

Making the Connections
Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
July 19, 2015
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Texts: 2 Samuel 7.1-14a;
 Psalm 89;
 Ephesians 2.11-22;
 Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

There are days when you have to work hard in making the connections between the strange and ancient world of the scriptures and the 21st century in which we live. There are times when the distance of world view and language and culture feel insurmountable without the guiding hands of biblical scholars.

Today is not one of those days.

Just a quick perusal of this week's news cycle and you know that we are living in a world where dividing walls of hostility still stand. Here are just three items from this week's news cycle: the united nations passed a resolution to broker a nuclear agreement with Iran; a man walks into two military facilities and opens fire and five marines are killed as is the man himself; a woman is on her way to a new job in Texas and is pulled over for a traffic violation and three days later is found dead hanging in a jail cell.

These incidents alone reveal just how far we live from the peaceable kingdom promised to David and proclaimed in Jesus. I simply named the facts. The real dividing wall of hostility in this nation is exposed as you listen to the commentary of each of these events from different news outlets and in social media. I don't need to spend one more minute making the case that we live with deep divisions in our nation, the dividing walls between us are as hostile as they have ever been and that hostility is deadly both figuratively and literally. Clearly this text is speaking to our world.

There is a time and a place for us to probe the social and political realities that confront us. Those of us who are listening for the Word of God

through the Scriptures in any time or place are confronted by questions of justice that speak to our politics and the structures of our social order. It is right and good to read Scripture in this way.

However, I want to point us in a different direction today. Not toward the political or social implications of the gospel today but the existential. I do so with the hope and prayer and full expectation that attention to the meaning of our life and who we are pushes us back into the political and the social realms better equipped to let the gospel speak and shape those dimensions of our shared life.

So here's my question for us today: where do you live from? where is God?

From where do you live? What is the center of your identity? Where is the ground of your being? I know that sounds like a heavy question on a summer morning. But the writer of Ephesians has been making a case in the passage we read last Sunday and in the passage from today that I want to commend to you as you consider this question "from where do you live?" I want to commend it to you by way of a personal piece of my spiritual formation. I have shared different pieces of my story in different settings but here's the part I want to share today. Somehow along the way, growing up in the church in western Michigan, I got in my head that the center of my identity was connected to my ability to be good. My role was to perform and impress whether this was about being a good student, a good daughter, a good friend, a good Christian. My sense of well-being was intimately connected to my performance. I've shared before how discovering the writings of Henri Nouwen in my middle 20s were so instrumental to helping me to deconstruct that compulsion to prove myself worthy of God's love.

A companion to this intensely spiritual work was a theological discovery I made in seminary in reading the work of reformed theologian Karl Barth. He was the one who turned me toward these opening chapters of Ephesians which have become the starting point for my reconstructed sense of identity. We have been chosen in Christ from before the foundations of the world (this has nothing to do with how we have

performed or who we have impressed). We have been destined for adoption through Jesus Christ (not according to our track record, not because we prove ourselves worthy) but solely because of God's good pleasure. With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of God's will, according to the good pleasure that God set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

There are three things that stand out for me in these verses we shared last Sunday. First, our identity begins and ends in God. Second, the central spirit of this choosing and adopting and gifting and calling has to do with God's good pleasure. It for the sake of joy that we are here. The third begins to turn us toward the passage for today. The choosing and adopting and gifting and calling that God does is not limited to one group. This isn't just for me or us, my people, our group, or those who think like us. There is no "us and them" in all. "All things"

Where do we live from? What is our identity? What is the ground of my being? When I let the truths of Ephesians about who I am sink deep into my soul...when I can dwell in that place where I know myself as deeply beloved of God from before the foundations of the earth...when I know that I am here for the sake of joy and the work before me whatever that may be is part of God's ongoing work of gathering up all things into Christ - I have a very strong and solid place where I can stand. When I begin to know those things for myself, I can begin to know them for the "other" who stands before me.

When I look at the ministry of Jesus I see someone who stood on that solid ground described in Ephesians and it propelled him to tear down every single dividing wall he encountered. It's a really interesting lens to use as you re-read the gospels. Jesus as the one who tears down the dividing walls. What Ephesians tells us in the passage for today is that Jesus did that work not just in his teaching but in his own body. What we often do with dividing walls is begin to describe those on the other side as somehow fundamentally different from ourselves until the violence of our rhetoric dissolves into violence full scale. Here's the way I heard someone this week describe the cross: the cross is the place where Jesus "stands between us

and our own violence.”¹ Jesus could do this because he understood in the depths of his soul what God was doing from the foundations of the earth. He did not need to defend himself or protect his life at all cost because even in his death he was doing the work of gathering up all things. And the power of God propelled the ministry of Christ forward far beyond his death.

If Ephesians speaks to that existential place from which we live, the Gospel of Mark shows one of the practices that supported Jesus in living from that place. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Have you ever thought about practices of retreat and solitude and Sabbath rest and prayer as an indispensable aspect of justice work and peacemaking or compassion? To hear the gospels tell of it these practices were indispensable in Jesus’ life as consistent as sleeping and eating.

Randy Smit, an elder of Hope Church who is also a pastor, is preaching on these texts today and shared some reflections early in the week. I share one of his lines to show how this interior work feeds the work of justice and peace-making. “Jesus knew that the only thing better than the start of a retreat was the end of a retreat.” The needs of the crowd called him out of his retreat. Right? And yet I suspect that the time alone, attentive to his own soul – the strengthening of his clarity about who he is and from where he lives – is precisely what fueled his compassion for the great need of the crowds.

I don’t have quick and easy answers regarding the deep divisions I named earlier but I do know the One who is our Peace.

And I trust that the more we lean in and continue making the connections between his life and ours the more we will discover God as the source of love who is in all things.

Amen.

¹ From the Taize community: http://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2012-03-01