

Pentecost 9 July 21, 2024

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and redeemer. Amen.

Last Tuesday, Good Shepherd's own Tess Taylor, in her capacity as Barre City's Housing and Homelessness liaison, and Brooke Poulliot from the Barre City Police Department as well as Kristin Baumann, the new Director of the Aldrich Library, pulled together a large group of congregations, social service agencies and others to address the continuing homelessness issues in Barre. It was very well attended (I'm happy to say there were six members of Good Shepherd there), and I'm encouraged for what we will be able to accomplish. But right after this meeting I looked at the lesson from 2 Samuel, and for the first time I saw that God who had freed the people of Israel from slavery and still preferred to be homeless! Kind of strange, but then I remembered a guy from my days at St. Mary's in Harlem: Charles Kelly was a deeply spiritual guy, he sang with the choir and introduced the call and response version of the Lord's Prayer we will sing in a few minutes; he volunteered at the soup kitchen and always, always came to church on Sundays, as Charles would say, "I need my cup of Jesus!" But Charles was homeless, living out in the park and nothing could convince him otherwise. Until finally one day, it was as if a switch flipped in his head: Charles agreed to get into a housing program. But it wasn't quite done: finally he was set to get his own apartment in Brooklyn, but he began having doubts: so I told him, "Look Charles, just because you have an apartment, you don't have to sleep there; sleep in the park, nobody will know; nobody will check on you every night. But both you and I know that there will be that night in February when the snow is blowing sideways, and you'll have a place to get warm." So he got an apartment and kept sleeping in the park. But then he got a little kitten, so he had to go to the apartment everyday, and in the end Charles died in his sleep at home. And right here in Barre, shortly after Elizabeth and I came here, there was a fellow named Gary to stayed outside Lenny's all the time. One cold fall evening, Beth Mueller and Lauren Lamore asked Gary if he wanted to stay inside, that they could get him a room at the motel. Of course, Gary said yes, and with lots of hard work, persistence in reaching out to the state agencies, with grit and determination, Beth and Lauren were able to obtain permanent housing for Gary. And that's what it took: something to change, to develop a relationship, to see the other in a deeply compassionate way. And like the homeless God of 2 Samuel, there is eventually a change that changes everything: the development of a relationship of love and trust that enables

us to come together, to seek a better way to live together and true manifestation of of compassion, that show the power of this approach.

The other thing that struck me was that I have often thought that there is a little bit of congruence between the Buddha and Jesus in the Gospel lesson from Mark we hear today. In Buddhist thought, there is an important image of the “compassionate Buddha” who teaches that for enlightenment, we must seek wisdom and compassion, that these are the two wings on which we fly. The compassion of Buddha is the deep desire for all to be well, for harmony to exist throughout all the universe. This is the image and teaching of Buddha, enlightened under the bodhisattva tree. In Mark’s Gospel as we heard this morning, Jesus saw a great crowd; and as we are told, Jesus had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and so Jesus began to teach them many things. I like it that both Buddha and Jesus reach out in compassion. But where Buddha’s sense of compassion is very abstract, the focus of Jesus’ compassion is very specific: those around him, those who are lost, those in great need of compassion and sympathy here and now. For Jesus, this is the path, the way of love, the way of salvation and liberation, to show that depth of compassion to those who surround you, to those who are in a deep need for Jesus’ healing presence.

The Christian writing commonly referred to as the Letter to the Ephesians, takes this notion to an even deeper level: beyond Jesus showing compassion, showing the way to peace, this scripture rather asserts that Christ *is* our peace. In this epistle there is a larger view that is provided for believers: this is a panoramic view of salvation history, the story of God’s actions to free creation from the tyranny of evil and death: this is a cosmic portrait of the manner in which God’s actions transform the world. Particularly, though, this epistle, especially in this second chapter, it particularly focuses on how God’s actions of salvation take root in our lives. This epistle seems to be directed most pointedly at the Gentiles, that is, those in the early classical world of the Roman Empire who were not Jews by birth and who come to Jesus and the Church without much of the background that Jewish followers of Jesus had. These Gentiles were once considered beyond the pale, outside of the redeeming work God set in motion for the people of Israel in their deliverance from their slavery and bondage in Egypt during the Exodus: now the people of Israel had the teachings of Moses, the Law and commandments to guide them: as this epistle explains it, the reconciling love of Christ overcomes all previous divisions: where once the Gentiles were outsiders, strangers and aliens to the work of salvation, now in Christ

salvation is offered freely to all...where once they were hopeless and without God, now they are given hope...where once far off, now they are drawn near, brought near, as the writer puts it, "by the blood of Christ." And this is where I believe it really gets deep: rather than following the way of the world at that time, the Pax Romana based on the divide and conquer strategy and tactics of a vast military machine, this epistle asserts that the Pax Christi, the peace of Christ is given to us in our unity: Christ overcomes the division of humanity through the cross, an instrument of torture and death, but through the cross we see both the depth of evil in our world and the need for God's reconciling love: in Jesus Christ we see the power of God's love, even in weakness, "to stretch out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that all might come within reach of his saving embrace," and this is the basis of a true and lasting peace, a peace of God which passes all understanding, but which brings all humanity into one people, a unity unparalleled in the world at that time, and indeed, still unparalleled in our own day.

And now, almost two thousand years later, this same compassion, this same peace is still **the** promise: we, you and me, we are called into this same fellowship of peace. This is the peace of the fellowship of those who gather at the foot of the cross and there see the true source of our salvation: who see the great shepherd of souls in the dying savior, the one whose life is given that unity might overcome estrangement and the love might conquer even death itself. The church is now called on to undertake this peace-making role, with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone, to build the unity among all races, all classes, all sorts and conditions of people. We are called, you and me, we are called to become the shepherds now, to have compassion as Jesus did, for the teeming crowds in their misery and desperation, we are called to minister and to mission in the Name of the Risen Christ to shepherd, guide and care for those both inside and outside of this church in desperate need of the love of Christ and the peace of Christ in their lives. But we do not do this alone or on our own power of strength: rather we are, "built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God," fed, nourished and strengthened by God in the love of Christ and inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit for this shepherding task. What more appropriate for the people of the Church of the Good Shepherd: God has given us a special mission here in Barre, God has called and loved us each into this mission and God brings us together in unity, overcoming the divisions of this world, that we might serve as members of the household of Christ Jesus to share the love given to each of us. Thanks be

to God for this great grace to live each day a new in the mission of God.  
Amen.