

June 24, 2018

Trinity Church and St. Monica's Church

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday closest to June 22

Proper 7, Year B

In his address to the Christians in the city of Corinth, which we heard in the reading this morning, St. Paul encourages them to open wide their hearts. There was a time perhaps when this injunction to open our hearts to others would have been taken for granted, not only in our church communities but in our nation as well. There was a time when we knew that, according to our faith, we are called to welcome the stranger, the immigrant, the visitor, the person who lived outside our neighborhood, who was of a different race, or ethnicity, or sexual orientation, or even someone, as they say, who was outside our comfort zone. But in his appeal to the people in Corinth, Paul is inviting them, and by extension inviting us today, to join with the Jesus who sat in the boat setting out across the Sea of Galilee. Like Jesus, who sat peacefully even while the boat was buffeted by winds and rough waters, we are being invited to say, without fear, as Jesus himself did, let us go over to the other side, to encounter all the different people we will find there. We can welcome Jesus' invitation because he knows that we should have

no fear of those on the other side no matter how different they might be from us.

And why should we have no fear of them? Because we know that with God all humanly constructed differences are artificial and fade into insignificance in the light of the all-encompassing, all embracing love of God who created us all equal in God's sight. This is the gospel heart of what the Jesus movement is saying to us today. It is reminding us that there was once a time when we knew and proclaimed the truth of these gospel affirmations. There was a time when we didn't need to assert them so boldly because they were part and parcel of our everyday lives as we tried to respond faithfully to the call for tolerance and inclusion from God that was incarnated in God's son, Jesus Christ. But unfortunately these core convictions of our faith sometimes seem to have gone into hiding. We live in a time when powerful forces are seeking to divide our human family by creating fear of each other among its members. We live in a time when the lust for political or economic or personal power has become so overwhelming that it leads the fearful and frightened and resentful to attempt to rise to greater power by demeaning and dehumanizing others by diminishing their humanity; by depriving them of the rudimentary elements of what makes for a loving and welcoming community. The lust for greater social and economic power is driven by the fear that others will take

something from us that we deem essential to our very identity, having lost sight of what our true identity is and of the God from whom it comes to us as a gift. Losing sight of the gospel of inclusion and the imperative to widen our hearts to others, we single out the immigrant, the person of a minority race or sexual orientation, someone with an inferior education, someone without the financial means to secure the blessings of a stable living environment, in short, anyone who lives outside our protected and exclusive ghettos of privilege and power. We single them out in order to put them down and lift ourselves up at their expense. At its extreme this pernicious philosophy leads us in the name of zero tolerance to separate children from their parents at the border because we fear the immigrant. Make no mistake about it: powerful forces are stoking the smoldering fires of resentment and anger against anyone who threatens our allegedly hard-won status. These vile forces seek to provide us what is essentially a false identity defined by an in-group or tribe that is encouraged to fear anyone outside itself. And once these identity defining groups have been set against each other and forced into conflict with each other, the already powerful and dominant groups will exploit these conflicts to advance their own interests. The last thing those who desire to dominate weaker and more vulnerable people want is for us, as St. Paul says, to open wide our hearts to others without restriction. But

our core Christian identity is not grounded in social or economic status nor is it driven by fear of the other but in the all-inclusive affirming and welcoming love of God who demands infinite, not zero, tolerance for others.

Nevertheless, opening ourselves to those who are different goes against a powerful and resistant strain in our fallen and sinful nature: as a result of our fall when we turned our backs on God as the sole giver of our fulfillment, flourishing and true identity, we have increasingly come to depend upon our own powers and resources to provide us with those things we think are essential to our well-being. We have closed ourselves off from others, not ventured beyond our own side of the sea, and retreated into the safe confines of our tribe or narrowly defined identity. We have cultivated a fear of others because we have come to believe they are fundamentally hostile toward us, competing for those finite and impermanent things we falsely think will satisfy and fulfill us, such as superior social status, more financial wealth, or greater political power. This fear of others feeds on insecurity and resentment. But it stands in stark contrast with the Gospel truth that our real fulfillment comes only in giving to and helping others: in opening ourselves to the inclusivity of a loving community. The opposite of fear is not self-sufficiency but humble submission

to the love and acceptance of the community that welcomes and embraces us. But how do we get to that point?

If we are ever to overcome our hostility toward and fear of the stranger we will need to sit with Jesus in whatever boats we find ourselves as we negotiate the often turbulent waters of our lives: to live with and learn from the Jesus who is so unafraid of others that he invites his disciples to cross over to the other side, to cross the artificial borders we have created out of fear, and then calmly goes to sleep in the midst of the boat being rocked and shaken by the water and the winds. Like the disciples we undoubtedly want to scream at him: why don't you wake up and take control. But Jesus is without fear even in the midst of turmoil. Why? Because with God there is nothing to be afraid of. Sure, we may get wet, perhaps even fall overboard, or get bruised by smacking into the side of the boat. Overcoming our fears does not mean that everything will go smoothly on our journey across the waters to reach those on the other side. What it does mean, however, is that nothing can swamp our confidence that with God's love all things are possible and that we will never be abandoned or left without hope if we trust in God. If God created each and every one of us with love then how can we turn our backs on any of our brothers or sisters who are in trouble or are the victims of injustice and oppression?

One of the most important gifts God has given us to help us navigate the rough waters of a callous and unjust society is the community of fellow-believers. In the ancient Greek world these communities were called koinonia, a Greek word meaning a fellowship of persons who had all essential things in common. They had a sense of oneness, a sharing of goods and talents, a commitment to give to each as he or she had need from what the others had the ability to provide. It was in the koinonia that our true identity was forged.

If we want to make a difference to a world filled with hatred and fear of the other which can lead to such horrifying acts as separating children from parents, we can begin by building up our koinonias here and now in our church communities. We have the opportunity to show a fearful and divided world what it's like to live with others who are different from us in superficial ways but whose differences are brought together in the unity of diversity, in the blending of multitudinous colors to compose a marvelous tapestry in which differences serve the common good. If we are willing to sit with the calm and collected Jesus in the boat, we can feel his peace and strength without fear.

Perhaps we can find a sign of God's power and a hope for in this time of crisis in the story of the recent winner of the

national youth spelling bee: it turned out that he was a young man of color, living in a southern side that once defended slavery, the son of an immigrant from India, whose winning word was, believe it or not, the word koinonia. Thanks be to God.