

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by Robert Hadzor on Sunday, July 19, 2009.

It was two years ago when I first officially passed the peace in church. The sermon was over, everyone had just been kneeling, and as I stood awkwardly in the back of a small Episcopal Church in western North Carolina, something was said by the priest that caused such a strong reaction in the church. I was barely on my feet when a woman, respectfully *wise* in her years, grabs both my hands and she plants a big kiss on my cheek and says, “*The peace be with you, kid.*” I was in awe. I had no idea what to do. I looked around and saw everyone shaking hands and giving two arm hugs and I decided right then and there, that although I was a recent graduate of a university, heading to graduate school at Duke, I had no idea what the heck was going on.

Stunned to say the least, I returned the kiss of peace on her cheek, and quickly turned around, ready to possibly exchange this same “peace” with the twenty-something female that caught my eye during the Epistle reading. I was intercepted by her father, and after shaking his hand; I took his firm grip as a silent motion to keep on moving.

I later found out that the older woman, the one who gave me the kiss of peace earlier in that service, was actually a visitor of the church that day, and no one actually knew who she was. Recently, I have wanted to contact this church and find out if they ever did see her again, or if she, like my chance to “pass the peace” with the young woman behind me that day, was never to be seen again.

Today, I want to talk about Christ’s peace. In our reading of Ephesians, we have a vision of what Christ’s peace can do. The writer shares a vision of the universal church, one that is celebrated, and one that does not find divisions between the audience, in this case, Jew and Gentile. We have Christ, the bridegroom of the church, and he has reconciled the divided groups in to one unified community. The writer of Ephesians is expressing a theme of inclusion, stressing a reminder that at one point, all have been on the short side of society, and we must finally remove the divides among us in order to usher in Christ’s peace.

Where does our passage fall in the greater picture of Ephesians? It falls in the beginning, rich with energy found in the opening of any letter, infused with the desire to tackle an issue. In Ephesians’ case, the issue is of division and tensions, right where the Ephesian listener would have been. Our passage holds a crucial message that will remain active throughout the rest of the letter; that only through Christ can the unity of different groups be found. It continually emphasizes the importance of understanding the role model of Christ, in order to achieve unity, and maintain the protection against continual dividing issues that rise among the readers.

It is very easy to read this letter, and at first glance, believe everything is okay. “Oh Bobby, Christ has united us all! All is well!” But we all know, all is *not well* in our world. Sure, the letter of Ephesians can stir up strong feelings of accomplishment in all that Christ has done. But as we dig deeper into this text, the true caliber that exists is exposed, one of personal responsibility, of our need for Christ, and of our need to reconcile one with another.

It is very easy to overlook the things outside of this church when we hear a story like Ephesians. We get caught up in the passion of Christ that we miss the very divisions that still exist. Money, sex, class, education, the occupations we hold, the places we live and where we spend our time. These things, regardless if we notice, define our person in the world. And using the words of Ephesians, these are the things we have made “in the flesh, by human hands.”

The divisions we see around us are temporary, preliminary, hand made to show our place and yet, limited, and merely yield their place to the action of the Spirit. These things are similar

to the mark of circumcisions that is spoken of in Ephesians that divides the Jew and Gentile. However, we are told in Ephesians that Christ is the new circumcision, the new outward mark, one that we must take in order to reclaim a unity that has been lost. Ephesians says, “For he is our *peace*; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall...the hostility between us.”

All this is accomplished since Christ is our peace. Ephesians explains this peace as being found exclusively “in his person,” “in one body,” and “through him.” Christ’s achieved peace “through the blood,” “through the cross “in the flesh.” The question now is, what is this “peace”?

In the Gospel of John, Christ greets his disciples after the resurrection with the word, “Peace.” This man, who was wrongfully accused, abused, and murdered, and has now come to his revenge filled, yet faithful followers, and shows them that nothing shall divide any longer, all summed up in his greeting, “Peace.”

According to the catechism of the Church, found in the Book of Common Prayer, the Church “pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, *peace*, and love.” This same catechism shows that our individual duty to our neighbor is found when we “work and pray for *peace*.”

