

July 22, 2018

St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

Sermon preached by the Reverend Hope H. Eakins

In September, a group of 26 pilgrims will leave St. John's to go to the Holy Land. Maybe it is because of this trip that we are reading about Israel a little more closely these days. Yesterday's news reported the large-scale attack of Israeli warplanes across the Gaza Strip, a retaliation against the killing of an Israeli soldier by a Palestinian sniper. It seems to me that the reaction was a little out of proportion to this trigger event. In response to one Palestinian sniper shooting across a fence, Israel sent artillery and warplanes and bombed 60 sites in Gaza. Why was this so? Because the past months have been filled with tensions and protests, with Palestinians sending flaming kites and balloons to scorch Israel's earth and Israel removing Arabic as an official language and passing a bill that promotes settlements on West Bank land. In other words both sides have been hard at work fighting each other, and every action provokes a bigger and harsher reaction. If they fly a kite, we'll throw a bomb – kind of like my sons when they were little, stuck in the back seat of a car on a long road trip, arguing over who looked at me funny and who crossed the line on my side of the seat. Whether talking about children or nations, it is certainly clear that the more we view the world in terms of “them” and “us,” the more we define the things that separate and divide us, the more we are going to defend our side and the more we will demand guns and security barriers to keep us safe.

The Epistle this morning has a different understanding of safety. St. Paul tells us that Christ is our peace, that Christ has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us. The “dividing wall of hostility” that Paul talks about is what separated Jews from Gentiles. From the Jewish perspective, the Jews, the specially chosen children of God, were clearly on the inside while the Gentiles were on the outside. In fact, in the Temple in Jerusalem, this divide was marked by a massive stone wall. Gentiles were only allowed in the outermost court of the sacred precincts, and at every gateway through that wall, signs warned the Gentiles not to cross the divide, under pain of death.

“But [it is not so in Christ Jesus,]” Paul declares. “You who were once far off have been brought near by ... Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us.” The new way of righteousness is not through the law but through grace, he says, through God's abundant love and mercy. Paul's argument uses complicated theology, but what he says is not complicated. He says that God loves us no matter what we do and we should love one another the same way. He says that what is measured by God is not whether we follow the 613 laws in the Hebrew Scriptures but whether we follow the law of love.

Paul gets so excited about this idea of grace that he rattles on without pausing for breath, talking about how circumcision doesn't matter and how being a Jew or a Gentile doesn't matter and then he hammers his point: God wants us to live without walls or separations. There IS no Jew or Greek, slave or free, Yankee or Southerner, Protestant or Catholic, Arab or Israeli. No one can claim that God is on her side alone; no one can claim that any place, any land, belongs to him alone. Neither Democrat nor Republican is God's chosen party. In the contemporary conflict in the Near East, neither Jew nor Christian nor Muslim can claim that God has given the Holy Land just to them. God has given the land to all the world so that brothers and sisters can live together in unity.

So it seems to me that when Israel vows to strike back at the Palestinians for a shooting that killed a soldier this week, Israel's vow should be not to retaliate but to learn how to get along together. It seems to me that Israel

should spend its time and energy and money on building common resources with the Palestinians and not on constructing a 26 foot tall barrier wall to keep them out.

It seems to me also that our own country should find ways to work together with the Mexican government and maybe even spend some of our dollars to equalize opportunity on both sides of the border rather than spending a fortune to build a 21 foot tall steel fence that would separate Native American tribes and destroy the fragile ecosystems around it.

Yes, politicians say that our security will be undermined if we don't keep "them" out and keep "us" safe. But it seems to me that every time we try to put up barriers against "them" that "they" resent the injustice and resent being marginalized and hate being excluded so much that they will do anything to leap over the walls that keep them out. So what can we do instead? We could try to equalize conditions on both sides of the wall; we could send teachers and nurses instead of border dogs and guards with machine guns. Maybe if we shared what we have instead of building fences, we'd make friends instead of enemies.

Robert Frost began his poem *Mending Wall* with these words: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." That something wants the walls down. That something, Paul would say, is really God-in-Christ who wants to break down all the dividing walls we put up, because all people are brothers and sisters when they stand before the cross of Christ. It is not that Christ eliminates our differences but that Christ makes our differences holy and valuable and puts them in a higher wider world where they are no longer barriers but treasures that make life richer and fuller than we can imagine. SomeOne there is who doesn't love a wall, who wants it down, and that SomeOne is God, who from the beginning has been about the business of breaking down the walls of alienation that separate us from each other and from God.

This and every Eucharist is the claiming of what God yearns for us all to enjoy: the celebration of our unity in Christ. Here, like the company of strangers Christ fed on the Galilean hillside, we come bringing different things. Some bring fish, some bring loaves, some bring hands to serve, but all are welcome, all our gifts are used, all are fed. Here at the Lord's Table, our differences do not divide us but are resources that strengthen and enrich us. Here we who are many are made one family. This is the way God wants us to live all our lives - as children of one family. When something threatens to divide us as individuals, as communities, as nations, and especially as the Church, we are to sit down at the table and remember some lessons. We are to remember that being married is more important than being right, that being a family is more important than obeying the rules, that being a global community is more important than being a top dog, and that more important than liturgy is being the Church of God. We are to live as one family, no longer strangers and aliens but members of the household of God, and when we do, we will discover what heaven is all about.