

Listen, Listen, Speak

*Hearing God and Being Heard
in a Noisy World*

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Four

Screaming to Belong

A close friend texted me one morning in a panic. A day earlier he'd posted on his social media accounts what he thought was a fairly benign opinion about some political matter. I know what you're thinking. No political matter is "fairly benign" these days. Nevertheless, the virality of his post was unexpected and unwanted, and it came as a shock. There were a handful of affirmations, but mostly, the online masses came out of the woodwork to scrutinize, criticize, nitpick, and split hairs. They came with their torches to set fire to his credibility. They came to cancel my friend.

Most were distant online acquaintances. Some were trolls looking for another nameless, faceless victim to devour. But many of the incensed were friends he'd known personally, some for many years. At one point, he texted me, "Outrage culture is decimating my real life friendships." Decimate is right.

For centuries, Rome was a global superpower. At the height of its dominance, the empire ruled from modern-day

England to India. The backbone of Roman ascendance was its military, which relied heavily on ruthless discipline. Roman soldiers were heavily armored at the chest, but their backs were uncovered in battle, the thought being that there was never an instance when it'd be appropriate to turn and retreat. Any soldiers who failed to hold their position were publicly punished. One-tenth of the group would be chosen at random and bludgeoned to death. In Latin, the word for "ten" is *decem*. This is where we get the word *decimate*, which today has taken on the meaning "destroy."

A random selection eliminated.

Impulsive cancellation.

Such brutality contributed to Rome's rise for a time. But eventually, Rome burned. A culture built on decimation was decimated.

OUTRAGE AND TRIBALISM

Widespread outrage is not a new phenomenon, but the rise of social media has pressurized us all in a unique way. Much like in Rome, there is in our culture today an increasingly incessant and insatiable hunger for elimination. Cancel culture has a quota. Someone, or more accurately many someones, must go. And the bar for revocation is ever changing. What matters most is that there be a target for the outrage. As Jonathan Haidt puts it, "Social media has both magnified

and weaponized the frivolous.”¹ The bow is perpetually drawn and the arrows must fly, justified or not.

The digital age perpetuates this because outrage sells. Angry and vociferous posts garner the most engagement online. Studies have shown that “outrageous content generates more revenue through viral sharing, natural selection-like forces may favour ‘supernormal’ stimuli that trigger much stronger outrage responses than do transgressions we typically encounter in everyday life.”² The internet amplifies outrage, increasing its volume and velocity in ways typically unseen in person. It’s easier to scream at an avatar on a screen than a real human face-to-face.

Simultaneously, outrage is proving grossly ineffective when it comes to actual change. It has little to no effect on real opinions or real-life circumstances on the ground. It’s more about what the writer Ashley Charles calls “clicktivism,” which she describes as “the modern-day picket sign for the work-shy yet well intentioned who share their outrage through hashtags, online petitions and rambling captions about equal rights.”³ She continues, “Had a long day and couldn’t get round to any real protesting? You need clicktivism! Feel like supporting a political campaign but also feel like taking an afternoon nap? . . . I know just the thing . . . clicktivism!” Because of its ease and accessibility, clicktivism has set our online lives ablaze with rage, leading people like neuroscientist Molly Crockett to ask, “If moral outrage is a fire, is

the internet like gasoline?"⁴ The answer is yes. As Rome once did, we are burning today in an inferno of our own making.

Our militant at-the-ready posture toward one another has led to a deep and hostile division pervading our nation, cities and towns, neighborhoods and schools, workplaces and social circles, friendships, families, homes, and churches. We've become enslaved to tribalism. The political analyst Martin Gurri assesses our current condition this way:

[There used to be] massive numbers of people all essentially looking into a gigantic mirror in which they saw themselves reflected. So most people were consuming the same content and there was a common denominator. The digital revolution has shattered that mirror, and now the public inhabits those broken pieces of glass. So the public isn't one thing; it's highly fragmented, and it's basically mutually hostile. It's mostly people yelling at each other and living in bubbles of one sort or another.⁵

In an age of outrage and tribalism, it isn't eggshells we're walking on. It's shattered glass. The damage done is far more severe as we bleed our humanity all over the cold concrete of division and polarization. The irony, though, is that outrage and tribalism themselves are fragile outer shells, protective

coverings tenuously harboring delicate human souls longing for more.

