

The Rev. Michael C. Fedewa
Proper 11
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 19, 2009
2 Samuel 7:1-14
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

A friend of mine is a Roman Catholic priest who at one time served in my home parish back in Portland Michigan. His experience of Portland as a priest was very different than my experience growing in Portland. Even though he served in Portland long after I moved away from there, we still have memories of some of the same people, and chuckle at some of the personality quirks that are very present in Portland.

This past week he was talking about Portland and a series of meetings he was having years ago with some of the local clergy. They were talking about drinking and alcoholism, and underage drinking—all big problems in small towns. As part of their discussion, my friend suggested that the clergy and churches work together to bring in a speaker to address the community regarding alcohol and alcoholism. In the midst of the discussion, a number of the other clergy from town stated that “it would be fine to invite a speaker to come, but members of their congregation would not benefit.after all,” they said quite seriously, “it’s only members of the Catholic Church and the Congregational Church that have problems with drinking. We other churches don’t. Our people don’t drink.”

Now years ago, I might have commented that: #1: I didn’t know there were non Catholics in Portland. And #2: Everybody in Portland drinks.

Now I know of course that both those comments are wrong. There are many other denominations in my little town of Portland. I was just a bit too smug to notice. And, even I had to admit, there are lots of people in Portland who did not drink then and now.

The story underlines how easy it is to make assumptions about others and ourselves. Only certain types of people drink, only certain types gamble, certain types divorce. Only certain types of people lose their jobs, or their homes. Only certain types of people like baseball or hockey or Nascar. Only certain types of people care about the environment or the right to life, only certain types of people support this political party, or this cause. While many of these assumptions are silly, and ignorant, most generally, the assumptions we live with are relatively harmless. Some assumptions however are the root of deep divisions, prejudice, and bigotry. Some assumptions about how others live and how they are different lead to hatred, violence and war.

The divisions, suspicion and hatred between Jew and Gentile at the time of Jesus was profound. The wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile was real. Much of the anger which Jesus provoked in the religious authorities of his day grew out of his ministry with Gentiles. He touched them, he healed them, he taught them, he ate with them, he used them as examples of Godly living. One could make the case that it was the radical hospitality which Jesus showed to those outside the Jewish nation which led to his death.

These divisions between Jew and Gentile continued in the time after Jesus death and resurrection. In the earliest decades of the Church, there were bitter disputes regarding the place of Gentiles in the Christian community. Should Gentiles be accepted? Did they need to be circumcised in order to be baptized? What about Jewish dietary rules, did Gentiles have to follow them? The discussions were intense. In the midst of the discussion, Paul would called Peter a hypocrite. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote that he wished that those who insist on circumcision would mutilate themselves with a slip of their knife. Ouch.

It is in the midst of these controversies that the letter to the Ephesians is written. In that letter Paul states that the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised has been torn down by the cross. Peace and reconciliation have been established by the death of Jesus. Jew and Gentile are now members

of the one humanity, the one household of God. The wall of hostility and hatred has been replaced by a new and holy temple. One new humanity, one new body has been born out of the blood of Jesus on the cross.

In Christ our unity, our common humanity, our one fellowship has already been accomplished. Yet, we know because of sin that walls still stand. Divisions still exist. Divisions related to age, and gender, and race, nationality, sexual orientation and religion. In our world sins of racism, and bigotry still threaten us always.

At the heart of our life as disciples of Jesus is the call to overcome these hostilities; to be ministers of reconciliation. As disciples of Jesus we are called to live as one new humanity. This was at the heart of discipleship in the time of Jesus. In our Gospel today, we see the return of the apostles to Jesus. He invites them to come away to a time of rest. Do you notice thought that there is an odd gap in the reading, 19 verses are missing. Jesus is teaching the crowd. Then the Gospel skips to the disciples landing at Gennesaret and mooring the boat. Do you wonder about what's missing? I did. And here is what's missing:

In the verses not read in the Gospel, Jesus sends the apostles across the lake. He sends them to the other side. He sends them to Gentile territory. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is always sending the apostles over to the other side of the lake. He is always sending them to Gentile territory. And, just about every time they cross the lake they face a storm. In the verses missing from today's account, the apostles face an adverse wind that prevents them from making any progress. In other accounts, there are storms. What Mark is telling us is that in the ministry of Jesus and his first followers, Jesus was trying to bring together Jew and Gentile. And, even then, even in the time of Jesus it was a difficult, and stormy endeavor. In one of the crossing stories, in the midst of a storm Jesus is asleep in the boat, the disciples cry out: "Don't you care that we are perishing?"

I believe that the work of reconciliation is the hardest work for the disciples to be engaged in. The work of tearing down walls, the work of helping one new humanity to be born, the work of ending hostility between peoples continues to our day. It is a work that is filled with storms and treacherous seas. At times we would rather not go. We would rather not try to cross the sea. But Jesus sends us.

Some would say that the Episcopal Church is in the midst of some pretty stormy seas these days. The discussions about sexuality and blessing of unions continue to swirl around the Episcopal Church and other churches in this country and around the world. Sexuality is today's version of the issue the early church faced regarding Jew and Gentile. The walls of division and hostility are still strong. But, in Jesus these walls have been broken down. In Jesus, peace and reconciliation give birth to one new humanity. With Jesus as the cornerstone, the walls are torn down and a new and holy temple will be built. That is our prayer. That is our hope. That is our work.

In the Gospel, after crossing the treacherous sea of Gallilee, Jesus and the disciples moored the boat and began to heal the sick. General Convention has passed, the seas were stormy, some wondered if the Church would completely capsize. But, convention passed and we, so far, have stayed afloat. We have reached shore, safely. Will there be other storms? Of course. There always are. We pray in confidence, that after every storm Jesus brings us safely to shore. As we come to shore, we pray that we might continue his work and bring his healing to our world.