

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Pentecost VII

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Over the past week I had the unique blessing of traveling with a group of young people to the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota. We were joined by another group from Florida in setting up a three day camp for Native American youth. The Standing Rock Reservation is vast with scattered settlements, most of the young people we serve see each other during the school year, but during the hot days of summer, these young people barely see each other nor do they have the luxury of eating three square meals a day. What we offer is an opportunity for these young people to see each other, enjoy a time of fellowship, be children again, offer them a safe space-even if for a limited time, to feed them three square meals and to nurture their seeds of hope and life.

Our task has never been to recreate life but to tend to the seeds that bring forth new life, and to hold up life with a genuine commitment towards the idea that we care about each other. Our presence has always been to affirm our belief in the kind of relationship that transforms each of us and our understanding of the kingdom of God as anything but a contested space.

I believe that God's kingdom is not a contested space, for a contested space is devoid of compassion, tolerance, fairness, justice and productivity. God's kingdom is like a field where each seed is planted with hope, where all find respite and joy in each seed because of the life it portends, and where each find consolation in the other's story. It is not to compare stories because we find ourselves in each other's story.

The sower had his field prepared and ready for his seeds. He sowed with a fervent hope that come harvest time, he will reap his harvest with joy. But it turned out that someone-an enemy, had other plans for him. The enemy's only goal was to negatively impact the harvest. The enemy's goal was to deprive the Sower of a good harvest. The enemy's goal was to be an impediment to productivity.

The slaves who found the weeds among the wheat were livid. How is it possible? This wasn't supposed to be a contested field, they cry out to the Sower, but now someone has turned it into a contested field. And so, for the sake of the harvest, we have to restore the field back to what it was. We have to take out the weeds so they do not have to contest for air, space, sunlight and nutrients with the wheat. When we are angry, we seek the destruction of the cause of our anger. How many times have we not asked God to destroy our enemies for our sakes? How many times have we not asked God to do away with the worries of a contested world so we can live our lives in peace?

The reality is you and I bear within ourselves the burden of a contested space. And for St. Paul, this contested space is primarily generated by the demands of the flesh and Spirit. The two impose conflicting demands which we cannot escape. And so at any point in our lives we either have to fall for the flesh that leads to death or have to prove our allegiance to the God who rescues and offer us His salvation from the very death to which the flesh leads us.

It is the same God to whom the Psalmist reaches out with these words “Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth. Knit my heart to you that I may fear your name.” The Psalmist was deeply aware that to walk in truth is to know the way, and the truth of the way is uncontested. The way of the truth is life, and that life is honored by no other god than the God whom Jesus calls Abba, Father. For there is no other god besides me, there is no other rock that I know of, says the prophet Isaiah.

I carry within me a contested space, a contested personality, contested emotions, contested persuasions and contested feelings. The agencies that act upon me and to which I blindly follow are manifold, thus turning me into a manifold personality. I am a man of different and multiple colors. I am one person and yet, I lack the integrity that is demanded or implicit in my existence as one person. But guess what, the way that I am, so are you. In a sense then, there is no distinction between your struggles and mine. We each struggle with the multiple colors with which we were formed and with which we are painted. In a book, *A Paint of Complexity*, Eunice Tietjens writes:

I have too many selves to know the one.
In too complex a schooling was I bred,
Child of too many cities who have gone
Down all bright cross-roads of the world's desires,
And at too many altars bowed my head
To light too many fires.

Paul captures the symptoms of our condition when he observes that creation not only groans in pain, but we also groan in pain. At the core of both creation and our core is a depth of brokenness. This isn't because that was the original design of the Creator or the Sower, an enemy has done it, The Sower says.

But whatever the original plan may have been, we cannot go back to it because doing so would mean falling back into the same state from which we were redeemed, and subjecting creation to the conditions that created its present status. For that reason the Creator cannot go back to the last day of creation, when all he had created was beautiful and good, nor can the Sower order the weeds to be pulled from the field.

The Creator and the Sower cannot go back and recreate the world or to prepare the field, but they can look forward with hope to the promise of the harvest, the promise of a bountiful harvest, a harvest that will yield seeds of renewal, rebirth, regeneration and life. For Paul then, creation can groan in pain until the harvest time. You and I have to groan in pain until the harvest time, not that our suffering or pain doesn't matter or count, but our suffering cannot be compared to the joy of the harvest, the harvest that will bring forth new seed, new grain, new life, new joys.

The new seeds of the harvest are the children of God who are also joint heirs with Christ. The new seeds not only share a heritage with Christ but they are the people of God who are willing to act in the visible world not for reasons that are immediately apparent, but because an unseen, yet even more genuine underlying substance, call it God's reality, compels them to act, compels them to bring peace, compels them to bring healing and solace to the broken and contested places of our lives and world.

One of the stories I heard in North Dakota was that some of the youth desired to come to camp, but they could not because some of their peers had secured restraining orders against them. In a contested space, in a broken world, youth seek out restraining orders against other youth. If adults do not mirror the values of an uncontested space, how can the youth live any different?

In one of his writings, St Augustine encouraged stated that "If you desire to praise him (God), then live what you express. Live good lives and you yourselves will be his praise." If we believe that the value of a seed lies in its ability to produce one or more of itself, then living good lives is about the manifestation of the seed.

By the gift of God in Christ, we have been empowered to become children of God, seeds of God-seeds who know that they are not being saved out of a perishing world but as those who know that the world is being saved. Seeds who know that if we were blind in our distrust, now we begin to see; seeds who know that if we were aliens who feel alienated in a strange, empty world, now we begin to feel at home; seeds who know that if we were in love with ourselves and all our little cities, now we are falling in love with being human, we are falling in love with an uncontested universal community of which God is both the Creator and Sower.

For me, the fact that we yearn for God, search for God, struggle to discover the fullness of God's love and compassion, the fact that we are always longing for the complete truth is enough to convince me that we have already been given a taste of God, a taste of God's love and a taste of the truth that sets us free, free to praise and free to pursue God's will. And the good news is that God's will has never been esoteric or beyond our reach. Seek it, and you will find it. And when you find it, live it to its fullness, for it is by living the will of God that the kingdom of God is made present in both the contested and uncontested places of our lives. Amen.