

Last week, the President created a post on his personal Truth Social account that should have us all take a minute and reflect on ideas about identity and belonging.

The post was an image split into two halves, in one half was a formal photo of President Trump and his wife, above it was the President's name: Donald J. Trump. The other half of the image was a photograph of Michigan's Democratic Senate nominee with his wife, this was also captioned with his name: Abdul el-Sayed.

The President and his wife were depicted in formal, black-tie attire, the photo of the Senate nominee and his wife was very casual, the politician has his shirt open at the neck and he's leaning into wife, who is a hijabi, an observant Muslim woman, who covers her hair entirely with a scarf.

The headline for this post was "Two VERY DIFFERENT America's" (sic), with "very different" in upper case letters.

I would hope that, whatever our political affiliation, we would all agree this post is divisive and racist. It may not make any explicit claim that one expression of America is better than the other, but it certainly implies a prejudice toward the dominant white culture of this country, toward those with names of European origin, toward those who dress in a way that reflects Euro-American convention. Even with the most generous interpretation, I don't think anyone could argue this image wouldn't be hurtful and harmful to the roughly 3.7 million Americans who have Arab ancestry,<sup>1</sup> or the roughly 4 million Americans who are Muslim.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aaiusa.org/demographics>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/religious-landscape-study-religious-identity/>

The post invites the reader to contrast these two politicians – presumably assuming they’d feel comfortable with one ‘America’ and uncomfortable, or even threatened by or afraid of the other. And this kind of communication, inciting fear of ‘the other,’ has historically been very effective.

We humans are social beings, we often don’t survive when isolated or forced to live alone, but in community we can thrive. Although there are many forces that can bring communities together and hold them together, fear is perhaps the most primal. Fear has the capacity to forge an extraordinarily strong bond between those who are fearful of the same thing. And this is perhaps because, at its most fundamental level, fear’s connected to survival, especially the need to survive when under threat.

Fear tells us: we are in danger, we are under threat, they are coming for us, we must survive, and to do that we need each other.

Fear can certainly unite us, but it’s not the only thing that can do that. Love can do it, too.

Fear has us pay attention to details of identity, aspects of culture, specifics of religious practice *as points of differentiation*, a clear boundary line that separates “us” from “them,” a boundary that protects us from them, identity becomes a way of knowing who belongs with us and who doesn’t.

Love has us grow into our identity as we explore and embody our culture, deepen our religious practice, follow together a shared, and established pathway, so that life might be lived fully, and together, then we can revel in what we share and take delight in our differences.

Romans 5:5 tells us: the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us - when we receive that love, when, through prayer and practice, we consent to its presence and action in our lives, when we can live from that love, fear will begin to lose its power over us, our lives no longer a response to fear's demands, or to what fear would have us pay attention to.

Whenever belonging and identity are made necessary by fear, *belonging and identity* can become what's ultimate. And then, detached from the heart, detached from the outpouring of God's love (their very reason for being, forgotten) we become divided. And that's what's illustrated in today's Gospel reading, Matthew offers us two stories about what happens when identity becomes detached from love, detached from its reason for being.

In the first half of the reading, Jesus challenges his own religious community. He doesn't challenge the importance of the community's practices, because the practices are important, they have great depth of meaning, but he does challenge what happens when these practices no longer flow from the heart, when they are no longer a human response to the love of God within that longs to flow through us, through the way we live, and out into the world. Love that rightly should flow from us back to God, and from us into the lives of those we live alongside. It was love that gave shape to these practices and gave them meaning in the first place. Those who were questioning Jesus had lost touch with that truth.

In the second half of the story, Jesus meets a woman who doesn't share his identity, she's an outsider, who belongs to an altogether different group, with an altogether different identity. In every way that mattered, the Canaanite woman is one of "them," to the "us" of Jesus' own community. Despite belonging to different groups, despite not sharing an identity, she asks for Jesus' mercy. And this reveals something very important about God. God's mercy will not and cannot be contained by the boundaries we humans put in place to differentiate and separate one group from another.

Jesus, fully human as we are, challenged by human habits of thought and action, as we are, is receptive to the woman's persistence, and he course-corrects. He acknowledges the depth of her faith; her daughter is healed.

This story shows us how identity and belonging can so easily become dividing lines that can exclude and so harm, rather than serve as supports for our call into life together.

National identity, cultural identity, religious identity, and the belonging that comes along with them, is not bad in itself, because identity offers us a great deal: shared meaning-making, the deep comfort of belonging to something bigger than ourselves, ways to navigate and honor and delight in life, practices and traditions that give us a tested path to follow; but, when identity & belonging become what we live for, our reason for living and acting in the world in a certain way, identity and belonging will divide and separate us.

If Jesus needed some course correction here, it's a safe bet we do, too. All of us.

In this divided world, what if we turned away from those who seem to stoke division and instead focus our attention on what does, still, hold us together – love? Be curious about it, get good at sensing it, sharing it, each of us learning how to be attentive and receptive to the love of God present in all the folks around us as it is in us. And through prayer and practice, develop our ability to live from love, and live for love, trusting this will disarm the fear that still has this world in its grip.

This love, the love that flows from the very heart of the truth and reality of God made known to us in Jesus Christ is what can bring us together, what can have us feel we all belong, despite our differences.

The love of God can make us one, gathered though we will always be around very different practices, cultures, values, and religions, our identities looking different, sounding different.

It is the love of God, it is that “perfect love” that can cast out fear<sup>3</sup> and all the habits of thought and action that go along with it – and a world that’s not controlled by fear, a world where the love of God flows ... that sounds like ‘heaven’ to me.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:18