The writer Parker Palmer describes the soul as a wild animal. He writes, “If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance.”⁶ Outrage is like crashing through the woods. In response, our souls take flight toward the covering of either isolation or the faux safety of tribes tenuously and temporarily held together by a thinly shared opinion.

The truth is, almost no one *wants* to be outraged and tribalistic. Most people desire healthy relationships and societies built on meaningful connections. Most people want to *belong*. But because of all the anger and division, we’ve come to believe that real belonging is impossible, leaving us perplexed, frustrated, and alone. We are exhausted. But we are in fact more connected by our exhaustion than we might know.

According to a comprehensive research report called Hidden Tribes, when it comes to politics—no doubt the source of our rage—67 percent of Americans categorically belong to what they call the “exhausted majority.”⁷ These are ideologically flexible individuals who support working toward compromise but who feel fatigued and forgotten in the political

landscape. If that sounds a bit like you, then you're like most people today.

You'd never know it from social media and the twenty-four-hour news cycle, but most of us aren't as outraged and tribalistic as you've been led to believe. Most are simply and thoroughly exhausted. Most are lonely, isolated, and searching for belonging, like you and like me.

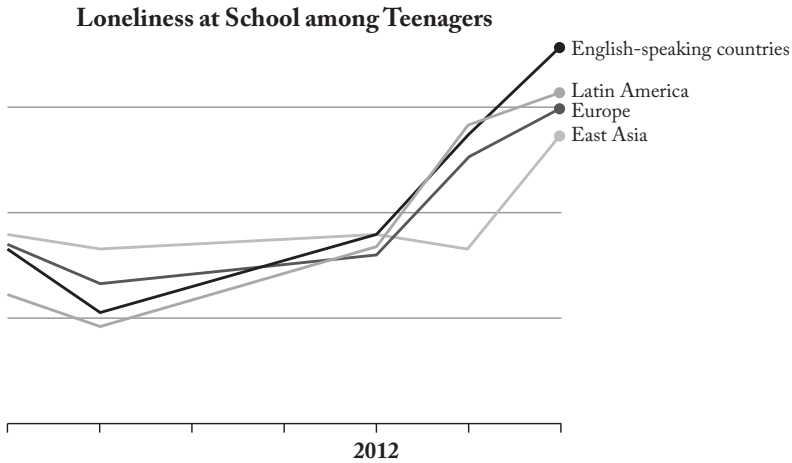
SCREAMING TO BELONG

In February 2021, Harvard University conducted a vast research study to measure loneliness in our country and found that:

- 36 percent of all Americans identify as being “lonely all or almost all the time.”⁸
- 61 percent of those between 18–25 say they're “lonely all or almost all the time.”⁹
- 63 percent of young adults suffer high rates of loneliness, anxiety, and depression.¹⁰
- 42 percent of those between 18–34 say they “always feel left out.”¹¹

Take a look at this graph.¹²

It measures loneliness at school among teenagers—“at school” is the operative phrase. This isn't loneliness while alone. This is loneliness while surrounded by dozens of classmates



