

**The Shared Ministries of St. Mark's and Holy Spirit**  
**II Pentecost Proper 4C 29 May 2016**

In all three of today's readings, we hear the echoes of "*them*" and "*us*," the divide that we almost instinctively have created between those who are like us [those who come out of our tribe, who belong to our church], and the "*other*," the "*outsider*," to the ones who are not "*like us*."

In the Old Testament lesson from the Book of Kings, Solomon is praying to God during the dedication ceremony for the first temple in Jerusalem. At that moment, Israel was at its height. Solomon's predecessor, King David, had defeated all of the nation's enemies, securing its borders from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean; he had established Jerusalem as the country's capitol, uniting the unruly twelve tribes into a single nation. But the one thing he had not done was to build God's temple. And now his son, Solomon, has done so and is celebrating its completion. But note Solomon's concern for the foreigner, the immigrant, the refugee. He prays to God, asking that "*when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you.*"

What a remarkable prayer, what a remarkable welcome to the outsider, to the one who is not like us. And how different that is from the fearful rejection of foreigners, outsiders, and immigrants that sadly we see in so many nations of the world today including our own.

Today's epistle starts with the opening lines of Paul letter to the Galatians, his greetings to the congregation that Paul himself established in the Roman province of Galatia in what is present day Turkey. Like all of Paul's letters, it begins with a formal opening including the words "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*," but Paul cannot even wait to get to the subject of his missive, speaking of Jesus, "*who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age.*"

And the evil that Paul immediately rails about is that some in that church were turning to what Paul called a "*different gospel*," a different good news. And what was that? It was the requirement that any new Christians, those who were Gentiles, those who were not a part of the original Jewish people who followed Christ, these new followers of Jesus would have to obey all the old rituals and regulations of Judaism. The good news that Paul had preached from the beginning was centered on salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a setting right with God of all humanity, not just those who adhered to the Jewish Law. Again, the issue was the notion of who was in and who was out, a division of "*them*" and "*us*."

In today's gospel reading, the central character was not one of the chosen people. He was an outsider. The centurion was a commander in the occupying army of the Romans. He was not a Jew, but the Jewish elders in the city of Capernaum sought out Jesus on his behalf of the centurion's slave who was near death. Apparently, this Roman officer has been a benefactor to the Jewish community and had even built their synagogue. But still, he was an outsider, and for a good Jew to even enter his house would be an act of defilement requiring ritual cleansing. The centurion was apparently respectful of the Jewish tradition; for he humbly declares that Jesus need not come under his roof, but merely speak a word of healing and the healing would be accomplished. And, indeed, that is what happened.

But why was this healing so significant? Because it says clearly that Jesus saw no distinction between Jew and Gentiles, between native born and foreigner, between our kind and theirs. The

gospel, the good news of God's love and God's power to heal and make whole, is not a possession that we can keep locked up for ourselves and for our own kind.

Earlier this week, I made a parish call on one of the parishioners from the Church of the Holy Spirit, one who is having a hard time accepting the notion of splitting worship during the year between the church in Plymouth and the church in Ashland. As you have heard, we are currently looking at holding the main, 9:30 a.m. Sunday service at the Church of the Holy Spirit for about seven months of the year and at St. Mark's for perhaps five months. It has become obvious that kept apart, both of these congregations may not be able to survive, but together we can be a vital Episcopal presence in the Pemigewasset Valley. And so on the third Sunday of June, June 19<sup>th</sup>, we will begin holding our main Sunday service at St. Mark's until sometime later in the fall.

For this particular parishioner whom I went to see, as for others I'm sure, the thought of leaving a familiar worship setting for another is troubling, even though it is only six miles away and the move is only for a time before we will come back. And possibly added to that are past perceptions of the other church that may not have any relevance today, but still are troubling, all of which may be compounded by old relationships with people who may have moved from one church to another in years past.

I must admit that, years ago, I viewed St. Mark's in Ashland as the place where retired clergy attended, clergy with strongly held opinions usually opposing things that were happening elsewhere in the diocese. But that stereotype is long out of date, and bears no reality for us. Today, no one thinks that this new phase in our relationship as two congregations functioning together will be easy. But we are committed to giving it a try, and hopefully to put behind us the out-of-date distinctions of "*them*" and "*us*."

