

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost/July 19, 2015

The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

Jesus shares the gift of his loving kindness in today's gospel. The two paragraphs we heard are linked by Jesus and his disciples stepping out of a boat and going ashore. He sees people hurrying and rushing, aimless and in need. And he has compassion for them. He expresses his compassion through teaching. What does he teach us? The Letter to the Ephesians believes that Jesus' teaching is about peace.

What if Jesus were to step ashore in our world, what would he see? What if he were to step into our lives, yours or mine, would he see us rushing, aimless, in need like the people of his day? His response then and now of course is to feel compassion. He might see us celebrating. Jesus was not very particular about his celebrations. He would celebrate with anyone. He would laugh and feel compassion. Instead of rushing or celebrating he might find us with too much time, not needed, unproductive. He would wrap us about with compassion. He would certainly sense fear in our world, the alienation and division. How reactive we can be. We react because we are afraid of what might happen, one observer, Melody Beattie, suggests. We react because we have been in a crisis so long it has become a habit. We react because we think we have to react. We react because we think things shouldn't be happening the way they are. We react because we don't feel good about ourselves. And Jesus' first feeling toward us is compassion. If we can get in touch with that it is healing. Even if we can just touch the fringe of that compassion it is healing. We do not have to be reactive. We can breathe deeply in the moment. And Jesus takes that moment to express his compassion by teaching us. And what he teaches us is peace. There is very little in our lives that we can't do better if we are peaceful.

Peace is the gathering together of the scattered. It takes a remarkable shepherd to do this; one who will leave the ninety-nine to go looking for the one who is lost. This is the righteous Branch that Jeremiah talks of who will gather the remnant and bring them back to the safety of the fold. Peace is this being gathered in. Jesus, the true shepherd, gives everyone access to God the Father. We are all one in him. Peace has to do with this unity. We can feel just as scattered in our personal lives. We talk of being at sixes and sevens, beside ourselves. We need to be gathered together, made whole. It takes a remarkable shepherd to do this; one whose first feeling is compassion. We are listened to, guided. We come to ourselves, are able to breathe calmly, and discover peace. Peace is the gathering together of the scattered.

Peace is the practice of humility. Jesus teaches not to lord it over others. Gentile Ephesian Christians might have thought themselves better than Jews who did not believe in Christ. The Letter tells them not to be arrogant. Remember that there was a time when you were without Christ, even without hope. Humility is the doorway to peace. No one is higher or lower, better or worse. All are one in Christ Jesus our Lord. Humility allows us to deal with our own limitations and those of others. It acknowledges that God is in charge of the universe. And with that letting go comes inner peace.

The opposite of humility is pride. This is what disrupted Paul's peace regarding the Law. The more he obeyed the Law the more he coveted his position as being greater than others who could not. So the more he obeyed the Law the more he broke the Law which clearly stated "Thou shalt not covet." It was a classic double bind. The way out of that "catch-22" was by the cross and resurrection which is what the Letter means by "the blood of Christ." Jesus who was subject to the Law died to its claim upon him, and was raised to the new life of grace. Jesus is now the exalted Lord, the true shepherd, who by his death destroyed the principle that caused hostility and division, whether that be death, fear, pride, or covetousness. Peace is the disavowal of any principle that divides.

Finally, peace is a mutual indwelling with God. Christ is never elsewhere than right where we are. He has stepped ashore into our lives. We dwell with him and he with us. In this is our peace. The Letter to the

Ephesians teaches that we are built together into a dwelling place for God. At the same time, the 23rd Psalm says that we will “dwell in the house of the Lord of the Lord for ever.” So God dwells in us and we in him. To know that is to be at peace.

What keeps us at odds today in our own life or in our various communities? Where are we in most need of Jesus’ compassion that gives peace? Areas that have affected us recently have had to do with race and sexual orientation. Do we look on differences with compassion, or with disregard and even hostility? Jesus who looks on us with compassion calls each one of us to look upon the other with that same kindness. When we are bound together by common kindness we find peace. We prayed to God this morning to have compassion on our weakness. What unites us are not so much our strengths as our weaknesses. Strengths may lead us to look down on those who do not share them. Trust me, weakness is something we all share. Humility understands that. It is our human weakness that brings us together under the care of the shepherd whose power is perfect and whose presence is peace. In our workplace we want to be creative and interrelated with others, not segregated off and divorced from the company’s greater purpose. When we allow for this unity and creative freedom we promote peace. So choose kindness. Pray for compassion. Bring the segregated together. It is what gives peace.

Jesus has stepped ashore into each of our lives, in every sphere of our being. The gospel has him setting foot in deserted places, teeming cities, rural farms; wherever we might be. And like the true Shepherd of Jeremiah he is gathering us all together. In our unity with him there is peace. Practice humility and find peace. Disavow principles that cause one to lord it over another and find peace. Find your dwelling place in God and let God step into your heart and your gathering. There too is peace. Whether in society, in our human condition, or in our places of work there exists the possibility of peace. In fact, there is very little in our lives wherever we may be that we can’t do better if we are at peace.

Amen.