

“Open to All”

July 18, 2021

Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

When he looked at the crowd, and the enormity of their need, he was moved by compassion and couldn't resist responding. Even though Jesus intended to spend time alone with his disciples, time they surely needed to decompress and debrief from their efforts taking the gospel into the countryside, he sets all that aside for the sake of those seeking help. In the ancient world it was believed the heart is the seat of emotions, so we can say Jesus was motivated throughout his life more from his heart than his head.

That's a quality the modern world doesn't have much use for. For us the idea of giving away something people find valuable and want desperately makes no sense at all. And allowing our plans to be sidetracked by distractions is a waste of time. Yet Jesus does this over and over, and calls those who follow him, who follow with their heart and not their head, to do the same. That's hard to do. It's asking a lot from us to expect us to give up the prospect of profit and security and be driven by nothing but the needs of other people.

I get the feeling from reading the letter to the Ephesians it was sort of hard for people in that time as well. One of the elements of change the writer of this letter emphasizes is how through Christ everything is levelled. Where once there was hostility, now there is harmony. The metaphor that's used is a “dividing wall.” I've been fascinated recently over how controversial that image is among scholars. Many of them seem to want it to refer to an actual wall. They think the author is alluding to the wall of separation that existed in the Temple in Jerusalem separating Gentiles from Jews. While apparently there was a separate courtyard for Gentiles, it wasn't put there out of hostility but out of hospitality. Jewish practice was to make space for non-Jews to be included without having full access. So, I don't think that could be what the author means. Besides, it's very unlikely anyone in Ephesus who was Gentile had ever seen the Temple in Jerusalem, let alone know how it was laid out. And frankly, by the time this letter was written the Temple had already been destroyed by the Roman army.

The dividing wall is a metaphor. And it's one that applies as well today as it did in the first century. All around us we find hostility between different groups, whether they're political, religious, ethnic; we can find an infinite number of reasons to separate ourselves from one another. We create barriers over the most ridiculous things in the belief that we're justified because we're protecting something of value. No too long ago I saw a picture posted on Twitter by the historian Michael Beschloss. If you have a Twitter account it's worthwhile following him; his political observations are very astute and every day he posts an historical photo that is remarkable. This one was of people in some kind of conflict on a beach in Florida. His caption reads, “White segregationists try to stop Black protesters from entering water at segregated beach, St. Augustine, Florida, [June 25], 1964.” The ocean itself was too small to share, so far as those segregationists were concerned.

The absurdities we're willing to commit to preserve our divisions is mind-boggling. The writer of Ephesians claims that Christ has abolished all that nonsense. We no longer have reason to exclude anyone. The dividing walls have been broken down. God's kingdom is open to all.

That's what Jesus demonstrates for his disciples. Even though they are tired from their travels and need some time at rest, he isn't finished instructing them. When the crowds appear, he turns to them with wisdom and healing. He is open to all. And those who follow him are being instructed, are being molded, to do the same.

I mentioned last week, in preaching on the first part of this letter, that the writer of Ephesians sounds breathless. There's a desperation behind these words that may be rooted in a concern that these people are in danger of failing to understand and falling back into old habits. But I think it may also be rooted in sheer elation. The writer of this letter is breathless because they're excited about the possibilities unfolding. The divisions between Jews and Gentiles being dissolved may be just the beginning. What other divisions might collapse?

That's the question we need to ask ourselves. If Jesus is open to all who come to him seeking help, what is our responsibility? I think these stories about his actions aren't meant as anecdotes, quaint little legends about his generosity. They're meant to instruct us, to inspire us; they're meant to pull us out of our heads and help us act from the heart. They're meant to enlist us as allies in God's project of reconciliation. I read a wonderful quote from Archbishop Desmond Tutu I'd like to share with you. He, of course, was a Black Anglican archbishop in South Africa and a fierce opponent of Apartheid. He wrote,

“God saw our brokenness and sought to extricate us from it—but only with our cooperation. God will not cajole or bully us, but wants to woo us for our own sakes. We might say that the Bible is the story of God's attempt to effect atonement, to bring us back to our intended condition of relatedness. God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to God. God sent Jesus who would fling out his arms on the cross as if to embrace us. God wants to draw us back into an intimate relationship and so bring into unity all that has become disunited. This was God's intention from the beginning. And each of us is called to be an ally of God in this work of justice and reconciliation.”

Each of us is called to be an ally of God in this work. What must we do to be open to all? What changes need to be made in our personal, professional, spiritual lives? What can we do as a community of faith to help in breaking down the walls that divide us, the hostility between us?

Jesus offers the example of deep compassion, moving from the heart, even when the head says otherwise. If we want to become allies of God in the work of reconciliation, we must listen to our hearts. We must put aside our own interests, our own needs, so we can respond with compassion to those around us in need. This is how we become, as the letter writer says, a

“dwelling place for God.” God will find a home in us when we are open to all and the walls that keep us divided are finally broken down.

Amen