As I think all of you are aware, my wife Lynn suffering a skiing accident at the beginning of April, breaking and dislocating her shoulder and doing severe damage to the nerves in her arm. That happened just two weeks before we were schedule to travel to Portland, Oregon to be part of the leadership of a once-every-three-year national church conference of Chaplains to the Retired Clergy. Well, Lynn was intent on going, if she could, and we had planned to stay on after that gathering to spend a long weekend on the Oregon coast with our son and daughter-in-law, and then to tour some of the snow covered mountains in the Cascades. All of that required a variety of apparel: clothing for the both of us for the conference, for the beach, and even for snowfall in the mountains. Well, I quickly learned that trying to carry extra baggage when you are hurt is all but impossible.

And I think the same is true for our next step together as two Episcopal churches seeking to share our ministries, our worship, our outreach and fellowship. If we intend to carry along old baggage, outdated opinions of the other, or past hurts, we will never be the Episcopal Church that God is calling us to be in this part of New Hampshire.

It is perhaps worth our while to recall the instructions Jesus gave to his twelve disciples when he sent them out two-by-two on their first preaching mission. Remember? No shoes, no wallet, no extra baggage. In other words, they were told to be vulnerable, to make no provision for oneself, but to look for the welcome of others. To my way of thinking, this sending of his followers to a new place, away from the familiarity of their being together with him, actually was meant to change them more than the people to whom they would preach. And often we find this is true for us, when

reaching out beyond our own comfort zone, we discover ourselves changed and helped by those whom we think we are serving.

Jesus never told his disciples to hang out a shingle or a church sign board and hope that people might attend our services. No, he wanted his disciples, then and now, to go out and experience the value of vulnerability, inviting us to a life without baggage so that we can begin to accept others and learn from them.

I wouldn't let this sermon time pass without a mention of the Memorial Day weekend that we are observing and turn our thoughts to the men and women, who, over the years and up to and including today, have put their lives in harms way to defend our freedom and our ideals of peace and justice in the world.

Each year on Memorial Day, my mind conjures up memories of a person from my family, whom we always called 'Crazy Uncle Ray.' As a young child on the west coast right after the Second World War, I loved my crazy uncle Ray. Ray gave to my brother and me the most wonderful gifts: real army cartridge belts complete with canteens and – to my mother's dismay – real bayonets.

The reason he was referred to by my family as 'crazy' Uncle Ray" is that while he survived the war, he was greatly damaged by it. Unknown to me at the time, Ray suffered extreme post-war trauma, having been severely injured and almost dying on the beaches of Guadalcanal, spending the next half year in various hospitals. He became an alcoholic, an abusive husband to my aunt who divorced him, and he eventually died of alcoholism.

There are men and women today who have returned from war, scared both physically and emotionally. But they are returning to a society quite different from their World War II counterparts. Some of you may have heard on National Public Radio this week a 91 year-old veteran who came back from that bloody war 70 years ago. Soldiers of that war had grown up in the Great Depression, many of whom were poverty stricken. But they had lived in a culture where anyone in the neighborhood would help anyone else. And their military experience, while violently different from life at home, still had that sense of common community. You took care of your mates; you never left a fellow soldier behind. And they did this, not because it was the right thing to do, but because it was the only way of having a chance to survive. And they returned to a society that felt the same.

Today's men and women returning home from war struggle with the lost sense of fellowship and cohesion of the close knit community of soldiers that worked together for the common good. And what many find instead is a nation divided over race, over income disparity and toxic politics. They find a society that put more emphasis on one's personal wants rather than the good of the community as a whole. As someone has said, sadly, as our common wealth increases, our sense of community lessens.

I hope that tomorrow's Memorial Day will be more than just a day off to do spring gardening or an opportunity to get 40% savings at Target stores. Hopefully, each on of us might each take time in the next twenty-four hours to turn our thoughts from concerns of whether the price of gas will rise or if stock market will rebound, and think instead about those who have and who will continue to put their lives in harm's way, some of whom have made the ultimate sacrifice, men and women like my crazy uncle Ray. And perhaps we will also give thought to our sense of community and our new fellowship as an expanded church family.

So let me close by repeating once again Paul's greeting, "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins.*" Grace to you who have worshipped for so many years in this building, and grace to you who have only thought of St. Mark's as your church home. For there is only one gospel which we share with one another, the good news of God's loving presence which will be with us wherever we may be.

*Amen.*