

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
17th Sunday after Pentecost
October 6, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 57:14-19

NT Lesson

Ephesians 2:14-18 NRSV

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. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

Peace: Both Far and Near

Today, I want to open our time together sharing God's Word by giving you a startling **revelation**: we are only seven weeks away from the first Sunday of **Advent**! Sometimes, the pastor must serve as the ultimate **reality check**, and so it goes today. Well, these next few weeks will help us place the **Gospel story** in perspective as we go into the time of preparation that is the purpose and intent of **Advent**: the **coming of Christ**, Son of God, Messiah, Emmanuel, into the world. That will begin the first Sunday of December, so get things ready: **Christmas** is coming!

Also, today is **World Communion Sunday**. This is usually observed on the first Sunday of October each year. Some congregations use this time for celebrating the core of the faith with the fundamental message of **salvation through Christ**. Other denominations emphasize the role of the **Eucharist**, the Lord's supper, as part of their theology and doctrine on **salvation** and the means of obtaining **God's grace**. In the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches the means of obtaining that grace is through the elements of the Eucharist, which are dispensed by the priest. There is a somewhat different stance among the Lutheran, Anglican, and Episcopal denominations on how that whole thing is supposed to work, but the means is pretty close to what the method associated with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

Related to that, I will remind you that we **Presbyterians** spun off directly from the Roman Catholic Church, so **John Calvin** agreed with **Martin Luther** that Christ and personal salvation were **not limited** to the function of the priest or the **bread and wine** of the Eucharist, but came from God through the **gift of God** in Jesus Christ and God's Spirit. Calvin loved the Eucharist, and taught that **Christ was present** in the dispensing and taking of the elements, but not limited to the wafer or the special function of the priest that presided over the chancel table.

But, one thing that these denominations can agree on, is that our **communion with the Holy Spirit** and the **grace of God** tie very closely to the **good gift** that is the **Eucharist**, the Lord's supper. In exploring the full meaning of the Eucharist, in 1933 the pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania wanted to emphasize **church unity** and the importance of the Eucharist. Soon, the leadership of the congregation took it up. That pastor, Dr. Hugh Thomson Kerr, was the **Moderator** of the General Assembly that year, and in 1936 the U.S. Presbyterian Church adopted this recognition as **World Communion Sunday**. By 1940, the **National Council of Churches** had adopted the observance and promoted **World Communion Sunday** worldwide.

So, we recognize this day in keeping with **tradition**, and in doing so, we also honor the **Ecumenical Movement** that began in the 1920's. There are still conferences promoting the unity of the church called by Christ, but the emphasis on this has faded in the past few decades. If you look, World Communion Sunday is not on our **liturgical calendar**, and it does not, and should not, receive the same emphasis as **Advent** or **Lent**. Instead, it sits somewhere between observing **All Saints Day** and other times of celebration, such as the **Baptism of the Lord** and **Christ the King Sunday**. Each of those days brings emphasis to another aspect of our faith and our **faith traditions**. Many pastors and church leaders find these special days of worship educational, interesting, and unique in opening our hearts and minds to the many aspects of our **faith journey** and our **ministry**.

This theme, urging **unity** and new ways of approaching **life and worship**, was present in the early church, as well. Note the the writer of *Ephesians* using words like: hostility, **barriers**, commandments, **peace**, and **the cross**. In contrast, you and I expect that every day, week, and month should be peaceful and smooth in our lives, and in our church family, and in every congregation; we might feel surprised that things were **not so agreeable** among those in the **church at Ephesus**. Other writings from the **apostle Paul** touch on lots of **disputes**: strange relationships among family members, the repeated insulting of fellow believers by bringing meat and other goods from pagan temples to a common meal, **disputing theology and doctrine**, and forming **rival groups** which promoted differing requirements and beliefs for those within the congregations that formed the early church. These included **circumcision** as a requirement for joining the body of Christ.