Until recently, I never saw the true beauty in passing the peace. It had never occurred to me that the passing of the peace in the Eucharistic service, resides after the proclaiming of our faith, the praying for one another in the Prayers of the People, and after the unity found as we confess our sins to God and one another. It is at this point, when we kneel as individuals, and stand as a forgiven and united body, that as an outward sign of Christ’s power to unite, we pass the *peace* of Christ to one another. The peace, the true symbol of inclusion and love for one another, crossing all boundaries that may have been made by the hands of men.

It is in this action that Christ once again replaces the “commandments and ordinances” that has divided us and replaces them with, “one humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.” This is where the foundation is laid, among the actions of the apostles and prophets, and we build a dwelling place for the Lord.

I ask those who have any knowledge of construction, what is the purpose of a cornerstone? (And it is *not* to just advertise the age of the building!). Does not a cornerstone hold two walls together? What a beautiful image! As Ephesian says, Christ the cornerstone of Jew and Gentile, White and Black, gay and straight, citizen and immigrant, oppressed and oppressor- creating a bond that is impossible to humanly construct, and that no handmade thing can destroy.

I have often said diversity is not a good thing if there is no unifying force found among it. It is simple to claim diversity in our church and overlook that although we are diverse it does not mean we are automatically unified. *It is when we have the cornerstone of Christ, the image of peace, that we can truly rejoice in diversity.* See, we do not loose our image when we are united in Christ as one would find in a melting pot. Our diverse identity is actually finally found as our eyes our opened and our hearts extend the peace of Christ. Ephesians is not calling us to loose our identity but to own it, by understanding the identities of others, as we are unified as one.

Notice that in Ephesians, we, who are no longer aliens and strangers, are joined together and “*grow into* a holy temple in the Lord.” Like this temple, our work is not done until we witness the resurrection of our Lord Christ. The dwelling place of the Lord is in constant construction. Yet, this dwelling place of the Lord gives us an identity, one that is united with the apostles and prophets, and gives us a sense of ownership, and protection. Like a house in construction, we must defend against anything that may hinder the building process. Using Christ as our peace, we expose and destroy the differences surrounding us, and welcome others

into the work we were invited into.

If we are to continue the work of Christ, as we have been called to do, I declare we must first understand Christ's peace. This peace exists everywhere and unites all into one body, empowering us to reach more. First however, we must see that there are still divides among our communities.

As long as we talk of "North" and "South", "East" and "West" Durham, not as a geographical location, but as a sociological, racial, and class division, we fail to in act in Christ's peace. As long as immigrants are mistreated and claimed as second-class citizens, and we sit passively and wonder why, we do not act in Christ's peace. As long as we find more comfort in our homes than we do serving the homeless, we do not live in Christ's peace. And as long as we remain ignorant to sexual, racial, and gender based discrimination, we do not live into Christ's peace.

I do believe the "walls" referenced in Ephesians have been destroyed by the peace of Christ. Yet, I also know mankind has built more, larger and stronger than ever. What we must understand however is that the Trinity destroyed the grips of evil at the crucifixion. As we come to one another, extending and receiving the peace of Christ, we bare witness to the Christ who's side was pierced as the centurion claimed, "Truly this man was God's son."

It is only then, when we extend an outward sign of Christ, that we defeat the outward signs that stand to divide us. Obviously it will take more than an extension of peace to fix our community divides. Yet, we know that the peace of Christ holds more than the sharing of fellowship. It holds a picture of God's kingdom, found in one another, as eyes meet, hands are shared, and we begin to claim our true identity. In one another, we are the very material that contributes to the building of God's dwelling place.

Our passage today is not speaking of an accomplished action but holds the very challenge of our charge. This passage, plainly put, is what puts us in our place and then asks, "With all that Christ has done to strengthen you, what are you doing to help peace?" And so with that, I boldly ask you today, to embrace the peace of Christ, and share in the joy of bringing to this world, a glimpse of eternity, today. **Amen.**

Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is discord, union. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. Where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. All this we ask in the name of one God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*