

**Bridging Our Divides:**  
**Why Liberals and Conservatives Need Each Other**  
**Part 6: Sanctity**  
**October 14, 2018**  
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Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 12:7-13; Ephesians 4:4-7, 11-16

**I. Dad and Jesus**

The apostle Paul talks a lot about how we are all spiritually members of one body in Christ, each of whom is given a different gift that serves Christ's body. Some are given the gift of wisdom while others are given the gift of discernment, and so forth. I learned from my father long ago, however, that when it comes to being a disciple of Jesus, it's not just our spiritual selves that matter, but our physical bodies as well.

It was July 3rd. I was six years old. My father and I had just shared lunch at the Guadalajara Mexican Restaurant. The Guadalajara, ensconced in the basement of the building where my dad worked at the corner of Fourth and Pike Streets in Seattle, was my favorite. The cheese enchiladas there were better than candy, and my dad used to pay me a full dollar anytime I could eat a whole jalapeno pepper (which probably explains why I love to sweat when I eat spicy food.).

After lunch, Dad and I walked down to the Pike Place Market, a popular gathering place even now, where fishmongers, farmers, and artisans sell their wares. I loved the market for all its frenetic activity and the street performers who were almost always there to entertain.

On this particular day, however, as we approached the square, there was a different kind of entertainment on the street. A man was standing behind a booth, shouting through a megaphone and inviting everyone to join a party!

I read the sign in front of his booth over and over but couldn't figure out what kind of party he wanted us to join. I'd never heard of the S-O-C-I-A-L-I-S-T party.

I also couldn't figure out why the party guy seemed so serious. He was shouting into his megaphone, and his tone of voice didn't exactly seem festive. Perhaps it was because no one seemed to be signing up. I felt sorry for him.

"Why, we'll sign up!" I thought. But when we got to the edge of the square, we observed a short, rotund man moving toward the S-O-C-I-A-L-I-S-T party guy. He was carrying a little American flag in one hand and a shopping bag in the other. At first I thought he was heading over to sign the invitation list, but then I noticed his angry expression. He was muttering something that sounded hostile.

As he drew near the guy at the table, the flag-carrying guy's muttering turned to shouting. He used words I'd never heard as he demanded that the party guy leave the square. The party guy kept shouting into his megaphone, trying to ignore the flag guy. Then the flag guy ripped the S-O-C-I-A-L-I-S-T party sign off the man's table, crumpled it up, and tossed it onto the street!

"That's not nice!" I declared under my breath. The party guy seemed a bit nervous now but continued shouting into his megaphone. I had no idea what he was saying; I was too shocked by the behavior of the flag guy, who, not content with tearing down the man's sign, proceeded to knock over his table.

When not even this stopped the party guy from speaking into his megaphone, the flag guy set his shopping bag down and threatened to punch the party guy. At this point, the party guy stopped shouting into the megaphone and thrust out his hands in a vain effort to prevent the flag guy's assault.

That's when my dad sprang into action. Even though we were probably twenty feet away from the melee, my dad inserted himself between the flag guy and the party guy in the blink of an eye. At 6'5", Dad created an imposing presence. Looking the flag guy straight in the eye, he spoke firmly, "He has as much right to speak his mind as you do."

The flag guy only became more enraged, shouting now at my dad to get out of the way. Dad coolly held out his hand in a "Stop!" gesture, asserting that the flag guy had best move on and leave the party guy alone. The flag guy only got angrier.

He tried to punch my father.

From this point on, my memory is something of a blur. I became hysterical. In my world—the world of Batman television shows and Spider-Man comics—when adults fought one another, it was to the death. I literally believed that one of these men—my dad or the flag guy—was going to die. I screamed.

Through my tears, I saw my dad deflect the first punch and the second. Then he held out his arm full length against the flag guy's chest, shouting, "Back off, *sir!*"

Given the size difference between the two men, the flag guy couldn't hit my dad as long as he extended his arm.

The flag guy backed off, muttering something to my dad I couldn't hear. He seized his shopping bag and stomped away. The S-O-C-I-A-L-I-S-T party guy gave my dad a sheepish but grateful smile, and my dad hastened over to me. I was still crying and trembling uncontrollably. In my world, Dad had just put his life on the line for a perfect stranger.

My dad suggested we go get a Coke, and I readily agreed. Anything to leave that square.