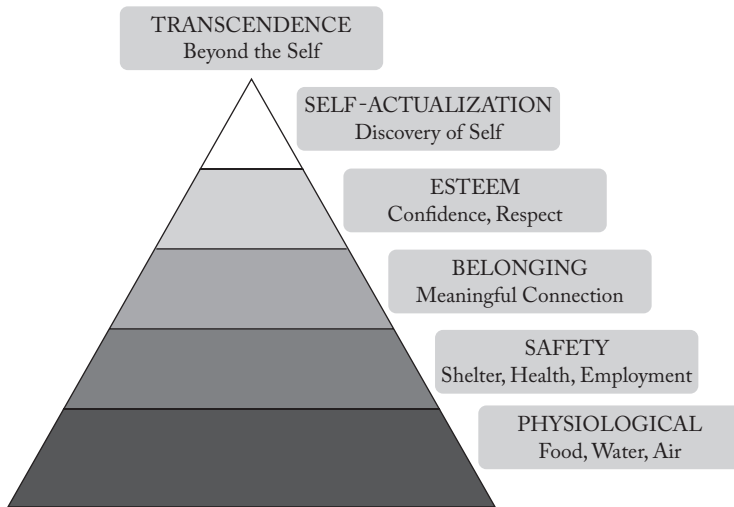
and hundreds, maybe thousands, of fellow teenagers throughout the school day.

Notice that there is a very clear spike upward about two-thirds of the way across the horizontal axis, a timeline ranging from the early 2000s to the late 2010s. The significant spike upward in loneliness occurs right around 2012, which was the year that smartphones became ubiquitous in the hands of teenagers. It was also the year Facebook bought Instagram. At the end of 2011, Instagram had about 15 million active users. By the end of 2012, that number was 100 million. Today, Instagram has more than 2 billion active users.¹³

The correlation here of loneliness with smartphone and social media use is not coincidental nor insignificant. The pervasiveness of the smartphone and the all-consuming, magnetic allure of social media are spiraling an entire generation into a vortex of isolation, depression, and despair.¹⁴

Though we are living in an increasingly digitally interconnected world, we are personally disconnected, which has led us to a crisis of *belonging*. In her aptly titled book *Alone Together*, MIT professor Sherry Turkle writes: “We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections . . . may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. We’d rather text than talk.”¹⁵

Many of us, I’m sure, are familiar with Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, developed by the psychologist in 1943. To put it simply, the hierarchy of needs is a way of mapping how human beings prioritize their motivations and behaviors.



At the base of the pyramid is the most fundamental motivating factor for human behavior, physiological need—food,

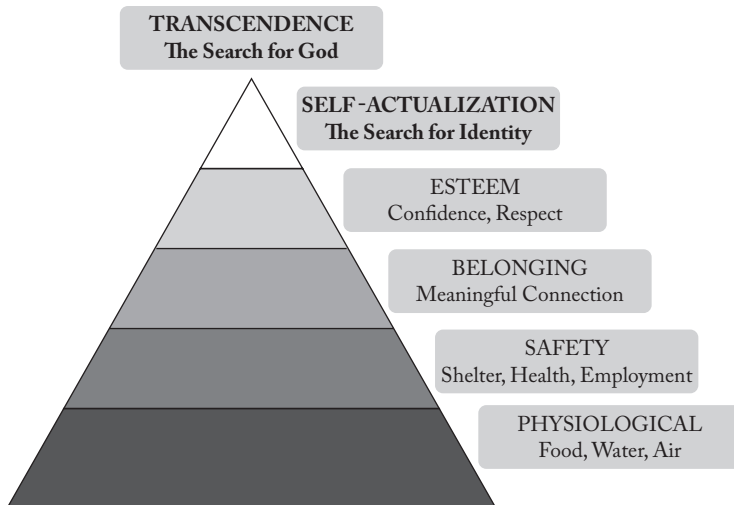
water, breathable air, and so on. Imagine a leisurely boat ride with a friend. The water is calm, the sun warms your back, and the two of you are having a deep conversation about life and the search for meaning. All is well until your friend stands up to stretch, loses his balance, and falls into the water. Imagine also that this friend is not wearing a life jacket and does not know how to swim. Panic ensues, for him at least. Now, imagine the unthinkable—that you simply continue chatting on, asking him about his aspirational desires, not noticing his desperate need for immediate help.

