



**“WHERE DO WE BEGIN?”**

Romans 12:14-19

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How many of you are familiar with the comic strip, *Calvin and Hobbes*? In one particular edition written by illustrator Bill Watterson, the young boy, Calvin, is talking to his enlivened stuffed tiger, Hobbes. It's winter out and the snow is really deep. As they walk through it together, Calvin turns to his companion and says, "You know, Hobbes, it seems the only time most people go outside is to walk to their cars. We have houses, electricity, plumbing, heat... Maybe we're so sheltered and comfortable that we've lost touch with the natural world and forgotten our place in it. Maybe we've lost our awe of nature."

Calvin continues by saying, "That's why I want to ask you, as a tiger, a wild animal closest to nature, what you think we're put on earth to do. What's our purpose in life? Why are we here?"

Without missing a beat, Hobbes somewhat instinctively replies, "We're here to devour each other alive." At that, Calvin turns around for a moment, looks up to the heavens, and then rushes home. Throwing off his jacket when he gets inside, Calvin is seen standing on the back of the living room chair leaning towards the thermostat as he shouts out, "Turn on the lights! Turn up the heat!"<sup>1</sup>

I don't know about you, but I seem to understand Calvin's temptation when he realizes what Hobbes has said. "What's our purpose in life? Why are we here?" the young Calvin asks. Hobbes, the stuffed tiger that is alive and real whenever Calvin's parents aren't around, shares the natural instincts of a tiger, "We're here to devour each other alive."

Surely it has felt like this in our world throughout the past several months as we approached the election this past week. Even beyond Tuesday, it seems that the rhetoric of the day has been to avoid being the last one to throw the punch. If you're going to go outside and step into the world, then you had better come out swinging so that you're not the one being devoured. Our natural world order seems to designate predators and prey.

As Tuesday approached, many were just hoping that we would be done with robo-calls, with campaigns, and especially with treating one another as less than human. Several have been asking whether we might ever get back to caring for one another again. On the other hand, if we thought it would end with the election, the extended events of this past week, along with the bitter political rivalries and battles, may prove otherwise.

As a pastor, for quite some time I've heard many from across the political spectrum express their concerns about the deep divides we seem to experience in our present day. Perhaps it's so troublesome because we not only experience the divide when we listen to a news station that either supports our own views or is completely opposed to our own views, but we also experience the divide in our workplaces, our schools, our churches, and even in our own homes among our families. Yes, even families seem divided over our opinions or at least over our need to be right.

If, in fact, we can't even dialogue in our homes, how do we as the Church begin to have the deeper conversations of faith when so much of who we are and how we think must be off the table? Where do we begin to build authentic relationships? Do we have anything to offer the world in this day?

Several years ago, when I was still in college, Dawn and I went out to Phoenix to visit her aunt and uncle who were living there at the time. As we made our plans, I shared with Dawn that my grandfather had a sister that I hadn't seen since I was in the second or third grade that lived out that way. I hadn't heard from her in a while, so I called her up and made plans to see my great aunt Ethelene when we came to town.

Before I left, my grandfather turned to me with a warning in his voice as he said, "Now son, you don't have any crazy plans to see my sister, Ethelene, while you're out there, do you?" I hadn't realized it, but apparently my grandfather and his baby sister had not been on speaking terms for a little while.

Being the oldest and most favored among the grandchildren, I did what any good, honorable grandson would do; I lied. "Nope. I don't have any plans to meet up with her. We're just going to visit Dawn's aunt and uncle."

On my way out to Phoenix, my heart was heavy because I knew that my grandfather and his siblings were separated at a very young age when his mother passed away from tuberculosis. Since their father was unable to care for them, the five children were sent to five different foster homes. There was no formal process for it at the time. They were just other families that were willing to help out. It was years before they were reunited as adults. I knew how hard my grandfather had worked to make that reunion happen and I couldn't believe that he was no longer on speaking terms with Aunt Ethelene.

While in Phoenix, I met up with my great aunt for breakfast. It was a few years before Facebook and I had not seen her since I was a young kid. As we waited at the restaurant that morning, I was worried that I wouldn't recognize her. The moment she walked through the door, however, I knew it was her. She and my grandfather had the same face; the same nose, to be exact.

