

Proper 11, Pentecost VI
July 19, 2009

I want to talk about the reading from Ephesians, and want to start with a couple of things from the late John Claypool. There is an ancient, ancient story that takes many forms. But basically the story says this: two proud men meet at a crossroads, and each demands priority; each demands that the other stand aside so he can pass. Each refuses the other's demand, and words turn to threats which turn to blows which turn to mortal combat. The single victor, battered, bloody, but triumphant, then discovers that man he has killed is blood kin, a father or a brother, or a son. The story in its endless variations (sometimes as a parable, sometimes as history) is found over and over, in culture after culture, as a perpetual witness to the human situation.

There's a sense in which this ancient parable is something of a parallel of our collective history. All the great religious systems that I know of suggest that we live in a universe, not a multi-verse. This means that there's a single source behind all reality. And if you think out the implications of this, it means that, since we all somehow emerge from the same source, then we all have some kind of connection with one other. And yet, almost from the beginning, we have lost so much our awareness of this primal unity. We have lost the sense that we are at some deep, deep level connected and kin to each other. And because of our diversities—because we have different skin colors, different locations, different languages, different political ideas, different ways of behaving, lots of differences, because of these, we have allowed these differences to become absolute. They have become the occasions of conflict and of violence. For reasons that are most cogently understood, not by genetics, not by environment, not by politics, but only by the brutal reality of sin, we have turned into adversaries and we have lived out, over and over, this ancient story.

I don't think I'm stretching the truth much to say that Jesus came into our world for one purpose and that was to reverse this ancient story. Instead of kinfolks misperceiving each other as enemies and, therefore, destroying each other, Jesus came, in the words of Ephesians, "that he might create in himself one new humanity..., thus making peace."

All of this comes into special focus for me as the last couple of weeks have been full to overflowing with General Convention, and all of the stuff that comes with that. I'll be giving an initial report on what happened at Convention during the Coffee Hour today, so that's not what this is about. This is about something deeper, something that I think we all have to struggle with.

When Ephesians was written, everybody knew that there were two types of people in the world, Jews and Gentiles. And, although Jesus and the earliest Christians were all Jews, the Christian community quickly became predominately gentile. So, one of the very first questions the Church asked itself was, of the two types of people in the world—which was best? Who had the special in with God? Who really mattered the most? Who deserved priority, who should stand aside, in one way or another, and let the other go first? | | Ephesians says that this question itself is fundamentally flawed—there just aren't two types people in the world, there is one. And the new and revolutionary reason for this is Jesus. What Jesus did was embrace all of creation, all of humanity, restoring the Father's will in creation so that "unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair." That's what Jesus did, then; and that's what Jesus is doing even now. The one who we see as other, as enemy, is in fact kin, and that should change everything.

But this is far from automatic, and the struggle still continues. We all have our own versions of the two types of people there are in the world, of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Our church has been struggling with this with a special intensity over the last decade, but it’s nothing new. It’s been a constant theme in the Church’s life from, quite literally, the first year or so after the resurrection.

One of the things I learned most deeply three years ago at General Convention in Columbus was that the stronger the sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’—regardless of who was ‘us’ and who was ‘them’—the stronger this sense was in folks, the more alike they became, and the more alike they sounded and acted.

Sometimes I think that this certainty, this division of the whole church, or of the whole world, into ‘us’ and ‘them’, that this has more power to shape the souls of people than does the content of the convictions themselves. Which means that the more intense different peoples’ ideas are, the deeper the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide, then the more similar they become in every truly important way. Not a pretty picture. And I can see this in myself and those I think are absolutely right no less clearly than I can in others. There is great spiritual peril here—and we have all seen the fruits of that, from arrogance to slander to schism. It’s scary.

Now, I don’t have any neat solutions. Simply saying ‘be nice’ or painting pretty pictures of some imaginary, perfect world just won’t do. The problem is as old as Cain and Able and as recent as today; and it’s complex beyond any pasting over with platitudes. Even worse, I don’t know how to reconcile these concerns with people’s conflicting felt imperatives for preserving the faith or following the lead of the Holy Spirit, or with the absolutely sincere convictions of so many on all sides that one’s own position is the best, if not the only, way to maintain faithfulness to God’s Word and to God’s will.

These things matter, and the truth matters. None of this is simple—but as a church and as individual people, as we are all caught up in something very dangerous.

But maybe a place to start is with what happens *first* when those two men in the story I started with meet on road. Because what happens *first* shapes everything else that happens. What do we do, what do we think, what do we look for, what do we remember, what do we assume, *first* when we encounter *the other*, the one who seems different, the one who may be a ‘them’ to our ‘us’?

This will shape what happens next—or at the very least it will shape *us* in what happens next. When we begin, when we *first* look at, or hear from, the other, can we *first* call to mind how the world has changed because of Jesus? Can we begin, at least within our own hearts, with the new and incredible reality that Christ “is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace”?

I saw again the powerful effect of this choice, mostly in creative and in helpful ways—and it puts me in a place both of judgment and of hope. If there is a way through all of this—and I’m talking here about the world and the culture we live in as well as the Church we love—if there is a way through this, it’s not by looking at the bodies of those we vanquish and discovering to our horror that we have slain a brother. If there is a way through, it has to do with where we begin—with what happens *first*—and how we allow that to give shape and meaning to all that follows.