What would be happening to your friend in this case? At this point, he'd care less about conversing deeply about the meaning of life—indeed, in the grand scheme of things, an essential conversation—and care only about saving his actual life. This is Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Only when our more primal needs are met can we rise up toward the more complex, nuanced, and meaningful needs of human experience. But as you move up the pyramid, assuming that your baseline needs are met, other human needs, motivating factors, and behaviors begin to arise.

So once physiological needs—food, water, and so on—are met, there are safety needs—shelter, health, employment, and so on. From there, the pyramid moves upward toward belonging—the human need for meaningful connection and relationships. Then there's what Maslow calls esteem, which is self-confidence and respect from others. Above that is

self-actualization, which is essentially about discovering and developing self-identity and, from that, finding a hope for life. Finally, in his later years, Maslow added a final category at the very top of the pyramid called transcendence, which is the search for meaning beyond the self.

For all intents and purposes, the hierarchy of needs is a secular tool, but it identifies fundamentally human, and therefore spiritual, needs. When Maslow talks about transcendence, for followers of Jesus, we would view that as the search for God. And for self-actualization, we'd understand that as the search for identity, which we ultimately find in Christ.



Chances are you're reading this book, a Christian book, because somewhere along the way you found your identity and

hope in Christ. You discovered that the search for God was not in vain, that God can indeed be found, or better yet, that you could be found by God. But think for a moment about your very early days with God, the infancy of your faith in Christ, when your heart and mind first encountered the truth of the Gospel. Who's there?

You, of course. And Jesus, yes. Solid Christian answer.

But who else?

Maybe a parent or a grandparent.

Maybe a small-group leader.

A youth pastor.

A friend who invited you to church.

Maybe a youth group. Or a campus ministry.

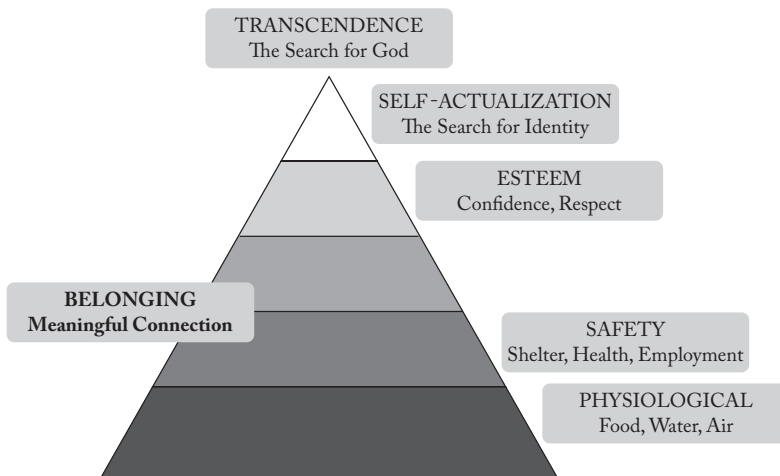
Very likely a local church community.

The point is that for many, if not most—if not all of us—at some point we were found by God and discovered our identity in Christ, we encountered the truth of the gospel, and this cataclysmic, transformative reorienting of our lives unfolded within, through, and into the loving care of a community of *belonging*.

On our journey toward identity and toward God himself, we found Christ-centered communities anchored in truth that didn't shun us but rather welcomed us with open arms, with all of our doubts and confusion and brokenness and shame, in spite of our differences and divisions. And this community lovingly walked alongside us, as slowly as necessary, never

wavering off the true path but always trekking along at a communal pace, a pace we could keep up with.

Outrage and tribalism threaten this all-important journey. They amplify our differences and divisions, feed off them, and divert us from both discovering our truest identity in Christ and God himself. Instead we are led down paths of cheap carbon copies of “belonging.”