Catching up over breakfast, it seemed as if they didn't know whose turn it was to call whom next. That was their argument. Can you believe it? That was what kept them from picking up the phone for one another, simply thinking that the other one would be too upset to answer a call. I encouraged Aunt Ethelene to call her brother, knowing that I'd have to 'fess up when I arrived home.

I did get home and eventually confessed my sins to my grandfather. The best part of the story, however, was how the two of them reconnected when she called him again. I think it was a year or two later that my grandfather passed away. When I spoke to Aunt Ethelene on the phone the night that he died, she said how grateful she was that they had the opportunity to reestablish their relationship before it was too late. In the middle of their temporary feud, someone had to be courageous enough to value the relationship more than their issues so that they could reconnect.

As we turn to our scripture lesson this morning, St. Paul is speaking to the church in Rome and encouraging them in some of their own difficulties that they are having with one another. Rome was a pretty diverse place. Being the center of the empire, people came from all over the known world to Rome. You can only imagine how cultures and ideologies might clash in a city like Rome. Even the Roman church itself was constantly encountering Gentile converts to the faith and having to live in the midst of a variety of cultural and political perspectives.

It is in this climate that Paul writes to this church in Rome about how they are to treat one another, saying:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."<sup>2</sup>

Eugene Peterson paraphrased a portion of Paul's words this way in *The Message*, "Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody."<sup>3</sup> I love those words, "Discover beauty in everyone." Peterson's paraphrase of Paul allows us to hear Paul's invitation to see the God who is reflected in our sisters and brothers as well as to reflect that same presence and beauty for the world around us.

I don't know about you, but it's hard not to get caught up into devouring one another on some days, isn't it? Maybe those words are too harsh and most of us don't think of devouring one another. Yet, I'm not necessarily one to back down, either, especially not if I've been hurt or someone I love has been hurt. Can you relate to that? How often have we seen that hurt people hurt other people?

In his book, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*, Bishop Reuben Job reminds us that John Wesley raised three rules that could govern our way of living and interacting with one another in the world. They were:

1. Do No Harm
2. Do Good
3. Stay in Love With God<sup>4</sup>

In regards to the first rule, Bishop Job reminds us that “When we agree that we will not harm those with whom we disagree, conversation, dialogue, and discovery of new insight become possible. When our words and actions are guarded by this first simple rule, we have time and space to think about consequences before a word is spoken or an action taken.”<sup>5</sup>

As we think about the current climate of dialogue in our world, in our nation, and in our church, I wonder if the first step towards healing is the one with most risks, namely, to walk outside, where we seem most determined to devour one another, and offer blessing and peace in the place of curses and harm. What type of world might we create if the Church were to first determine that while we might disagree from time to time about a whole host of issues, we will seek above all else to “Do no harm,” or “So far as it depends upon us,” we will “live peaceably with all”? Might we discover the Christ in others staring back at us?

Where might we begin to transform the world? How might we start? This past week, the words of a song that you sung last year on this day have been ringing in my heart. “My Life Flows On” by Robert Lowry seems to remind me of God’s greatest dreams and hopes for our world. He writes:

1. My life flows on in endless song,  
above earth’s lamentation.  
I hear the clear, though far-off hymn  
that hails a new creation.

Refrain:

No storm can shake my inmost calm  
while to that Rock I’m clinging.  
Since love is Lord of heaven and earth,  
how can I keep from singing?

2. Through all the tumult and the strife,  
I hear that music ringing.  
It finds an echo in my soul.  
How can I keep from singing?  
(Refrain)

3. What though my joys and comforts die?  
I know my Savior liveth.  
What though the darkness gather round?  
Songs in the night he giveth.  
(Refrain)<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps we learn to “do no harm;” perhaps we teach our world to live in deeper relationships with one another; perhaps the transformation happens as the Church steps boldly into a world that seems determined to devour one another, confident in the Love that embraces all. Where do we begin following a week like last week? Perhaps we begin by singing a new creation into being, and “Since Love is Lord of heaven and earth,” how can we ever keep from singing?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.progressiveboink.com/2012/4/21/2912173/calvinhobbes>

<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:14-19, NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 12:17-18, *The Message*.

<sup>4</sup> Job, Reuben P. *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.hymnsite.com/fws/hymn.cgi?2212>