

The story about God and humanity has a common theme throughout the Hebrew Scripture that is foundational to our own story as Christians. God created us and seeks to be in relationship with us. All God asks in return is that we love God and we love each other. God consistently keeps God's side of the bargain - but those of us on the human side have trouble keeping our side. As we say in one of our Eucharistic prayers "again and again God called us to return" but alas! we weren't consistent. Neither were the ancient Israelites. They Do return, they wander away, they get into trouble, they regret it and turn again to God. And so, we see God patiently trying to get God's people on the right path. He starts with Abraham, promising to make him a father of a great nation - the nation that becomes the Israelites, and circumcision becomes the sign of this covenant. Then we have Moses and the covenant between the Israelites and God takes shape on Mt. Sinai as the ten commandments. And finally, we have the covenant that takes place today in our reading from Samuel.

David has become a great king and realizes that he lives in a lovely home yet God resides in a tent. What's wrong with this picture, he asks himself? And so he says to the prophet Nathan, I am going to build God the best house money can buy. And Nathan thinks this is a great idea and

green lights it. God however, has other ideas and speaks to Nathan in a dream. Nathan, he asks, have I ever asked for the best house money can buy? Have I not always moved about with my people, did I not raise David out of the sheep pasture and make him a great king? No, David shall NOT build me a house! If there is any “house building” going on here, it will be by me. I will build the House of David, which will be an everlasting dynasty. And as Christians, we believe that the fulfillment of this covenant and the inauguration of the Kingdom of God was in the person of Jesus Christ. Moreover, Jesus has done for us what we could not or would not do for ourselves: keep humanity’s side of the covenant with God.

In our letter to the Ephesians, Paul is marveling at what God has done in Christ. Those of us who aren’t Jews have been invited into the covenant with God, and are within Christ’s saving embrace. As you might expect, this didn’t go over so well with Jewish Christians. Jews viewed those who were gentiles as atheists who lead a lifestyle that was antithetical to God. Similarly, the gentiles viewed the Jews and Jewish Christians as atheists who failed to conform with the ways of Rome. Thus the two groups viewed one another with deep hostility.

The most striking contemporary example of a similar degree of hostility and division that may be analogous to the situation in the early church has to be apartheid in South Africa. The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was remarkably transformative and allowed a more or less unified nation to emerge post apartheid. Contrast this to the walls that the Israelis are building to separate themselves from the Palestinians or the wall we are building along our southern boarder. This is not to say that there are not good reasons for these walls and their very purpose is to create boundaries, separateness and safety. For these walls to go away, for any wall to go away, there has to a willingness to seek trust, to work toward ending the hostility that is so divisive. It occurs to me that our nation's attempted treaty with Iran is controversial because we have ample reasons not to trust them. To remove their hostility toward us, and for our hostility to also be removed will take intentional effort. I imagine that the People of the Way, those of the early church, were also intentional in seeking a way for Jew or Gentile to live and worship together.

Remarkable is that the Jew did not cease being a Jew, nor did the Gentile cease being a gentile. Neither were the one forced to become like the other. Rather, they forged a new identity: that of Christian. Through

Christ, as the body of Christ, a new way of being came into existence and the “church” now was a people - not a building or series of buildings. And as much as God promised to dwell in the house of David, Christians through Christ have become “a dwelling place for God.” As such, we are not a melting pot where conformity is thrust upon us, much as the Roman Empire tried to do 2000 years ago. Rather, the church is diverse, and each person is cherished and unique. Paul values each part, and states that each part is indispensable and yet, diverse as we are, we make up one body.

The early Christians lived into their faith by being willing to sit down with those they considered “other,” who had a status or near status as “enemy” and seek out, instead, what they had in common. They came to understand that divisions alienate us more than from one another, they alienate us from God - and living apart from God is simply unthinkable. They lived out what we see Jesus displaying in our Gospel passage, that is compassion. This is not an attitude of pity, as we sometimes use the word compassion to mean. No, it means to be fully with another in their suffering.

I find that this is remarkably difficult to do because it also means to be fully present with those who are suffering and to have the ability to look at suffering without flinching before it's reality. It means acknowledging that there are some things over which we are helpless and over which we have no control. It may mean that we have to acknowledge our own suffering and pain, to let down our public image that we are "just fine." What courage must it have taken the people in Jesus' community to drop everything and do everything in their power to seek him out. They did this so much so that they even anticipated where he might be, getting there ahead of him. They so hungered for what Jesus had to offer that they were willing to do whatever it took just to touch the hem of his garment.

Mark is also letting us know that the nominally Jewish Herod, the person entrusted to look after those who lived in Judiah, has utterly failed to do so. We understand that from last week's reading where God's messenger, John the Baptist was beheaded and we understand that by the people taking those in need of healing to the marketplace - the public space where the world's commerce takes place. Mark is showing us that God's kingdom is breaking in through Jesus, and that God ways ultimately

will triumph. Mark is telling us that those of us who hunger and thirst for God's Word, for His truth, will be satisfied.

Today, as we gather around the altar for communion, come with a hunger and thirst for God. Come with an expectation that Jesus has compassion for you. Know that as you partake of the body and blood of Christ the ways of the world will not ultimately prevail. As we gather, we are the church, and all divisions cease to be as we, in all our glorious diversity, differing opinions and values become a unified Body of Christ. Take heart, be of good courage knowing that we are being equipped to do all that God has given us to do. Trust in God and know that you are loved beyond measure. Go out into the world and share this good news.

AMEN.

Sources used:

www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary-id=2598.

David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 3* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009, 254-265.