All the while, there's a dangerous deception at play. As we shout from our tribe toward opposing tribes, we are galvanized in our tribe and come to believe that this is what belonging looks like. This is one of the reasons why so many cultural movements today can build momentum so quickly. The opportunity to take part in the collective energy of a group bound together is like a stream in the desert of isolation. To the parched soul of the lonely, it doesn't matter where

the stream came from or where it's headed; all we know is it's water and we're thirsty and sooner than we can think, we drink.

This is the challenge and opportunity before us. Followers of Jesus are called to do the difficult and beautiful work of carving paths of belonging through all the outrage and tribalism, paths paved by grace and truth, and made accessible to the lonely, isolated, and all those in despair. Together, as Christians, we must declare loudly and clearly, boldly and beautifully, that *belonging* is possible—deep, meaningful belonging, to God and his people.

The apostle Paul reminded the first Christians in Ephesus, “You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19–20).

No longer foreigners and strangers but citizens and members of his household. The phrase *members of his household* was shorthand for extended family in the ancient world and in the original text is conveyed by the single Greek word *oikeioi*. The Greek word for “strangers” is *paroikoi*. Both words share the same root word—*oikos*—meaning “home.”

“Strangers,” or *paroikoi*, are those who dwell near or next to a home.

“Members of a household,” or *oikeioi*, are those who dwell within a home.

Strangers and family are closer than we think. Eugene

Peterson beautifully paraphrases Ephesians 2:19–20 this way: “This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You’re no longer strangers or outsiders. You *belong* here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He’s using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building” (MSG).

You belong here. This is the path people are desperate for. In her book *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*, Rosaria Butterfield reminds us that “this transition from stranger to neighbor to family does not happen naturally but only with intent and grit and sacrifice and God’s blessing.”¹⁶

Intent. Grit. Sacrifice. It won’t be easy, and it will be costly. Specifically, combating outrage and tribalism and inviting people to belong will demand the intent, grit, and sacrifice necessary to see clearly in an age when so many are seeing red.

That etymology of the euphemism *seeing red* is thought to come from a couple of sources, both violent and hostile. It’s possible that the phrase is connected to the idea of using red flags among ancient militaries to signal preparations for battle. Others believe the phrase comes from the sport of bullfighting and the signature red muleta used by matadors to incite raging bulls. Ironically, bulls are blind to the color red. It is in fact the matador’s movement of the muleta that enrages the beast.

And so it is with outrage and tribalism. We see red and

we charge. But in reality, we're colorblind. We're not seeing what we think we're seeing. In order to empathetically and compassionately hear and respond to the longing for belonging beneath the anger, we must first learn to see clearly.

PLANK IN THE EYE

I was a lonely kid most of my life. My mother struggled to make ends meet for much of my childhood, which meant moving from apartment to apartment, looking for new job opportunities and cheaper rent. I went to four elementary schools in five years, making it nearly impossible to establish meaningful friendships.

I wrote earlier in the book about my inability to speak English when I entered first grade, and so on my first day of school I was immediately placed in an English as a second language class. I was the only kid in the class and spent most of that year completely ostracized from my fellow students.

One of the earliest memories I have from that year is from a day when my mom had packed me *kimbap*, which is essentially Korean sushi. This was before sushi was mainstream. When the other kids eating their PB&Js, sloppy joes, and rectangular pizzas saw my seaweed-wrapped rice, there was immediate uproar.

“Gross!”

“What are you eating?”

“That’s not food!”

I’d gone from being unseen to having all eyes on me for the worst reasons. One moment, I’d wanted nothing more than to be noticed; the next moment, I was willing to give anything to disappear. I loathed being invisible, and yet, in that very moment, I wanted to be nothing but invisible.

This is my earliest memory of feeling judged. I was six, but I recall the emotions vividly—feelings of being judged sear themselves into our hearts because it makes us feel simultaneously exposed and yet unseen.

When we judge, we don’t see clearly. We see red.

And in turn, tragically, the one being judged begins to see the same. Anger ensues, and, looking for cover, we divide into our groups, and the cycle of judgment continues.

