

What happens when two people who don't know each other, but hate each other, finally meet? That's the story of a white man named Claiborne Paul Ellis and an African-American woman named Ann Atwater.

Ann Atwater and Claiborne P. Ellis had much in common, although it would take years of battling each other across the racial divide before they were able to see their similarities. Atwater lived in a dilapidated house on an unpaved street in Durham's Hayti district, where she struggled to support her two daughters. Ellis lived across the tracks in a neighborhood nearly as destitute, but white. He worked multiple jobs to support his family, but like Atwater, he barely found the funds to make ends meet. The two were fiercely dedicated to improving the prospects of "their" people, Atwater as a militant activist for housing reform, and Ellis as the Exalted Cyclops of Durham's Ku Klux Klan. Ellis's position at the margins of white society frustrated him, and looking for a scapegoat, he turned to the target provided by the Klan, as he explained in a 1980 interview with oral historian Studs Terkel:

"I really began to get bitter. I didn't know who to blame. I tried to find somebody. I began to blame it on black people. I had to hate somebody. Hatin' America is hard to do because you can't see it to hate it. You gotta have somethin' to look at to hate. The natural person for me to hate would be black people, because my father before me was a member of the Klan. As far as he was concerned, it was the savior of the white people. It was the only organization in the world that would take care of the white people. So I began to admire the Klan."

Ellis found his voice in the Klan, and rising to become the local leader, he began to take the Klan in a new public direction. As the civil rights movement increased in urgency and militancy, he believed acting as a spokesman on behalf of the Klan was crucial to upholding the "Southern way of life" and its "natural" social hierarchy. Even town leaders were largely receptive to his message.

In the 1960s, eighty percent of black Durham residents lived in substandard housing, a figure which had remained unchanged since the 1920s. The Housing Authority, part of an old boy network headed by an autocratic cotton mill executive, failed to enforce housing codes. Any discussion of the matter ended bogged down in a bureaucratic cycle of "commissions, committees, councils, boards of inquiry, official investigations, delegations, panels" – a endless "substitution of talk for action." Atwater, emboldened by community organizer Howard Fuller, discovered a passion for housing reform and a natural talent for leadership first with Operation Breakthrough, then as chairwoman for the United Organizations for Community Improvement. She organized her community to rail against the city's repressive and reprehensible policies towards black housing, often peacefully in pickets and marches and city council meetings, but she was not averse to more violent tactics, as when she participated in the bombing of the Housing Authority. She'd even threatened Ellis with a knife during a 1968 council meeting.

The two were thrown together in 1971 as co-chairs of a charrette, a series of long and intense meetings between a diverse group of people. By their own admission, both

wanted nothing more than to murder each other in the most violent way possible. But looking for compromise, city council leaders asked them to work together. The purpose of this charrette was to discuss school desegregation, a still contentious issue, and to draw up a series of recommendations to present to the school board. Considering their history of mutual animosity, Atwater and Ellis were reluctant to work with the other, but both knew that to have their opinion represented, they must participate. It was during this series of meetings in the summer of 1971 that C.P. Ellis began to change. At first, the two argued and screamed at each other. But then Ellis had a conversion. Sitting down with his nemesis, he realized that his struggles were her struggles too, and that they shared a fundamental commonality of experience. Ann Atwater, in an interview with the Carolina Times, expressed this sentiment:

“Mr. Ellis has the same problems with the schools and his children as I do with mine and we now have a chance to do something for them. There certainly is no deep seated love between Mr. Ellis and myself but this school project brings out problems we all have. We are going to have to lay aside our differences and work together. This will be the first time two completely different sets of philosophies have united to work for this goal of better schools. If we fail, at least no one can say we didn't try.”

Change did not come easily or suddenly, and the two faced ostracism, even death threats; C.P. Ellis had an especially difficult time returning to his life post-charrette, as he had “lost his effectiveness in the community,” which he acknowledged in a toast on the last night of the charrette. But, in the years that followed, Ellis underwent the sort of transformation that should by rights only happen in movies. He became a civil rights advocate and leader of a trade union with mostly black members. Ann Atwater became his best friend, and they stayed close until Ellis died in 2005.

There are many stories just like that; stories of people who should seemingly hate each other, but who found that once they got past the hate, they had more in common than they thought, for they were united as Americans, as Christians, as people of the human race.

Unfortunately these days, divisions can make the news quite a bit. People can be more divided than ever. Just last week, I read one of the saddest stories I've ever come across. It was penned by Kevin Nicholson, who is running for US Senate in Wisconsin. In it, he accused his parents of turning their backs on him, his wife and his grandchildren, simply because he went from being a Democrat to a Republican. Records do indicate his parents in fact gave the maximum amount allowed to his opponent. I do not know the family and do not know if it is true or not; I'd have to interview the family. But it underscores a problem we face as a society. More and more things like this, people shouting at one another, refusing to speak to one another, or seeing something indicating one's politics or faith, and they see the person not a fellow American, human being, Christian, etc., but as someone completely different from them. This is even true among some Catholics; I've seen it first hand. People who were angry at one parish or didn't want to associate with them; people who look at other Catholics in a judgmental light for being too liberal or conservative. Certainly I, like most all of us,

have felt that judgment too from some of my fellow Catholics. And what happens with all these differences? At best, they don't speak about differences; at worst they become entrenched and angry at one another and further polarized. It's quite easy for things to become toxic!

This is a problem. Saint John Paul II called polarization sinful because it raises seemingly implacable obstacles to fulfilling God's plan for humanity. God's plan is for us to grow in love for one another. Jesus did not say "this is my Body give up for some of you" but for all. Diversity, we are told, is to be celebrated; yet at the moment we feel not so much diverse as divided. Where is the center? What can hold diverse people together, rather than turning them against one another?

