Beyond 'us and them'

by Patricia Datchuck Sánchez by Illustration by Mark Bartholomew

Spiritual Reflections

Humans have a penchant for cultivating an "us and them" mentality. In the ancient world, some among Jesus' contemporaries had grown up with such a mentality, and it was difficult to overcome. For centuries, the Jews had been accustomed to their special role as God's chosen people. They were to be uniquely instrumental in God's plan of salvation for all people.

However, at times, they regarded this unique responsibility more as a privilege. Those whom God had so blessed and graced began to think in terms of "us and them," with "us" being far better than "them."
Perhaps some had begun to lose sight of the fact that God's choice was precisely that -- God's choice. Not merited or even deserved, God's choice was rooted in God's loving prerogative and was to be gratefully welcomed as a gift.

Just as each of us needs reminding as to who we are in God's eyes, so also were our ancient forebears gently reminded: "It was not because you are the largest of all nations that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you, for you are really the smallest of all nations. It was because the Lord loved you and because of God's fidelity to the oath God had sworn to your fathers. ... Understand then that the Lord your God is the faithful God who keeps his merciful covenant down to the thousandth generation" (Deuteronomy 7:7-9).

With these thoughts in mind, our ancestors in the faith were to realize that though their role was special in God's eyes, so all the nations of the earth were special unto God and were to be respected as such. When these thoughts are forgotten, prejudice can find a foothold -- the type of prejudice we see reflected in the sacred texts for today.

While telling the story of Naaman the leper, the author of 2 Kings was well aware that his readers would have regarded Naaman as doubly disadvantaged and doubly disdained. Not only did he suffer from a debilitating disease that caused him to be ostracized from a society that feared contagion, he was also a foreigner whom the Israelites regarded as outside the pale of salvation.

Nevertheless, God's action in this regard affirmed that no person is beyond the scope of God's concern. Finding himself cured, Naaman believed and was converted to the God of all creation and of all humankind. Naaman was God's own and one in whom the tender mercies of God were being revealed. If God has no favorites, how can we? If God ignores no one, how dare we?

Similarly, in the Lucan Gospel, the grateful Samaritan leper healed by Jesus is held forth not as a victim of a dread disease or a despised foreigner but as one whom God loves. Like so many other unlikely people throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, he was the one in whom the all-inclusive mercies of God were being revealed through Jesus.

If God has no bias or prejudice, neither can we, if we profess to believe in God. If God loves unconditionally and without measure, so should we who call ourselves God's own. Because God has repeatedly assured us, "I have loved you with an everlasting love, I have called you and you are mine!" so we are to assure one another. (See "I Have Loved You," a song by Michael Joncas, based on Jeremiah 31:3.)

You are mine, God says to each of us. If all of us are God's beloved possessions, let us revere one another as sacred places where God has chosen to dwell, now and forever.

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