

Cultivating Kinship
Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
July 22, 2018
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Texts: 2 Samuel 7.1-14a;
 Psalm 89;
 Ephesians 2.11-22;
 Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

I wish we lived in a world where I would have to work hard to introduce this sermon. To make the case that the theme of Ephesians was relevant to us today. That I would have to dig deep into the news cycle to find examples of how hostility is present in our communal life. I wish it wasn't so easy to make the case that we (like the church in Ephesus) still live with ideas about who belongs to the commonwealth and who are the strangers and aliens threatening "our way of life." There are dividing walls made of hostility that are alive and well in this nation, in this denomination, in this city, chances are in this very room. It's in the air we breathe. It is in the ways that we think and feel and react.

Before I go any further I want to make the same clarification I made with the children today. Hostility is something different from anger. Anger signals that something is wrong and needs attention. It often rises in response to a perceived threat. It's a warning that something here needs to change. Feeling anger at mistreatment or abuse or injustice is healthy and right. Those are precisely the places when we see Jesus himself get angry in the gospels.

So please do not hear me saying today that anger is wrong or that protest in the face of injustice is wrong. Please do not think for one second that I am equating the peace that Jesus came to bring with West Michigan nice and being quiet or passive or polite. There is a beautiful sentence in the book *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* that reads: "Peacemaking doesn't mean passivity. It is the act of interrupting injustice without mirroring injustice, the act of disarming evil without destroying

the evildoer, the act of finding a third way that is neither fight nor flight but the careful, arduous pursuit of reconciliation and justice.”

Now that I’m clear on what I don’t mean by hostility let me be clear what I do mean. Hostility is a deep-seated ill will – a distrust and a bitterness that festers over time. It creates a reactivity that is no longer tied to the present moment but is often an accumulation of past resentments and history. The dislike and the displeasure are visceral and immediate. And if we are honest, when hostilities flair we are not interested so much in reconciliation as annihilation. We just want them gone.

I want to invite all of us to take a moment to bring to mind where hostility might be alive for us. You can think of this in any way you want: communally as a congregation in a deeply divided denomination, as a citizen in this polarized political climate, or personally with someone in your family, your neighborhood, your work place. Want to give you a space to call to mind those past resentments, that shared history so that you can get in touch with that visceral reactivity I mentioned a moment ago. (Silence) Got it?

Now hear this: “Jesus is our peace; in his flesh he has made us into one; he has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us... he put that hostility to death through the cross!”¹

Man! Talk about sucking the life out of our self-righteous resentments! This is the hard news before the good news. That as followers of Jesus we need to interrogate the air we breathe, the thoughts we have, the feelings that arise and the assumptions those feelings are based upon. Then we have to choose something different. The question is how – how do we let hostility be put to death in us?

According to our texts for today, it’s through cultivating kinship. In the passage from 2 Samuel, David is in the height of his power. Just through a quick survey of the headings leading up to this passage reveals “David anointed King of all Israel, Jerusalem made capital of United Kingdom,

¹ My paraphrase of Ephesians 2.14 and 16.

Philistine Attack Repulsed, David Brings the Ark (the symbol of God's presence) to Jerusalem." He is settled in his house and his enemies are on the run and his mind is turning toward his legacy. How can he consolidate this power and ensure it for the generations to come? In a move that is most likely a mix of motives – both genuine piety but also politics² – David has in mind to build a temple. David wants the assurance that God is with them. And the temple, as the household of God, built within the walls of his city would give him that assurance...of God's presence – yes! but also of his own power.

God through the prophet, Nathan, makes a counter offer. Not just a promise but a covenant; an unbreakable covenant held up from God's side. An assurance that God's presence would dwell among them in the house of David (there's a little play on words here) but not a physical house or temple that David would build but a house that God would build through David – through his family – through his kin.

Sadly, for many generations – even some to this day – this covenant would be interpreted exclusively in political terms having to do with the royal dynasty of David's lineage...having only to do with Jerusalem and Israel. But I suspect God intended a far deeper and wider reality than that. A recognition present throughout the scriptures that kinship goes deeper than blood or lineage or nationality or politics or even religion.

The claim of our text today is an incredible claim: that the dwelling place of God is in our kinship with each other. "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God...in Christ the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God."³

David was looking to build a place of protection for the ark of God. God firmly put David in his place. I don't need your protection. Don't forget

² Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Samuel, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 254.

³ Excerpts from Ephesians 2.19-22, NRSV

where you come from – how humble was your beginning - that I was the one who pulled you from the pasture and made you to be a prince over my people...I have gone with you...I have built you up.

As Pastor Gordon so beautifully preached two weeks ago, when we forget where we come from and how utterly dependent we are on God, that is where arrogance comes in. That is where, I would argue, the roots of hostility come from. The antidote is kinship; the capacity to see the connections between us, to recognize ourselves in each other, to see the image of God in the eyes of the person in front of us...even the hostile ones.

I mentioned in a funeral a week ago that I am reading a book by Gregory Boyle “Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship.” In it Father Boyle tells stories from his life leading a ministry called Homeboy Industries described as “the largest gang intervention, rehab, and re-entry program on the planet.”⁴ He tells these incredible stories about people who have been rejected at every turn whose lives are steeped in hostility; a hostility that they have received and that they now give. He makes the claim that “Kinship is the game-changer (worthy of selling) everything to get it....Yet Gospel Kinship always exposes the game, jostles the status quo in constant need of conversion, because the status quo is only interested in incessant judging, comparisons, measuring, scapegoating and competition.”⁵ Folks this is the root of hostility and it is us inside the church as much as the culture around us.

So let’s just for a moment suspend all that judgment, comparison, and measurement and competition. Trust that God’s presence among us is found some place else.... through embrace, and acceptance, and forgiveness paired with high expectation for change and commitment ready to give second, third, and hundredth chances to meet those expectations.

Just for a moment let’s be honest about our need for those same things. And can that recognition of our own need spark some curiosity about those

⁴ Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 3.

⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

people we called to mind a few moments ago...let's imagine what it might be like to let just one block of the dividing wall be set aside.

With that imagination...I invite you to hear a prayer I read on Friday morning – a prayer I've prayed many times from *Celtic Benediction* – that came alive in a different way in light of these texts before us today:

In the morning light, O God,
may I glimpse again your image deep within me
the threads of eternal glory
woven into the fabric of every (single one of us.)
Again may I catch sight of the mystery of the human soul
fashioned in your likeness
deeper than knowing
more enduring than time.
And in glimpsing these threads of light
amidst the weakness and distortion of my life
let me be recalled
to the strength and beauty deep in my soul.
Let me be recalled
to the strength and beauty of your image in every living soul.⁶

⁶ J. Phillip Newell, *Celtic Benediction: Morning and Night Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 62.