

July 19, 2009
Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 23:1-6
Ephesians 2:13-18
Mark 6:30-34

Reflection

Were you amazed by the message of today's second reading? The Jewish people of ancient Ephesus would have been. Was it true that they would now be one with the pagans? Inconceivable! That's what they would have said. Inconceivable! The pagans, that is, anyone who was not Jewish, might have been equally amazed.

But Jesus of Nazareth had lived, and had died, and had risen from the dead. So all bets were off, since everything had changed.

It was through the cross, the author of Ephesians insists, it was by Jesus' blood shed on the cross, that the world was being transformed.

The key word in this transformation seems to be peace. Jesus preached peace. He established peace. He was and is peace.

So why do human beings, including those who call themselves Christian, still live as if we were sheep without a shepherd? Why do we still run after anything or anyone--celebrities, sports, the latest technologies, the hot new spiritual book or the charismatic new leader, in the hope of finding a shepherd to guide us?

Another compelling image in today's passage from Ephesians is "the dividing wall of enmity," broken down by Jesus. He was healing our divisions right from the start. Think of the non-Jewish Wise Men on their mission to pay homage to the "King of the Jews." Think of Jesus' first disciples. Mary Linder, one of our Communion Service leaders, pointed out quite correctly that if they hadn't been in Jesus' inner circle, Simon the Zealot probably would have knifed Matthew the tax collector. Think of the Roman centurion who announced that the crucified Jesus was the Son of God. Think of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus the Jerusalem Pharisee, who buried Jesus. And think of the great variety of women and men from

across the Roman Empire who came to follow Christ in the first generation after his resurrection. God's Kingdom had come.

And yet, this beautiful oneness among people who would normally have not sought each other out was not to last. We can see it in the New Testament. By the time the letters of John were written, perhaps near the end of the first century, there were real differences among Christians, and the various factions were already demonizing one another. When Christianity became a legal religion in the fourth century the Church felt that it was important to define exactly what we believe. The fights that went on at the councils were vicious. And the mutual excommunication between the Eastern and Western Churches hasn't been totally overcome almost 1000 years after it occurred. Today there is more friendly contact among Christian denominations than there used to be, but there are a few groups who claim that unless people believe exactly what they believe and worship exactly as they worship they aren't really Christian, and God has condemned them for eternity.

And then there's the larger world. The barriers Jesus came to destroy still seem to be up and running, even in the land of his birth. We constantly see other people as threats who must be contained or destroyed. The fact that we even use the word "other" in connection with our fellow human beings shows how far we are from being the "one new person" envisioned by the author of Ephesians. We live in a society where nothing seems secure, and the only possible response is to look out for oneself and one's family first. Meanwhile, there are plenty of shepherds "who mislead and scatter the flock," as Jeremiah put it.

In making these observations, I am not referring only to Christians or only to Americans or only to people in the Western World. I suspect that they apply to just about everyone. Why are we so alienated from each other? Perhaps because we are alienated from the earth, which, you will remember, our creator God called "good." But that is a story for another time.

Is there no hope for us? Will the peace Jesus established continue to be rejected? Will it be impossible in the end to make "one new person" out of tragically divided humanity? We must say no. To claim that these things will never happen is to say that Jesus' coming had no effect whatsoever. That's not what we believe, and that's not why we're here.

The reign of God—wherever and whenever God’s will is done—is among us. There are people everywhere who are living parts of their lives at least, according to Jesus’ teachings. Think of all of the unselfish service that goes on in our community. And across the world. I was so moved by an interview I heard with an American reporter who stayed in Tehran after the foreign journalists’ credentials had been revoked. He wanted to witness to what was happening in Iran. He talked about the huge numbers of people, 3 million he said, marching silently to protest the election results. He talked about the doors that were thrown open to shelter folks who had been tear gassed and beaten. He talked about the city police who identified with the protesters and begged them to go home before they were hurt. And he talked about one woman, who had been severely beaten, who insisted on rejoining the protest in solidarity with the rest of the people. The situation is not perfect there, as we know. But the journalist himself became one with the protesters. He wasn’t always thinking of his own well being, for at one point he was tear gassed.

These moments of standing up for peace and justice are real. They’re like stars shining in an otherwise dark sky. They are the promise of our becoming one, as we were meant to be. They give us hope. So let us never stop hoping.

Amen.