In his book *Talking to Strangers*, Malcolm Gladwell writes, “We think we can easily see into the hearts of others based on the flimsiest of clues. We jump at the chance to judge strangers. We would never do that to ourselves, of course. We are nuanced and complex and enigmatic. But the stranger is easy.”¹⁷ We rarely afford others the generous benefit of the doubt we afford ourselves.

This is heartbreaking, not just for the one being judged but for the one judging. In not truly seeing the other person, the one doing the judging becomes blind. Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes it this way: “Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others we blind ourselves to

our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are.”¹⁸ In the world of social psychology, this blindness is often identified as actor-observer bias, the human tendency to attribute our own circumstances and behaviors to external causes while attributing others’ circumstances and behaviors to internal realities. A coworker gets a promotion you felt you deserved and expected, and your first thoughts are “I didn’t get the promotion because the boss hates me” and “She got the promotion because she’s willing to play office politics.” This is actor-observer bias, and we judge others in this way a lot. We do it primarily for two reasons.

First, we do it to position ourselves over and above others. “I can’t believe they did that / they’re like that. What a mess. I would never . . .”

Second, we do it to protect ourselves from being exposed. “I can’t believe they did that / they’re like that. What a mess. At least I’m not . . .”

Both are, at their core, ways to conceal our real and whole selves from others and from ourselves. As a result, both are equally detrimental to meaningful connection and simultaneously vital to the survival of outrage and tribalism. Ultimately, both tendencies—to position ourselves and to protect ourselves—are tied to our shame. As Curt Thompson astutely points out, “The act of judging others has its origins in our self-judgment . . . ‘Shamed people shame people.’ Long before we are criticizing others, the source of that criticism has been

planted, fertilized and grown in our own lives, directed at ourselves, and often in ways we are mostly unaware of.”¹⁹ We judge because we’re ashamed. Put another way, outrage and tribalism cover a multitude of shame. But Jesus offers a way out from beneath the crushing weight of our shame.

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? (Matthew 7:1–4)

We don’t often think of Jesus as funny, but he was.²⁰ A plank in the eye is a laughable and ludicrous image—intentionally so. Jesus is exposing the absolute absurdity of judgment. Judgment is ludicrous because all of us are living through the long arch of learning, growing, and changing. And to judge another person on that same journey simply because they are at a different point on that journey is to foolishly believe that we have somehow arrived when our own experiences make clear that there is and always will be so far to go. When we judge others, we are blind to the fact that our perspectives are just different. In his book *Humble*, social psychologist Daryl Van Tongeren

writes that “once we change our viewpoint, we can’t imagine why other people would be so foolish as to believe something different—even when we were those very same people in the recent past . . . Those who shift their ideological commitments roll their eyes at the ignorance of those who hold their previous beliefs. How quickly we forget how much we’ve learned, and how different we are now from what we once were. I can only imagine how incredibly annoyed I would be at myself ten, fifteen, or twenty years ago.”²¹

When I’m painstakingly honest with myself, most of the time, the things that annoy or disturb me most about others is the stuff most inherently broken inside of me. In judging, I see red and am blind to both the existing pain and potential good in the other, as well as the existing brokenness and potential evil within myself.

But at this point, we’re faced with a crucial question: What do we do with all of the actual brokenness in the world? Does acknowledgment of the plank in our eye lead to a different sort of blindness, toward the injustices, evils, and pain in our midst? “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly *to remove the speck* from your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:5, emphasis added).

Taking the plank out of our own eye is not an invitation to turn a blind eye toward the wrong in our midst. It’s the other way around. We take the plank out of our own eye in order that we might see clearly enough to join God in the

work of setting wrong things right. This is what judgment at its finest is. Eugene Peterson reminds us, “Judgment is not a word about things, describing them; it is a word that does things, putting love in motion, applying mercy, nullifying wrong, ordering goodness.”²² When we’re seeing red, we judge in order to position and protect ourselves at great expense to others, trampling and denigrating if necessary in order to hide in our shame. But when we begin to see clearly, judgment becomes an act of love, mercy, and goodness.