Reading about such things makes me glad that we can live in **relative peace** among so many views of God, **Christ**, the Holy Spirit, **worship**, prayer, and **scripture**. Just listing out these areas of disagreement reminds us that the **ecumenical movement** of 100 years ago is now a bit dormant. Then, as now, we would rather argue about any range of topics, all of which divert us from the focus of **Christian service** and ministry. In the mix of all that is **salvation**, certainly. But, in our **Reformed tradition**, we hold that salvation comes from the **power of God** and is, and always has been, a function of the **Holy Spirit**.

In other words, salvation is **not of our making**. My preaching and our very best prayers do not offer salvation, nor do they bring salvation for a single soul. That reality that is salvation is **God at work** in the individual, just as God remains **engaged** and at work in the world. As you can tell, the topics at hand behind **World Communion Sunday** are varied and rather deep. So, in order to get to the core substance of our scripture lesson, we have to gain a **deeper understanding** of God's **Word**. In doing this, we also move into the work of **God's Spirit**. The result is the Word which I bring to you today. As you can see, God's Word is not **limited** to my interpretation nor the written page in the *Bibles* we have before us. God's **Word** is **Christ**, and God cannot be contained in ink and paper or the words of any individual.

In the same way, God is **not limited** to the elements that we will share today. We know that they are part of the **tradition** of the church. But, they also convey so much more:

- They serve as the **foretaste** of the **heavenly banquet** that awaits us.
- They are the **gift** of God through Christ himself.
- They are a **reminder** of our receiving God's Spirit in our **baptism**,
- They are **evidence** of abiding presence of the **Holy Spirit**.
- They enact and embody the **presence of Christ** among us.
- And, like our other sacrament, baptism, Eucharist is the **visible and tangible evidence** of the **invisible grace** God gives to us.

John Calvin figured this out and put all of this into writing and into practice. It is this **unifying aspect** of the **communion** of **our presence** today that creates the backdrop for World Communion Sunday. Whether we can agree or not, **God unites** us through every meager form of worship and celebration of God and our salvation in Jesus Christ. And, God does this despite the many disagreements that we all have over so many points and details about our beliefs, our scriptures, our governance, our faith, our **mission**, and our **ministry**.

It appears that the writer of *Ephesians* had in mind the scriptures we read from *Isaiah* as these verses of the letter were being formed. God's vision of **peace** spanned hundreds of years from the time of the **prophet Isaiah** to the formation of the **church at Ephesus** in the first century. And, because of those insights recorded for us, you and I are able to take up these topics and discuss them again among ourselves this day, nearly **2000 years** after this letter was written. These verses in *Ephesians* assure us that the **unity and peace** that we seek is not, and will not, be of our making. They come to us through the **cross**, enacted by God through the Holy Spirit, and continually placed before us by the **Risen Christ**.

When we celebrate the Eucharist today, we continue **to proclaim** that God is good. But, more than that God is **concerned** for us, reaching out to hold us, embracing us. This loving act of God goes far beyond our limited opinions and the pettiness of our differences. In uniting with congregations and believers around the world as we do today, we take one step closer to **unity in God**. By investing our time and attention here in worship and at this table, we declare that we see the world and life **differently** from those outside the faith; but, we are united, in **communion**, with one another and **in Christ** in the breaking of the bread and its **sharing** today. In doing this, we **break down the barriers** that separate fellow believers through our prayers and our humility: actions that are required and reinforced when we **meet at this table** in the feast and celebration that is the **Eucharist**. And, in uniting in this unique and faith-filled activity we lay the foundation of **hope** for us and for the generations who will **follow** us in the faith.

In this **act of unity** today in our taking of the **Eucharist**, we **yield** ourselves to God through Jesus Christ. And, we show that in this moment **peace can come** to all: both those **near at hand** and to those who seem so **far removed** in body, but who remain so very **near in spirit** through Christ and the love of God. All **thanks to God**, the almighty Creator, and to **God's Son** who reigns in power for us, and to the abiding presence of God's **Holy Spirit**, now and forever. Amen

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