

PASTOR'S NOTES. Doing Religion and Politics Differently, Part 3.

*“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”*

Galatians 3:26-28 (NRSV)

When we group people by categories, it allows us to make quick decisions, and this often serves us well. As if on autopilot, we avoid that person on the bus who seems different to us. It makes life simpler and usually safer, even though we might be misjudging them.

The way we divide up people may seem obvious to us, but we were taught to think this. For example, I have been programmed to see racial distinctions. In grade school I was taught that there were three races of people: Caucasian, Mongoloid, and Negroid. Living among white people with German and English backgrounds, and living near a black ghetto with African-American people, this seemed such an obvious truth, and still does. And yet as I study history I find out that this distinction dates back to around 1600, with almost no evidence before then. In Genesis 10:6-14, Ham, one of the sons of Noah, is the ancestor of the African people, but also several Asian and Middle Eastern peoples. They didn't divide people in the same way back then. I notice certain physical traits and consider them significant: skin color, nose shape, hair type. Earlier generations noticed other things.

Another distinction is much more recent. Around 1864, German thinkers developed a concept of homosexuality – that some persons were naturally attracted to persons of the same gender, both romantically and sexually. This idea of sexual orientation was popularized in this country in the early 1900s by the work of Sigmund Freud. From his work, we have inherited many of our attitudes about human sexuality:

- 1 – that we are primarily sexual beings;
- 2 – that there is a difference between general attraction and sexual attraction – and the latter is primarily based on gender (*you are sexually attracted to many persons, but they are all of one gender or the other – this has been modified slightly in recent years*);
- 3 – and that this orientation is biologically based.

While over the decades we have come to question many of Freud's assumptions, these three assumptions have gone largely unquestioned.

In college I took a course on behavioral genetics – so I'm not an expert, but I did learn that on whether behavior is inherited (“nature”) or learned (“nurture”), we usually get it wrong. We assume that if something about us is biological, then it is unchangeable; while if something is sociological, or learned, then we can change it. The reality is often the reverse. We are much farther ahead in treating biologically-based conditions than sociologically-based ones. If we discover that someone is suffering because of something physical, we can use some kind of drug to treat it. Someone who is suffering

because of a troubled home life will usually require extended trial-and-error treatments, maybe medication, and likely counseling and rehabilitation. This is not an “either-or” situation; many aspects of our lives may be a combination of inherited and environmental factors. I have met people with clear biological differences that relate to how they understand their sexuality (including some that might be labeled “Intersexual”). But these are rare; I suspect that biological factors play less of a role than most of us assume.

I suspect that all three of these assumptions are either incomplete, or simply false. I could say more about why, but I am more concerned with the damage we have done to individuals, regardless of how well-intentioned. We have categorized people based on these assumptions; people have been told their life has been determined; we have been taught to say “I was born this way” instead of the more accurate “I have been this way as long as I remember.”

Consider the case of Calvin (not his real name). Calvin self-identified as a gay man, Yes, he was this way “as long as I remember,” but he would also say he was born that way – that is what he was told over the years. Calvin was one of four men I have counseled who self-identify as gay and who were sexually abused as a child, in his case by his uncle. I do not believe that every gay man was abused in this way, but I am struck at how common this story is. Nonetheless, I believe each of us has a unique story, and there are likely a million different reasons that might lead a person to identify themselves this way. But for Calvin, a recovering alcoholic who was reflective and wise about life in almost every other way, he never questioned the “science” of his sexuality, at least not openly.

At various times in our life we might want to be categorized; we want to fit in somewhere. But more of the time the categories strip us of our full humanity. Calvin had both a sexual history and that of an addict, but neither of those ultimately defined who he was; a precious child of God, uniquely created for divine purposes. A woman once asked me about her sister Candice, who had been in a relationship with a woman earlier but was now with a man. “I don’t get it – is she a lesbian, or is she bisexual, what is she?” I don’t know if she was really asking, but being me, I tried an answer: “Candice is Candice. The labels don’t tell us anything about who she really is.”

You are probably wondering why this article is titled about religion and politics when I have been talking mostly about sexuality. This is because I only get two pages at a time, and I will relate this to our religion and politics discussion in part 4.

In the meantime, I pray that you and I will look past any labels to see our sisters and brothers as our Lord sees them – His unique creations, persons He willingly died for, and persons meant to be missionaries of His glorious will.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive, flowing style.