

7th Sunday in Pentecost (year B)
July 23, 2006
Steve Bolduc

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 23
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Text: [Y]ou are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God (Eph 2:19)

Theme: Ambiguity in doctrine versus certainty about the nature of God

Subject: Humility as a precondition for experiencing God's grace.

Title: The Episcopal Church Welcomes You

Paul's letter to the Ephesians describes the new household, or family, of God created by Christ's great sacrifice—not a family bound by law and ritual observation but a family united in, indeed created by, mutual love. As Trinitarians, our central image of God is familial—a Father, a Son, a Holy Spirit of pure and profound love. God was able to reconcile the world to himself in perfect harmony through Christ because of this Spirit of love.

In the portion of his letter we heard today, Paul describes how God's act created unity in Christ.¹ He reminds the Gentiles to whom the letter is addressed that they "were at [one] time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." Christ's crucifixion and resurrection however "has broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us, . . . [creating] in himself one new humanity in place of two."

Paul wanted the Ephesians to understand this call of the new covenant of promise, a covenant of reconciliation of all humanity to God and to each other. Yet, as Verna Dozier reminded us in *The Dream of God*, we humans do not always live up to the ideals of our religion. She noted:

The ancient Hebrews, during the time of their establishment as a nation among other nations, distorted the call by turning it into law. The Christians, during the time of their becoming a structure among other structures of the world, distorted the call by turning it into an institution (p. 5).

How has the call been distorted? One way has been the too common human frailty of dividing humanity into "us" and "them," of somehow demarcating the "strangers to the covenants of promise" from the "members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:12 & 19). Some churches create elaborate systems to determine who is going to heaven and who is going to hell and therefore know, with presumed certainty, who to "allow" into their church families. Others are less subtle and draw broad divisions according to race, class, or income.

Some might recall Louie Crew's visit to St. Stephen's last fall. Louie is the founder of *Integrity*, the advocacy group for lesbian and gay Episcopalians. Louie spoke eloquently, passionately, and with humor about why the Church should fully recognize the ministries of its gay and lesbian members and bless the committed relationships of these members. Yet, at the end of his talk, Louie admitted that he might just be wrong in this position. I found his humble admission of uncertainty, his comfort with the ambiguity of the issue, to be wonderfully Anglican. Yet, Louie was certain about one thing. He recognized no ambiguity about the nature of God—loving,

¹ Boring and Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, 2004. Westminster John Knox Press. pp.601+

merciful, and compassionate. Because of this, Louie said he is able to carry out his own call as he understands it with faith that he can stand before God on that day of reckoning.

As you may have already read in Liz's letter in the *Ambassador*, I will not be able to continue in the deacon process. Because of my loving, committed relationship with Craig, Bishop Michael has told me he is not able to ordain me. Bishop Michael feels constrained by actions of the recent General Convention and the mood of the Anglican Communion at this time.

I am disappointed by the Bishop's decision but am certain that the ministries here at St. Stephen's are not diminished.

About what else can I be certain?

- Like Louie Crew, I have no doubt about the loving, merciful nature of God.
- I know that Craig and I are conscious of the sacramental dimension of our relationship—of our family—even though our Church does not have a liturgy to recognize this.
- I know that the same Holy Spirit of pure and profound love which binds God the Father with Jesus the Son is at work in St. Stephen's, in this diocese, and in the world.
- I know that the institutions of the church are not synonymous with the household of God
- I know that through Christ, as Paul told the Ephesians, we “are no longer strangers and aliens, but are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”

Carter Heyward, of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, reminds us that God as Trinity means that whatever is Sacred is *relational*, never self-absorbed; always moving beyond itself to meet the new, the other, the different, never set in its ways or stuck on itself as the only way.²

Our images of the household of God and the Body of Christ are also relational. We experience the love and compassion of God not individually but together, not because of anything we have or could have done but because of the love of God towards us. God's love precedes all. I believe this is the most important thing to keep in our minds and hearts as we seek to carry out our own call in the new covenant in Christ.

We are one family, one communion. As Paul told the Ephesians, “we are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” Breaking communion because we disagree with one another severs the relationships through which we experience God's grace and seeks to re-establish the dividing wall of hostility between us.

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus and the weary Apostles trying to find a moment to rest. . . “for many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” However, the need of the people for healing, teaching, and spiritual nourishment were pressing and Jesus—the embodiment of love, mercy and compassion—ministered to their needs. Unlike the Apostles, we have the leisure to share bread and wine with Christ and with each other today and every Sunday. So let us come to this table as a family, as members of the household of God, to share the bread and wine, and together seek solace, strength, pardon, and renewal.

² *Saving Jesus from Those who are Right*, 1999. Fortress Press. p. 73,

I would like to close with the collect for the feast day of Richard Hooker, one of the first Anglican theologians.

Let us Pray:

O God of truth and peace, you raised up your servant Richard Hooker in a day of bitter controversy to defend with sound reasoning and great charity the catholic and reformed religion: Grant that we may maintain that middle way, not as a compromise for the sake of peace, but as a comprehension for the sake of truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*