Over Cokes at a nearby restaurant, my dad tried to explain what transpired in the square. He grabbed a napkin, took out a pen, drew a line down the middle, and gave me my first lesson in politics. He explained the differences between Socialists and Democrats, which he put left of the line, and Republicans on the right.

From my dad's explanation, I could tell that there was probably nothing the Socialist guy stood for that my dad agreed with. He was definitely a Republican and thought everyone capable of rational thought should be one too.

I was astonished. Here my dad had just risked his life on behalf of someone's right to say things he entirely disagreed with. In this moment, from my child's-eye perspective, I perceived little difference between Dad and Jesus.

What motivated my dad to step into harm's way to protect a stranger on the square? Surely it was not his love for the Socialist party or for the man himself, who was a perfect stranger. No, it was perfectly clear to me even at that tender age that my dad acted so quickly and decisively because he loved Jesus. For he had taught me for years that Jesus wants us to love our neighbor as ourselves, which included our neighbor who might consider us their enemy.

So my dad sprang into action without giving it so much as a second thought. He protected the party-guy without weighing the risk, and he refused to use his considerable size advantage to harm the flag-guy in any way to assert his dominance. In other words, Dad served his Lord not only in his heart but with his very flesh and blood. In that moment, like Jesus himself, my dad became love incarnate.

I would like to believe that something in my father's actions spoke deeply to the assailant. Rather than backing off simply because he'd made a simple (and

accurate) calculation of relative force, perhaps something of the justice and grace behind my father's response called to the man's own inner sensibilities, inspiring him to change his intended course of action.

I would also like to think that the Socialist was moved in some way, too, aside from being relieved that a Good Samaritan showed up. He seemed so angry about things that were going on in our country. Perhaps what happened gave him a little faith there was goodness, too.

Whether or not my dad's action had any lasting effect on the two men on the square, what I do know is that it had an indelible effect on me. He showed me that the teachings of Jesus weren't merely ideas you stored up in your souls, but ideas that required flesh-and-blood action – sometimes actions taken without counting the cost.

## **II. Sanctity and Survival**

In his book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Jonathan Haidt observes that Sanctity (i.e., "the God thing") is one of six universal moral matrixes that act like taste buds when we make moral decisions. (Reminder: the other 5 are Caring – which I call Compassion – Fairness, Liberty – which I call Freedom – Loyalty, and Authority). According to Haidt's research, those who consider themselves politically "conservative" tend to value all the moral flavors relatively equally. When making moral decisions they want to taste the "flavor" of all six moral matrixes, without one dominating the other.

On the other hand, those who consider themselves "liberal" tend to prefer Compassion far above all the moral "flavors." Other "flavors" they prefer are Fairness and Liberty (especially when defined as "freedom from oppression"). With respect to the other three "flavors" – Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity – they tend to be fairly neutral, or even negatively disposed toward them, often due to ways they perceive these qualities have been misused in the past.

As we've stated repeatedly in this series, not all "conservatives" or "liberals" fit this characterization. I myself don't fit neatly into either the "conservative" or "liberal" box. One of the things that makes me a bit of an odd duck in either camp is that I prefer the *combination* of Sanctity and Compassion far more highly than other "flavors" in moral "dishes" I'm offered. It's kind of like the way I prefer the combination of sweet and spicy in Asian dishes above all others.

Frankly, it makes me crazy that most political liberalism treats the Sanctity "flavor" more like something bitter that you only want to use in very small quantities, if at

all. I get why they do it. They affirm the value of living in a secular democracy rather than a theocracy – as I do – but to many people this means cutting out reference to any specific religious belief whatsoever. I think it means encouraging people of all religious beliefs to engage their faith deeply in their political discourse and moral decision-making rather than disallowing faith-based perspectives from any kind of public conversation.

I think political liberals would have a more sympathetic ear in the public if they at least treated Sanctity like salt. You don't want to use salt in high quantities or it destroys the dish, but if salt is well-integrated throughout the dish, it makes all the other flavors more intense and interesting.

Here's one way I see Sanctity working like salt in creating a healthy community:

I just returned from speaking at a symposium of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches in Marshalltown, Iowa. This body is made up of Congregationalist churches that did not merge with the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1957 to create the United Church of Christ. They're a smaller body than ours, but they are intensely Congregational – uber-Congregationalists! Like those of us in the UCC, they consider the fullest expression of the Body of Christ in our world to be the local congregation. There is no higher authority on the ecclesial totem pole than the local church – not the denomination, not the pope, not the world church. But in contrast to the UCC, this belief in local church autonomy leads them to shun denominations altogether – though I did notice how their “national association” acts pretty much acts like a denomination ...

