

Jesus is our Peace.

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab

7th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 11, Year B. July 23, 2006. Delivered at 8 a.m. only. Distributed at 10 a.m. (Text: Ephesians 2:11-22)

Tradition tells us that Paul wrote the words in today's Second Lesson from a prison in Rome to a church far away in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), a church he had helped to start. He was reaching out to people he knew and loved – and who had a strong emotional bond with him, too. One of the main reasons Paul had for writing his friends in Ephesus was that their church was coming apart at the seams. They'd lost their unity. They were quarrelling with each another. They had developed "factions" and chosen sides. Partisanship was getting out of hand. Their divisions and loss of love for each another grieved the Apostle who had brought so many of them to faith in Christ. In this part of his letter, Paul was offering assurances to the Gentile Christians, whom he had gone out on a limb to welcome into the young church as equals with Jewish believers in Jesus as the Messiah.

It's hard for us to imagine how difficult it was for Jewish Christians to welcome Gentiles into their fellowship. In that era, Jews were taught to regard Gentiles as completely outside God's covenant. They were alien, unclean. Jews alone were God's people. "Gentile sinners" was the common way they spoke of non-Jews. This way of thinking wasn't just crude prejudice; it was rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and the traditions of the Elders. Four hundred and fifty years earlier, when they returned from their exile in Babylon, Ezra the Scribe compelled Jews who had married Gentiles during the exile to divorce their spouses and send them away. Gentile wives would "contaminate" the holiness of the People of God. That kind of thinking was not easy to break.

We can take cold comfort from remembering that the church has had factions and disagreements since the days of the New Testament. But we know that Jesus prayed for his disciples to be united, asking "*that they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you.*"

Factions are a plague. But we have to admit that factions are also a logical product of human nature. We like to have things our own way, and so we sift ourselves out into groups (and further into *sub*-groups) that share a common culture, or the same way of thinking about a specific issue, or the same political goals, or the same religious convictions. "Birds of a feather flock together," as they say. So we might even assume that factions are normal. —But, then, war is normal too, isn't it? ... Like cancer. Or lust. Or greed. The fact that something is "normal" makes it understandable, but doesn't make it *desirable*.

There's nothing wrong with people having different ideas about things. People *are* different. Diversity is not a choice; it's built into our nature. But *factionalism* is a giant step beyond diversity. Factionalism is more than peaceful association with like-minded people or friends with similar interests. Factional rivalry goes beyond advocating one school of theological opinion or one particular interpretation of the Bible. Factions – in politics or in the church – strive for control and domination. Factions want to impose their views and values on everyone else. Factions want to *win!* Winning, though, presupposes "enemies" and the need to defeat them. For Christians, as Tom Ehrich wrote recently, "a focus on winning can lead to arrogance and cruelty, and it sees people as expendable in the great work of fighting the enemy."

Jesus prayed that his followers would have the same kind of unity with one another that he had with his heavenly Father. Paul told the Ephesians that Jesus "*is our peace.*" He even said that "*He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross.*" Those are powerful words. Paul saw the death of Christ as the "birth" of a New Humanity. All the old divisions and hostilities and barriers to fellowship were abolished. In another letter, Paul says, "*Male and female, slave and free, Jew and Greek – all are one in Christ Jesus.*" —Oh, if only we could live that way!

Natural, human inclinations have led Christians to split into sects based on our differing interpretations of the Bible (interpretations which we proclaim as "revealed truth," repudiating all other plausible interpretations). Or we separate from one another based on competing visions for how the church should be ordered (condemning other views than our own as "revisionist"). That's precisely what Christians have done for

hundreds of years —and are doing still. But the Bible tells us that God wants the church of Jesus Christ to be *different* from the rest of human society. These days, any difference is hard to spot. —That must grieve the Spirit of God.

Unity is only possible in the church to the extent that we recognize that Jesus “*is our peace.*” As Paul said about Jews and Gentiles, we all “*have access in one Spirit to the Father.*” And at the Last Day, he alone will be our judge. Christ did not send his disciples out to be judges, but to herald the presence of the Kingdom of God and by their lives give testimony to God’s power to transform sinful human beings. But the current hatefulness and bitter language towards one another within the church testifies that *we* have not been transformed in any obvious sense.

It strikes me that all the differences among churches and church people matter a lot more to *us* than they do to our heavenly Father. We’re *going* to have these differences. It’s unavoidable. Our differences won’t go away, but they don’t have to make us enemies, not if we believe that the redeeming death of Jesus has made us into a single “New Humanity.”

I have little expectation that the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Communion is going to look the same ten years from now. Some kind of realignment is coming; many would say that the realignment has already begun. The “center” seems to have collapsed, and all of the energy in our church is out at the opposite edges —the “hard right” and “hard left,” or (as they call themselves) “the traditionalists” and “the progressives.” I’ve always believed that it’s more important to build bridges than walls, so the most recent developments in our church depress me.

But I’ll tell you this: Though I’m sad and disappointed at the current state of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, I’m not alienated from anybody in this church... either on the “left” or the “right” of the current issues. Personally, I’m a relatively conservative, evangelical Anglican. But I don’t have to “win.” I can love people with whom I have sharp disagreements about many things, and I can be part of a single family with them in Christ, a New Humanity. If they can’t accept me as a brother or love me back, that’s more their problem than mine! If we profess faith in one Lord Jesus Christ, as we say in the Creed, that’s enough for me. —If it’s not enough for them, I’m sorry. —I pray that many of you here today agree with me, but if you don’t, that’s o.k., too. I still love you.

I believe we can have real unity and yet agree to disagree about serious issues. We can have real unity and also advocate differing interpretations of the Bible or Christian doctrine (or anything else). We can have real unity and also be free to believe that we’re right and others are, possibly, *not* right! Consider this: the Pharisees and Sadducees in Jesus’ day were at least as different from one another, or more so, than Bishop Bob Duncan and Bishop Gene Robinson are today! The Sadducees only accepted the first five books of the Bible as inspired by God, and they didn’t believe in prophets, or angels, or the resurrection. And they collaborated with the Romans. The Pharisees believed in the Law and the Prophets and the Writings and treated the teaching of their Elders as inspired. They believed in the resurrection of the dead and they hated the Romans. —But Pharisees and Sadducees worshiped in the same Temple together and shared a single, burning loyalty to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They argued about almost everything, but neither ever pointed the finger at the other and said, “*You’re not a Jew! I can’t worship at the same altar with you!*” They knew they were one People, one Family. That was enough.

Only love for one another will have the power to keep Anglicans together when everything else fails. If we accept that God loves us and that Christ died for us so that we could be one, how can we *choose* not to love one another? And real *love* isn’t just a word – it’s a way of life. It’s embodied in how we actually behave toward others, especially people with whom we have many differences.

Love makes me look at the people I disagree with and say, “*No matter what happens, you’re my sisters. You’re my brothers. We’re one family.*”

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