So how exactly do we begin to see clearly?

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. (Romans 12:3–5)

Seeing clearly begins with a “sober judgment” of ourselves. When we see red, when rage pushes us toward our tribes and we begin caricaturing those with whom we disagree, we take the plank out of our eye by taking a deep breath and praying even deeper prayers, asking God by his Spirit to ground us firmly in his peace and help us offer to others the patient

grace he has so kindly offered to us. From there we recognize that we are all a part of the grand mess called humanity and that nothing is as black and white or us versus them as we might've assumed.

Sin is a complicated web of relationships where my wrongdoing has a direct effect on the wrong in the world. I am not without blame and “they” are not the enemy. We are all sinners saved by grace. This is what sober judgment of ourselves looks like. Dietrich Bonhoeffer summarizes the idea this way: “Christian love sees the fellow-man under the cross and therefore sees with clarity. If when we judged others, our real motive was to destroy evil, we should look for evil where it is certain to be found, and that is in our own hearts.”²³

Within the family of God, among Christian brothers and sisters, I am not my own. I belong to God, yes. But I also belong to the one I'm prone to judge. We are one body. My wrongdoing has a direct effect on others just as theirs has on me. *We* sin, *we* suffer, and by God's grace, *we* are saved. Recognizing our own contribution to the communal plight of human experience compels us to act, to remove planks and specks, and to work toward justice in the world, beginning right here before moving out there.

What Christians must combat most fiercely is blindness to evil in all forms and in all places—in them, in me, in us. The battle is not us versus them. It isn't my tribe against their tribe. It's the truth and grace and transformative power of

God against the evil forces of the enemy of God waging war against each and every human soul—yours, mine, ours.

In order to speak good news in an age of noise, we must first remove the planks from our eyes to see clearly. And as we do, our ears will follow suit, allowing us to not only see, but *hear*, the desperate longing to belong beneath the outrage and tribalism.

A RETURN TO CYNICISM

In my interactions with people in my church over the past few years, I've noticed a considerable uptick in cynicism. It's a cynicism that goes far beyond mere doubts about intentions or uncertainties about the future. As congregants in my church share their concerns about the present and future of their lives and our world, there is a growing sense that things simply are the way they are and that there's little to no chance of improvement in the foreseeable future. And what is more, there seems to be a growing cynicism about each other. We're losing hope in one another. We're cynical about people.

In the fifth century BC, there was a Greek philosopher named Diogenes who was born in Sinope, a city on the northern coast of modern-day Turkey. After being banished from his hometown for embezzling money, Diogenes landed in Athens, where he met Antisthenes, widely credited as the founder of the philosophical movement called cynicism.

Originally, the movement was much more than what comes to mind for us when we think of cynicism. A cynical person today is one who abides by a fixed set of beliefs regarding the irreversible depravity of humans and the hopelessness of life. But for Antisthenes, cynicism wasn't a set of beliefs; it was a particular way to exist in the world.

Antisthenes was frustrated by all the high-philosophy talk of his day, well-educated men bantering back and forth, waxing poetic about the various ills of the day and how enlightened people ought to think rightly about such matters. But as Antisthenes saw it, these men did very little in and with their actual lives to embody the principles and values they elucidated so eloquently with words. Diogenes, inspired by the teachings of Antisthenes, committed himself to a life of simplicity as a means of protest against the hypocrisy of Athenian high society. He spent many years living in a large clay pot on the streets of the city, surviving by begging.

According to a famous anecdote, one evening Diogenes was eating lentils, the food of the poor. A respected philosopher named Aristippus, who'd achieved comfort and wealth by aligning himself with the king, approached Diogenes and said, "If you would learn to be subservient to the king, you wouldn't have to live on lentils." Diogenes replied, "If you learned to live on lentils, you wouldn't have to be subservient to the king." Another story says that Diogenes one day wandered the streets of Athens at midday, holding a lantern

in broad daylight. When asked why he was doing such a preposterous thing, he replied, “I am looking for an honest man.”