In any case, what I found endearing about this group of Congregationalist souls is that the idea of the local congregation being the Body of Christ is very much alive and well. They take the apostle Paul seriously when he says that the Christian community acts like Christ's body, with every member having an important role to play. Even if a congregation may vote to move in a certain direction, the diversity of points-of-view within the congregation are believed to be essential to making decisions that are the most likely to reflect God's will.

We in the United Church of Christ do well to remember our Congregationalist roots. For, though we tend to be theologically liberal, and tend to lean in a politically liberal direction, we are actually a pretty rich mixture of Republicans (31%) and Democrats (58%) nationally, and particularly so in the Midwest where the Republican percentage is higher. Our uber-Congregationalist sisters and brothers might remind us, therefore, that churches with this kind of mix need to find ways in which liberal and conservative viewpoints complement one another,

rather than conflict with one another, in acting together as a healthy body. This equanimity may not be valued in the world of politics, but churches are spiritual communities before they are political ones. As spiritual communities we are highly diverse people who serve the one Lord, one Spirit.

Curiously, Jonathan Haidt points out that there may be another reason why liberals and conservatives need to work together, in or outside churches: genetics. A growing body of research shows that the majority of political "liberals" and "conservatives" *are actually born this way!*

Neuroscientists have found that the brains of "conservatives" and "liberals" tend to be "wired" differently. While differences in political outlook can be explained by social conditioning or life experiences that affect how our brains function, other differences are apparently there from birth.

It's not that our genes *determine* whether we'll be politically conservative or liberal, but they do make us prone to liberalism or conservatism, just as our genes influence whether we're prone to be overweight or not, or prone to addiction or not. The genes don't make it that way, but they do tip the balance in a certain direction.

There are two genes in particular that influence our political choices. One gene tends to make people more prone than average to fearing the unknown. Thus, they have a higher-than-average desire for safety, security, and predictability. Yet another gene tends to make people more prone than average to loving novelty, the unknown, and adventure, thus making them bored by predictability and "playing it safe."

As a general rule the "adventurers" tend to grow up to become political "liberals" while the "safety and security" people tend to become politically "conservative."

Again, these are generalizations to which there are many exceptions. People who don't know my sister-in-law, Corrie, very well, for instance, tend to assume she's kind of a "hippie" because she is about as politically liberal as they come and has a "granola-ish" artistic flair. But Corrie is also about the most "traditional" person I know – if you define traditional as keeping to what might be called "heritage" American values. She grows a lot of her own food. She doesn't believe in microwaves. Nor does she own a television, preferring reading and making music over any form of electronic culture. She carefully records the stories of elders throughout her family tree so that they can be remembered by future generations. She prefers repairing things over throwing them away. Corrie's biggest recent purchase was a wood stove – for cooking.

Corrie doesn't fit the mold and perhaps neither do you. But the point Haidt is making is that, if we realize that many of us "conservatives" or "liberals" are genetically preconditioned to be this way, we might be more tolerant with one another. We might also acknowledge that if human evolution has privileged this kind of diversity over uniformity, then it must somehow be essential to the human species to have some people who are always looking for the next new thing, and some people who prefer the same old things; some people who prefer tradition and some who prefer innovation; some who are more concerned with safety and some who throw caution to the wind. Together, they create a healthy human ecosystem.

As a person of faith, for whom Sanctity is among my most important values, our genetics provide a scientific "amen" to my spiritual belief as a Congregationalist Christian: Christ's Body – the local church – thrives on diversity. There is no such thing as a Body of Christ where each and every member believes the same things, acts the same way, or votes alike, even as they serve one Lord, one Spirit.

I pray that as, our future unfolds, there will be more Christians in our country like my father, who are actually Christian. People whose faith moves them to act without hesitation, and without counting the cost, when the diversity of human life is neither valued, nor respected; Christians who not only put their hearts on the line but their physical bodies as well in order to protect those whose beliefs may be quite different from their own because of the conviction that a healthy and holy body has many members. In this respect, I pray that there are more Christians like those I encounter each and every day at Countryside Community Church.