We look at this passage, and we see the “us” and “thems”—those of Jewish tradition and culture and the Samaritans. And again, you may not know the history there. The Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to Babylon in about 600 B.C. Its people were carried off into captivity. Seventy years later, a remnant of around 43,000 was permitted to return and rebuild Jerusalem. The people who now inhabited the former Northern Kingdom, the Samaritans (who were part Jewish) vigorously opposed the repatriation and tried to undermine the attempt to reestablish the nation. For their part, the full-blooded monotheistic Jews detested the mixed marriages and the worship of their northern cousins. Walls of bitterness were erected on both sides that did nothing but harden for the next 550 years. They were family, but they allowed that division—that “us” and “thems”—to divide them.

Those deep divisions can kill us. That attitude that you’re not good enough, you’re not like me, I don’t get it. In verse 25, Jesus is asked, “How do we enter the kingdom?” Maybe a better way to ask this is, “How do we live out the kingdom?”

“On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” (v. 25). That’s a sermon in itself, but we’re not gonna go there today. “‘What is written in the Law?’ Jesus replied, ‘How do you read it?’” Again, Jesus is asking questions. He’s making us search inside of his own heart. “He answered, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and ‘Love neighbors as yourself.’ ‘You have answered correctly,’ Jesus said. ‘Do this and you will live’” (vv. 26-28).

That reference to love others as God loves is in Matthew and Mark and Luke, and it comes out of Deuteronomy 6:5. We think about the man on the side of the road who was beaten by the robbers. Who should have understood and known and lived out this verse? It’s in Deuteronomy—it should’ve been the religious ones. They should have known to love and to practice



that solidarity. That's how they're called to serve: To show and to share the love of the Creator. Yet it was an outcast, a half-breed. To them, a person who is invisible to the Jewish people is who Jesus used in the story to reach out, who was "the hands and the feet of God" to a person in need—the one who practiced solidarity. He did it because he didn't see a different person lying wounded, beaten up, and dying. He saw his brother; he saw a family member.

In most Indigenous cultures, we see each other as family. In the Lakota culture, we have a phrase called *mitakuye oyasin*. It means we're all related or "all my relatives." When we greet each other, we say, *Hau Mitakuyapi*, as I did in the very beginning. It means, "Hi, my relative." Christ's challenge at the end of the passage to the expert in the law, and to you and I, and to us as the church is to love with everything we have to a stranger who can give nothing back in return.

"Which of these three," Jesus asked, "do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (vv. 36-37).

Will we do as Christ commands? Will we go and do likewise? Will we love others as we are loved by the Creator? We're loved as we are and how we are. Will we practice solidarity by loving others as our sisters and brothers, and not "us" and "thems"? I wonder when hear this passage, do we see the other person as "them" when we see them on the side of the road? How do you see a homeless person in your community? How do you see a person of different ethnicity in your community? If you watch the news, how do you see the news? Do you see it as a sister or brother, or do you see it as an "us" and a "them"? Do we love each other as God loves us? It's what Scripture calls us to do. Or do we only love the ones that are like us? Do we sit down with another who is from a different culture and do we ask from the heart to learn from them? Or do we assume we already know it because we saw it in a movie or read it in a book or we have that Asian or Latino or Black friend, but we've never asked their perspective?

We are called to be brothers and sisters. We're called to take our eyes off of ourselves. In our culture, it's all about community; it is not about the individual. It's not about me; it's about us. Do we believe that and live that

out as God calls us to do? Will we take our eyes off of ourselves and have them on God?

For Indigenous persons, everything we do is sacred. Even when we braid our hair, the three strands are body, mind, and spirit. As my uncle took a breath with the elder, it was sacred. I remember being called "family of God," yet I don't want to go sometimes. I don't want to be that good brother. I don't want to cross that track. It's human. I don't want to look foolish by stopping and helping that person. I don't have time. I'm on a time zone; I've got to get moving. I don't want to get my hands dirty.

The Samaritan didn't care who the man was. He didn't care who was hurt. He didn't care if he was from a different culture. He didn't care if it would cost him. He said, "This is my brother who's hurting. I need to do my part. Even if the bill is large, the next time I come through I'll take care of it." I think this Samaritan lived out practicing solidarity far better than the religious did. He did what Mark 12:29-30 says. In the *Message* paraphrase, it says, "The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy. And here is the second: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' There is no other commandment that ranks with these." To practice solidarity is to live out that verse. In order for me to do that, I can only love others as well as I love myself, and I only can love myself if I allow God to love me, and allowing God to love me, then I can love others where they are.

I see how we treat each other, how we talk about each other, how we jump down each other's throats, how that divides "us" and "thems," versus asking the question—we don't have to agree—but asking the question to understand. My heart is broken because in my culture, we are all family, yet our world continues to divide us into "us" and "thems" and we continue to take the bait. Division by our bias that we often aren't even aware of—that's unconscious in who we are; and our cultures in the U.S. and Canada are not about our relatives, but they're all about ourselves. Again, that's not what Christ has called us to. In Matthew 25:40, it says, "The King will reply, 'Truly, I will tell you whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" Will we practice solidarity?

I think of the Good Samaritan. It's not the ones who had the head knowledge about the Creator, but one who



had the heart knowledge who lived out solidarity with that brother alongside the road.

The challenge for you and me is (in my language: what *Woneya Wakan*) what the Holy Spirit has laid on your heart to do. How is the Spirit calling you to show and share the love of the Creator that you've been shown, to walk in solidarity with others where they are and as they are, to be that sister or that brother to another family member, to reach out and help bind their wounds by telling your story of how your wounds have been bound, and to walk along the road and journey and help in their healing of their journey?

It's my prayer for us as we look and see how we're each created and called to practice solidarity as a Good Samaritan debt, to use these words from Glenn Peterson, superintendent of Canada Conference, which I use with his permission: "May the wisdom rise to meet the challenge with compassion." *Wacekiye mani pe Thi-yóšpaye*. Walk in prayer, my extended family, my relatives. Let's pray.

Creator God, help us to walk with compassion, to be aware of our implicit biases that we unconsciously live out. Help us to see our sisters and our brothers in all scenarios and situations. Help us take the gifts you have given each of us to serve our family, those around us, and those you put across our paths. Philimaye, thank you for the time and for what your Spirit has laid on each of our hearts to do. Help us to respond to the call to reflect the full kingdom of God. And may we remember the words of Revelation 7:9: "And after this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. And they were wearing white robes and were holding on the palm branches in their hands."

Ate yapi Na cinca na Woniya waken Caje kin on. Hemcheto. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, so be it. Amen.