

The Rev. Michael C. Fedewa

August 26, 2007

13th Sunday after Pentecost.

Isaiah 28:14-22

Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-29

Psalm 46

Luke 13:22-30

This past summer, our middle son Ben worked at a Camp in eastern Pennsylvania. While there, Ben and some other campers took a trip to Boston. While in Boston they toured Fenway Park, the home of the Baseball Red Sox. My loving son called me from Fenway and also bought me a souvenir from there: A tee shirt. Not just any tee shirt, but a tee shirt that has two words written on it. One, Yankees. Two, an expletive, not appropriate for church. It's a shirt that only a true Yankee hater would ever wear in public.

Well, yesterday morning I wore the shirt in public for the first time. After the Tigers beat the Yanks in eleven innings, I thought it was the perfect time. I wore it to the downtown Y. I was amazed, 4 people commented on it...."love your shirt" or "great shirt", "bet you got that Fenway" they said. Now four may not seem like many, but...in the hundreds of times I have been to the Y, and with all the tee shirts I have worn there, this is the first time any one has had a comment about any shirt I have ever wore. On the one hand, jokingly it reveals how many Yankee haters there are in the world. On the other hand it, perhaps it says something a bit less flattering about human beings.

Human beings sometime find their unity and build their identity around people they hate or despise. There may be some humor in sports fan being united in expressing their contempt for opposing teams. But, other groups, too often, define themselves by who it is they hold in contempt. This is true in our political world isn't it? Is there any message that is too crass or vulgar if it excites ones supporters in their contempt for a rival candidate? Elections are often won not because of what a candidate stands for, but because of who or what one stands against.

Sadly, this tendency is found in the contempt that builds between cultures and nations. Some cultural and national movements are built around being anti western, or anti semitic, or anti Arab, or anti American, anti Israeli. At times, such contempt gets out of control, contempt turns to hatred and war breaks out.

Unfortunately, religion is often too often built upon the foundation of contempt. There are religions whose sole identity is built upon who it is they despise. Some hate Christians, others hate Moslems, others Jews, other Hindus, some hate everybody who is not like them. Methodists despise Episcopalians who despise Presbyterians who despise Baptists who despise Roman Catholics. Too many are too certain, that those who do not believe exactly as they do will not be saved. We know too well, that religious contempt is at the heart of so many wars that rage in our world today. We know too well that religious wars threaten the very survival of human life. We know too well that there will only be peace on earth when there is peace among the world religions.

Baseball fans, politicians, nations, and religions are not alone in building their identity around who it is they despise and hold in contempt. It may be a result of our broken human condition that we all--in greater or lesser ways--do the same.

Our reading from Isaiah warns against wrapping one self in a blanket that is too small. This will not be sufficient to withstand the awesome power of God. Those who find their unity and identity in contempt of others, will not be able to stand in the face of God's justice.

In Luke's Gospel this weekend, Jesus is continuing his journey to Jerusalem. Jesus has predicted that when he reaches Jerusalem, the religious leaders will sentence him to death. Jesus will be sentenced to die, not because he healed the sick, not because he fed the hungry, not because he cared for the lonely. Jesus will be sentenced to death because he challenged the cultural and religious expectations about who should be despised and held in contempt. Jesus challenged the norms that allowed some to be hated.

Jesus ate with prostitutes and tax collectors. He chose women to be among his disciples. Jesus told stories that praised Samaritan and foreigners. Jesus touched lepers and others considered impure and untouchable. He welcomed and embraced outcasts.

On the way to Jerusalem someone comes to Jesus with a question: "Will only a few be saved?" Jesus does not answer the question directly. Instead, he turns to the crowd and issues them a warning. Do not presume that because I sat in your company and walked in your streets that you will be among the saved. The door might be too narrow for you to enter. You will be shocked when you see people from the north, south, east and west entering, while you are left out. You will be shocked to see that many that you considered last, will be first, and many you thought first will be last. You will be shocked when you see that many that you despise and hold in contempt will be welcomed as you are thrown out.

It was talk like this that got Jesus killed.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is not primarily concerned with who is in or out. Jesus is not primarily concerned with what people wore, what they ate, or where they lived. Jesus is not as primarily concerned with purity as the religious leaders of the day defined it. He is not overly concerned with keeping religious laws, he is not as concerned about believing everything about God in a certain way. Jesus was not wrapped up in the religious controversies that swirled in and around Jerusalem. What was central in Jesus teaching was feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, caring for orphans, the least, the lost and the lonely. Jesus called his followers to find salvation by doing these things. Salvation was not about who you were, what you looked like or where you came from. For Jesus, salvation was about how much you loved.

Unfortunately, these central teachings of Jesus have been forgotten by the very people who claim to follow Him. From the beginning the Church has struggled to be truly catholic, to be truly universal, to be truly welcoming to all. From the beginning it has been a struggle to welcome and celebrate the gifts of all. Are the gentiles truly to be welcomed? Can women have a place of authority? Can the young have a voice? The old? Are all races and nationalities truly to be welcomed? Are the poor as welcome as the rich? How about the divorced? The disabled?

In our day of course, the issue is about sexuality. Are gays and lesbians truly to have a place? Can they serve in places of authority? I am proud of the leadership of this congregation who are willing to say yes, they have a place. As I say this, I know that there are those in the congregation, people whom I respect and love who disagree with me, who are not so supportive, who may be disappointed, sad, confused, angry or afraid. I only want to say, that you also are welcome here. We also treasure your presence, your insight, voice and the life you bring to our community.

The focus of Jesus is not about who we are or where we come from. Jesus is not focused on race or on nationality or sexuality. The primary focus of Jesus is not even about what one believes or how one worships. No, the focus of Jesus is much more narrow than that. The focus of Jesus is about how truly we love. Our identity and our unity will be built on how we live the love of Jesus in our world. We will find our unity in Christ when we work to eradicate hunger, to care enough for children to help lower infant mortality rates around the world. We will find our unity when we work to bring true gender equality, to combat AIDS, malaria and other diseases, to promote education as a universal right. We will find our unity in Christ, in our efforts to care for the earth. Our unity in Christ will be formed not in what we despise, but in who and what we love and how we act on that love.

I like my tee shirt. But, I wish I had a tee shirt that focused not a team I despise, but on who and how I love. That would be a tee shirt I could wear in front of anybody. That would be a tee shirt that would truly be worth wearing any time and any place.
