

July 8, 2007

C Proper 9

Galatians 6 1-10, 14-18

Luke 10:1-12, 16-20

Maria Hoecker, preacher

“May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters.” These words, written by St. Paul to the Christians in Galatia, come coursing down the centuries this morning, a benediction on us from this man of God. And then, being the teacher that he is, Paul gives us some instruction, not on how to obtain this grace—for he would be the first to tell you that grace is a free gift from God—but rather on how, having been so gifted, we should then live our lives.

Early in the passage appointed for today, we hear Paul speaking of “a spirit of gentleness.” This is not the only time we will hear about the quality of gentleness in Holy Scripture, nor, indeed, the only time we will hear Paul talking about it. But what does it mean—gentleness? What kind of person can be described as possessing this quality? We probably need to rid ourselves of the image of one who is meek, mild, ineffective—probably what we would call a “doormat.” We’ve all read St. Paul’s letters and it is doubtful that you would use any of those terms to describe him. A few Sundays ago the reading from this same Epistle began: “When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face. . . .” Not a meek doormat, the Paul we have come to know.

But Paul also knew that “a gentle answer turns away wrath.” Paul writes, “If anyone is detected in transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” In other words, you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. In a given instance, we may be right and our sister or brother may be wrong. But if we speak to that person in such a way as to anger them, cause them to become defensive, or so as to shame or humiliate them, the only thing we may accomplish is to close the door.

“Speak the truth in love,” Paul encourages us in the letter to the Ephesians. A spirit of gentleness leaves the door open for the other person to think about what we have said, perhaps to talk again. It leaves the door open for us as well. Because sometimes, just possibly, we will be the ones who are in the wrong!

This same spirit of gentleness is needed in our efforts to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others. The author of 1 Peter wrote about this: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” Nobody likes being hit over the head, even if it is with good news. In fact, that kind of evangelistic behavior is more likely to act as a “turn off” than it is to win souls. “Let your gentleness be known to all,” Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians.

The Christians in Galatia lived in a world that was much in need of a spirit of gentleness. So do we! As ambassadors of Christ it is up to all of us to contribute this spirit of gentleness. In a world where competitiveness reigns, can we sometimes just yield to one another? In a world full of road rage, can we practice a little courtesy, even on the highways and byways? In a world of increasing pollution, can we live gently with nature? In a world where politicians must demonize opponents in order to win elections, can we listen to both sides? In a world where even Christians let disagreements fracture the body of Christ, can we still be agents of God’s reconciliation?

Our bishop, Porter Taylor, writes that “in the Gospel, Jesus is sending 70 others to prepare the way for His arrival in new places. Jesus isn’t deluded about the world. He knows it is filled with wolves, but he sends the seventy out like lambs and He instructs them that they are simply to announce “Peace” to a household. They are to cure the sick and proclaim, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.”

We should see ourselves as one of these 70. Jesus is sending us out into the world to find the places that need healing and, then, to announce that the Kingdom of God is to be found there. We are to prepare the way for the coming of our Lord into the broken places so people who are in despair can now have hope, so our society will know there is a way of relating to one another that is different from manipulation or neglect. And that way is the way of love.

Our mission as Christians is to love our world into becoming receptive to Jesus Christ. Wherever there is

brokenness or sickness, Jesus sends us to proclaim that the people in those places are invited into the kingdom.

Too often our stance as Christians has been aloof and self-righteous.

We lament about those drug dealers or those murderers or those fanatics, Never seeing ourselves connected to them. And when we do feel connected, they become the problem and we have the solution.

Jesus says, "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals." Our tendency is to give people something, Food, a book, a pious explanation for their troubles. There is nothing wrong with that. We are called to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, But, most of all, we are called to invite our brothers and sisters to the Communion Table. We first have to see them as brothers and sisters. Jesus' command is, therefore, simple: He says, just go and encounter and love.

How foreign that is to our society? Not manipulation. Not neglect. Gentleness. Love.

"The fruit of the Spirit," Paul writes in this same Epistle, "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control." And, as we read today, "you reap whatever you sow." Let us then sow the kind of harvest that we will be happy to reap. As it is written in the letter of James "...a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace."

Bishop Taylor tells a poignant story told to him by a friend. This friend moved outside of Nashville to live in the country. One night, while he was sitting on his deck, through the woods he saw flames from his neighbors' house. He ran over there and the roof was on fire. No one was home, so he ran to his house, called the fire department and then returned next door. His neighbor drove up, got out of her car and just stood there. Now, they barely knew each other but as he walked over to her to give her some platitude, she grabbed him and hugged him for dear life. Like a mantra he started saying, "It's okay. It's okay."

Our world is *always* on fire. It's there, but we must open our eyes and truly focus on where the fires are. I'm not just talking about the raging wild fires through several of our states in this country. I'm talking about the flash fires that sweep in and out of our lives here, in this place, in our town, in our homes. Let us go into those uncomfortable places and embrace those who stand alone and say, "It's okay."

Let us say, "Peace to this house. The Kingdom of God has come near to you. Peace."

The Rev. Barbara Beam and the Rt. Rev. G. Porter Taylor are the sources for this reflection on peace and the way of love..