I share these stories to point out that cynicism at its roots is not about a lack of hope or belief in better days ahead but the opposite. Originally, the cynicism movement began as a commitment to expose the falsehoods in our midst, to uncover the hypocrisy and duplicity pervading culture and society, in order to shed light on the truly worthwhile and meaningful, and to work toward actual change in the world.

While the modern cynic is quickly dismissive, the ancient cynic was disciplined and devout in his examination of any and all matters before him. Or, as Arthur Brooks expounds, “The modern cynic rejects things out of hand (‘This is stupid’), while the ancient cynic simply withholds judgment (‘This may be right or wrong’).”²⁴ Modern cynicism is dangerous enough when applied only to situations and circumstances, but it is absolutely ruinous when applied, as it so often is, to other people. Outright rejection of one another widens the chasm that already exists between us, further dividing us, more firmly entrenching us in the depths of isolation, and dramatically undermining our efforts to achieve what we long for most: to be heard, to be seen, to be known, and to belong.

In the next few chapters, we’ll explore ways that we can begin to speak good news into the cacophony and chaos in a way that cuts through the noise and is actually heard in a meaningful way. But before we can speak good news, even

after we've attuned our ears to hear the voice of a God who sees us, we must also learn to hear the desire beneath the outrage and tribalism. Such hearing requires a return to the roots of cynicism—but not the modern dismissive cynicism that caricatures people and writes them off as hopeless lost causes. Hearing clearly amid the outrage and tribalism demands a return to the sort of ancient cynicism that questions our own instinctual, reactive notions about others.

In his book *Uproar*, Peter Steinke writes that “until and unless you recognize the power of your own instinctual life, you will continue to assess outside conditions, persons, or ideas to be the cause of your or others’ nervous unrest. So, in response, you use your energy to rectify, control, or eliminate the outside stimuli.”²⁵ This is the cause of the destruction unfolding all around us, and even in us today. Our media-driven, algorithmically curated, reactive, shallow cynicism toward others is setting fire to potential paths toward belonging, and we are being pulled further and further apart, even though what we all long for is movement in the other direction.

Before we speak, we must learn to hear God and one another clearly.

And to hear one another clearly, we must see one another clearly, just as God sees us.

I wrote earlier about the pain of being judged in first grade as an immigrant outsider. But there was one saving grace that year. A few months into the school year, a tall,

lanky, blond-haired, blue-eyed boy named Steven befriended me. We'd walk home the same way every day, and I eventually came to discover that we lived in the same apartment complex. An unlikely friendship formed. We overcame language and cultural barriers by way of a shared love for G.I. Joe and Transformers. We spent most weekday afternoons imagining adventures together. Steven was the only friend I made that entire first year of school. But he was all I needed. Though I was unseen by the rest, I was seen by one, and that's all it took.

I moved to another school in second grade, and that was the end of our friendship. I had to start over, several times. By the time fourth grade rolled around, I'd made a handful of friends and had a semblance of belonging at school for the first time in my life.

As it turns out, on the first day of fourth grade, I sat down at a desk next to a couple of my friends. A few moments later, a tall, lanky, blond-haired, blue-eyed boy walked into the classroom. He was new, and his demeanor bore the trademark nerves of an insecure kid unsure if he'd fit in. It was Steven. He was now the outsider.

At the first recess of the day, I walked over and introduced myself. He quickly recognized me. A relieved smile broke out on his face. My English was better now, and we enjoyed the pleasant surprise of more meaningful conversation. At lunch, I invited him to play kickball with me and my friends, our typical lunchtime ritual. He was immediately our best player.

We didn't lose that entire lunch period. Or ever. And it had nothing to do with the score.

We were together. We belonged.

We were seen and heard.

We couldn't lose.

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