The answer is given us in today's letter of St Paul to the Ephesians: 'In Christ Jesus, you that used to be so far apart from us have been brought very close, by the blood of Christ. For He is the peace between us, and has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart....'

The problem is we as humans of course can have a hard time understanding that. We can put up all kinds of barriers. This is not to say one can not be very opinionated on politics and religion or other matters; I certainly am. But what it does mean is we have to recognize that we are meant to truly be united; to love one another. Church is perhaps the best representation of that reality. Celebrating Mass are people all over the political spectrum; people who go daily or who have been away for years; people who look differently, dress differently, think differently, but who all have one thing in common: a love of God. So how then, can we become closer as a people?

I think a starting point is prayer. Jesus in the Gospel, after the apostles have returned from evangelizing and ministering to people, invites the apostles to "come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest for a while." When we do that, when we pray, when we listen, we can remind ourselves that God loves all people, without any exceptions. Prayer gives us time to think about the sacrifice of Jesus, who held no grudges, who hated no one. Mass, the perfect prayer, gives us the opportunity to receive Holy Communion, where we are reminded of God's love for us all but also how we are all united by that love. Prayer also reminds us of our own shortcomings and how Jesus love us despite of them; it gives us the chance to see the splinter in our own eye before the wooden beam in our brothers eye. And when we pray, it's a perfect starting point to pray for people we disagree with and dislike. Prayer unites us which is what we see every time we come to Mass.

Listening is also crucial. At the meetings, Ann and Claiborne had already yelled at one another before; but through listening to one another they were able to find that common ground. Sister Adrienne Kaufmann, a Benedictine nun, did a case study on abortion for her dissertation, focusing on how to bring together both sides of the issue. For instance, Hillary Clinton, who supports abortion rights, spoke about working with the pro-life movement to realize a common goal of fewer abortions. At the same time she made that speech, George W. Bush who was president at the time, called for the same thing,

“seeking common ground where possible.” Said Sister Adrienne: "To reduce or end abortion, pro-life people need to get into dialogue with pro-choice people about things in this society they both care about, and work together to change them. They have a lot more in common than they believe or imagine, but it's submerged below this pool of enemy rhetoric. Instead they need to drop the rhetoric, look at ways to pool their energies, and make progress that way." And she's right, for that applies to so many situations - people can get so entrenched, we can fail to find that common ground which starts by listening to those who seem so different from us.

Once we have those foundations, we can engage in civil argument, which is different than shouting or attacking. Recently at Georgetown University, there was a conference that focused on healing a polarized America. Cardinal Blasé Cupich of Chicago was present along with Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles. Cardinal Cupich stated that civil argument has been a central part of our nation's tradition, noting "the American heritage is not that we are divided by our differences, religious or otherwise, but that we are united in arguing about them for the purpose of creating new solutions forging a more perfect union." It's the difference between partisanship, which is where one had a division over an approach to how to handle a problem but leaves open the possibility of working together vs. polarization where there is this divided, dismissive, distrustful view of the other person. Arguing is a good thing; it's something I stress at every wedding Mass because if we just bottle things up or never talk, naturally that will make a marriage or relationship toxic. For true growth to happen, we need to have challenging discussions. Maybe we really want someone to just see something we know to be true and is a core part of our faith; take coming to Mass on a Sunday. The truth of this being important will never change. But if we just shame people, it's not going to get them to change. Maybe multiple discussions won't either. But the more we engage with people and have conversations with them about matters of our faith, the more we can get them to think and the more we can also understand where they are coming from. This also spills over into other areas too - it's a great blueprint to follow when we are talking about politics or things that we are passionate about. Remaining calm, not raising our voice, and engaging in conversation can be a true path to better relationships between one another.

Lastly, it's important to remember tolerance and patience are so very important too. We might not get someone to change, and while it's not a big deal if it's say who likes the Vikings or the Packers, it can be very difficult when we know people who believe things that are very contrary to what we hold to as a Catholic. What a tragedy though when anger or bitterness ruins not only dialogue but a relationship. Rather than focusing on the differences, try to focus on areas of common ground. Look for ways to have continued, ongoing dialogue. Be introspective; ask yourself are you the one who maybe needs to listen more or be more tolerant. And ask yourself how would Jesus treat this person? When we exhibit tolerance and patience, we just might find after a long period of time goes by that two people were changed for the better, both the person we have that disagreement with, and ourselves too because we became more calm, compassionate and understanding.

It goes without saying I'm a very opinionated person. I have strong opinions on politics, on my sports teams as I've on many occasions talked of my love for the Vikings and dislike of the team from Green Bay, and of course have strong opinions and beliefs that are at the core of my Catholic identity. But I am also aware that heaven is not like the neighborhood association where every house and lawn looks the same. We are a Church made up of people from all walks of life; different, yet also unified. I enjoy both giving grief to a Packer fan and getting it from them, and debating things. Sadly in our society and even in our Church, we seem to be becoming more entrenched and see people sometimes more as an enemy, less than as a brother. Jesus reminds us though of the power of love, and time and time again in stories like those of Ann and Clairborne, we see the power that love has to overcome hate and intolerance. As we prepare now to receive Holy Communion, and say "peace be with you" to the people next to us and then "amen" to our Lord, let's make sure that our talk isn't cheap, but that it's backed up by our actions. It's OK to be different. It's not OK to hate. May we strive to truly love one another as Jesus has loved us, passing on the love we are given by our God with no exceptions.