

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Day of Pentecost/May 15, 2016

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When we cry “Abba! Father!” Paul said, it is the Spirit of God bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. Is Abba a cry of joy or a reference to how Jesus understood God or was it both? The theologian John Cobb has recently argued that we have here a Jesus tradition of how he understood God. Abba is the only Aramaic word for father. Aramaic was the language Jesus spoke. Abba recalls a father’s relationship to an infant child. The normal relation of a father to an infant is tenderness and unconditional love. That is what God is like, Jesus taught.

I was in the grocery store line this week. A mother and her infant were ahead of us. This little child was staring at me and I of course was looking back and smiling. Finally, the mother became aware of her child’s gaze and turned to see what was so interesting. When she saw our interaction she just laughed. A father sent on Facebook a picture of his one-year-old daughter reaching out to grab his chin. There was joy on his face and certainly a tender love on the part of both.

It is this unconditional love of a parent toward an infant that dominates Jesus’ understanding of God. God’s love is intimate and tender. Over the millennia we have sometimes developed an understanding of God as a harsh Judge or absolute Ruler. When Christianity was taken west to the Native people there, it was God as Abba rather than as some kind of Grand Inquisitor which found a place in their hearts.

Tipi Sapa, whose English name was Philip Deloria, was a Yankton Sioux ordained a priest in the 19th century by William Hobart Hare, our second rector at Saint Paul’s. In 1873 Hare became Bishop to the Great Sioux Nation. Tipi Sapa met Jesus’ God in a song. In 1870 at the age of 17 he was

riding along a path by a little church when through an open window he heard singing. It drew him back to the church four more times before the hymn was sung again. It turned out to be “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” in the Dakota language. The tune is different from the one we know and sung very slowly. When he learned the tune and the first verse he felt as though he was the possessor of a great treasure. He returned to church regularly hoping to learn other things as beautiful as that hymn. The song seemed to open up a place in Tipi Sapa’s heart for Jesus’ God. They would both be pilgrims together. The more he came to know this God the more he came to know himself. God’s path and his path were one. As Jesus said in the Gospel, the Spirit of truth “abides with you, and he will be in you.”

When we make a commitment to the God of love it unifies our lives and thoughts. We become more whole. Our paths become one. This affects our relations with others. Jesus welcomed everyone to his table. His fellowship was inclusive. We are all one. In the same way at Pentecost God’s deeds of power (the power of love) were proclaimed in every language. God as Abba, as tender, unconditional love is for all. The Spirit seeks unity where there had been division. In the same way, as a church, our welcome is for all.

Jesus said that those who are loyal to the God of love will do the works he did and even greater. I take this to mean that God like a loving parent seeks our good, time after time. Later in his Letter to the Romans Paul says, “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him...” (RSV) No matter how bad it might be, no matter how little of value is possible, God works for what is good. God calls us toward that good. The Spirit that is cosmic in scope and as intimate as a parent aims at added value, at greater works. God does not force our hand but calls us forward, lures us toward that which is best for us. Of course like an obstinate child we can thwart God’s plan and life is the worse for it. But when we hear God’s call forward and trust it, we discover the good that is there, always greater than what was before.

This brings us to this year’s thematic goal, “For love like this...” The goal is Paul’s prayer “that through faith Christ may dwell in your hearts in love.” This is the love of Jesus’ God, Abba, like that of a parent for an infant – tender, unconditional, joyful. This is a love that welcomes and unifies, that

calls us forward to whatever good is possible. It touches our hearts and stirs our feelings. When the generous Spirit of Christ dwells in our hearts we feel the call to be generous. When the consoling Spirit is within us we are drawn to be consoling. When we find within us the lure toward what is of value, we want that for others and offer our service for the common good. And when we find the Spirit-song within, like Tipi Sapa we feel like we are the possessor of some great treasure and hope to learn other things as beautiful. For love like this, like that of parent for child, tender, unconditional, unifying, always calling forward to what is good in whatever situation we find ourselves, we cry out with ecstatic joy: Abba! Father!

Amen.