

July 19, 2009

**The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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In the Letter to the Ephesians today, we hear talk about the wall that divides humanity and the idea that this wall was broken down by Jesus, bringing peace within humanity and access to God.

What is the wall? The wall is the Law, which the Jewish people were supposed to observe and which the Gentiles did not. The Law originally comes in the form of the Ten Commandments. These commandments exist as a gift to make God's people holy, separate, governing how a community is to live together. They are a basic set of rules in place to help form a community of ethical and moral standards. Most of all, the Law is a gift from God, allowing one's whole life to be a living sacrifice to God, coming at a time when a majority in a world does not even believe in the One True God.

The Law, begins to develop, taking shape in the various laws we find in Deuteronomy, and Leviticus. More ideas about the law begin to take shape, and of course, we need to have a hierarchy in place, to oversee and administer the law. Then we wind up with further study and interpretations of the law, with the Mishnah and the Talmud. Centuries of this development serve to create a fixation on the living of the Law, not so much as a way of making one's life a sacrifice to God, but as a way of following a set of prescribed rules in order to be right with God, to be "in" with God, to be OK with a perceived taskmaster. Humanity is unable to honor the gracious intent of the Law. Rather the Law becomes a way of keeping others out, excluding others from God. Essentially the people of God say, "You do not follow our laws, therefore you are outside of God's grace." And so, this wall is built, and hatred among groups continues to develop. Today's Epistle points out that the Ephesians were once considered separate and on the wrong side of that wall. Even within the Jewish nation, there are divisions, with disagreements over the translation of laws and more walls and more separation follow as a result. Instead of God's people becoming a light to the nations, we see an image of a people in separation, isolated from other nations, isolating their own people from God.

The death and resurrection of Christ marks a seismic shift. No longer do we need to live a life based solely on a list of commandments and ordinances that actually lead to a way of exclusion. Those commands and ordinances are not the end-all, be-all of living.

Jesus shows us the way, by offering God's peace and God's grace to all who will have it, even to those once considered outside the boundaries of God's grace. Jesus actually lives the Law in its fullest, living his life as a complete sacrifice to God. The Cross is part of that offering to God, a culmination of a life given to God, of a life lived in sacrifice to God. The Cross smashes the wall of separation built by excessive legalism. Now all have access to God, Jew and Gentile alike, through Christ. Now all of humanity has access to

forgiveness and love. Now we are all free to live life without fear of honoring a perceived taskmaster. Rather, by taking on Christ, we can live freely, giving to others and making our lives a meaningful body of work, one of sacrifice to God. We can bring hope into the world; we can bring inclusion to the excluded. That is the gift we have through the Cross. Are we honoring it?

In some cases yes, we can see the progression of acceptance and integration in many ways, by people of different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. The Church has contributed to these developments, made with real sacrifices, in the spirit of love. We have made progress, no doubt. But, we still have much work to do. There is still international tribalism that threatens all of us. There are still issues of race, sexism, class and human sexuality to deal with. On a global and national scale, there is much to be done. Just as grievous, are the divisions we still build within our own Church, the Body of Christ. Legalism still exists and still hurts. We still build walls and create boundaries for those seeking God.

I have a friend. He was raised Baptist, but was never baptized. His wife was born into a family of Episcopalians, but they rarely went to church and she was never baptized. Keri and I visited them two summers ago. Now, typically when we get together we have long, fun discussions over a couple of cocktails after dinner. The topics in the past have included politics, social issues and even conspiracy theories, but never religion. However, it seems that all my old friends eventually want to discuss or ask questions about God. This trip was no exception. I fielded many questions about Baptism, Communion, and the Bible. My friend is very bright. He is also very skeptical about Christianity. He was never baptized, because he never felt he could make that step with integrity, knowing he had so many questions. However, he wants to believe. As we talked and I pressed him, he said to me, "I would really like to believe this. Who wouldn't? I mean, it would be great if it were all true." He wants to believe. He wants to understand.

What made this conversation so remarkable to me is that my friend and his wife were actually going to an Episcopal Church at the time. They did not make definitive steps towards Baptism and communion, but clearly the Spirit was working within them. What was disappointing about this was that in their time attending this parish, they learned so little about the basic teachings of our faith. Instead, they learned more about the current disputes in our Church. They were up to date on all the buzzwords. Liberals against conservatives, orthodox and revisionists, Gene Robinson, and "the African Bishops." It was sad to me. Here was a couple, who have had a lot of difficulties in their lives, they have two Children, and they have been seeking God, they have been seeking the hope that can be found in God. Yet they were getting more from our Church on schism than redemption. They were getting more insight about Church polity than the Gospel. They were in a Church with two camps building a wall of separation and they were asked to choose a camp, rather than to find and choose Christ. How much more could they have benefited and grown through witnessing God's grace, witnessing a community striving to love, to include, to sacrifice?

It has been two years since my friends' experience in the Church. Keri and I just visited them again this summer and they still do not go to Church. That wall kept them out.

(Although, the Spirit is still working within them and there is hope for getting them to the Baptismal font, someday).

The Church is the Body of the living Christ. Although it is imperfect because of our imperfections, the Church is the presence of Christ in our world, offering the perfect sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. It is easy for us to forget this, in the current climate of the Episcopal Church. We spend too much time arguing and dividing the body, rather than reflecting on how we have become one in Christ. Indeed, our behavior builds walls and prevents seekers from fully becoming part of the Body Christ.

Things will probably get more turbulent of the coming weeks and months, in light of the inevitable chatter that follows each General Convention. The Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church may look different in the coming years. Yet, we who are here will have the opportunity to teach and engage the world around us in the coming years and we have a wonderful opportunity. We can spend our time breaking down the walls of separation, by what we teach and how we live, and inviting those who seek Christ into our Church home. We can focus on bringing people to receive the perfect sacraments of the living Christ. We can say no to the sound bites and rhetoric, and focus on the freedom given to us in the Gospel, building up those on the margins, accepting those who were once rejected and encouraging those have lived life in the mainstream. We can help God change lives. Christ broke down the wall of separation through the Cross 2000 years ago. All have access to God in Christ. That should be enough to keep us going for the rest of our lives.