

Sermon on Mark 6:30-34, 53-56; Ephesians 2:11-22  
7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, July 19, 2009  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Last week the gospel lesson told us about Jesus sending his disciples out, two by two, to share the good news of the kingdom of God come near to people in the towns and villages of Galilee, to heal their diseases and cast out demons. It was exhilarating work, and they came back to Jesus with many stories of signs and wonders, all that they had done with the authority he had given them. But it was exhausting work as well, and they came back tired and spent. So in today's lesson Jesus told them to come with him to a deserted place by themselves and rest awhile. They went with him to find a quiet place, away from the crowds, to eat and rest. But no sooner had they set out, than people saw them, recognized them, and hurried ahead of them. So when Jesus and his disciples got to their "quiet place", they found thousands of people there waiting for them, with their sick waiting to be healed, hungry and expectant for a word of hope from God.

Imagine the disciples' disappointment at seeing these crowds, instead of an empty beach! So it was "back to work" instead of rest and relaxation! Well, how would YOU feel if you finished a very time and energy-consuming project at work, took a well-deserved vacation, and arrived at your summer lake cabin or boundary waters destination, only to find a new pile of work waiting for you, with new deadlines and pressures on you to get it done NOW! I think that you and I would not just be disappointed, we would probably RESENT those persons who had come into our "space" with unexpected work and demands. Shouldn't Jesus get some rest? Shouldn't his disciples get a break? Where was the disciples union?

But instead of resentment, Jesus had compassion on the people, because they were like sheep without a shepherd...confused, looking for someone to lead them, and unable to find water or food on their own. (So, next Sunday, we'll read about the feeding of the 5000 with five loaves and two fish that a boy had brought with him for a lunch.) If one of the questions answered by Mark's gospel is "who is this Jesus" – here is our answer! He is like a shepherd for people in need of a shepherd, quite unlike the many previous shepherds and leaders who had failed God's people by making them suffer even more. This shepherd, Jesus, had compassion for the people who suffered from disease, who were hungry and thirsty, some of whom were outcasts in their hometowns, all of whom desperately sought words of hope and promise from God. Jesus was the leader whom God had so long ago promised to send to his people. He was different because of his genuine compassion for people (totally unlike kings like Herod, who became rich off of the people and couldn't care less about what happened to them). Jesus then acted on his compassion, and didn't just feel sorry for them. Jesus fed them, Jesus healed them,

Jesus taught them about God's compassion and mercy, Jesus showed them a new way of living, and he will do the same for you and me. All we need to do is ask!

So how did all those people come to this situation, of being so desperate that they chased after him in deserted places looking for healing and words of hope? We may call this in the Church, the consequences of sin. People suffer from injustice, and hunger, because of human sin – when people abuse one another, or treat others unjustly, or don't distribute food and resources fairly, then men, women, and children suffer. It is the result of living in a fallen world.

The Apostle Paul talks about this in his letter to the Ephesians that we read today. Only he doesn't call it the consequence of "sin" – Paul talks about the *hostility* that exists between human beings, and between humans and God. We humans are stuck in this situation of being divided against one another, and separated from other human beings and from God, because of sin – because of brokenness, because of our "hostility" to one another.

Paul uses the example of Jews and Gentiles – how those who were part of the Jewish faith were "separated" from those who were not Jews (like all the peoples, faiths, and cultures around them). Gentiles were like "aliens", separated and far off from those who were Jewish, except through faith in God. Paul wrote, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 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...creating 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." (Eph 2:13-16)

Let's put this into today's context. You and I are fully aware of the great hostility that exists in our world today, and separates people, cultures, and faiths from each other. We witness hostility today when husbands and wives go through separation and divorce; we see hostility in partisan politics – as Republicans and Democrats accuse one another and fail to work together for the common good; we see hostility in communities when rival gangs are in conflict (like St. Paul's "East Siders" versus the "Selby Siders"); we see hostility between people who disagree on public issues – like abortion – which often results in name calling or even murder. We see hostility between rival denominations and religious faiths, which can sometimes lead to violence or even war. We even see hostility within the Church, when people who disagree so strongly over issues of human sexuality that they cannot reconcile or accept the fact that others can disagree with them and still be Christians! So we are well aware of hostility, and how hard it is to overcome or heal. It takes great effort, great leadership, and great love on both sides for people to overcome our hostility and differences, and reconcile with one another – but it is possible, for we have seen it. Jesus himself is our greatest example of this.

For in Jesus, God has not only broken down the barriers between us humans and God (that wall of sin that has been removed by the cross of Christ), but God has also removed the barriers between us humans with one another, and made us one people. What did it take for God to do this? It took the death of his only Son Jesus on the cross, and the power of God to raise him up from death to life.

Usually, we in the Church emphasize how the barrier between us and God has been removed by the cross of Christ. This is true, and essential to understanding how God's love has made all God's children, and given you and me the promise of life. God reconciling with us through Jesus Christ is essential to realizing our new relationship with God. But too often we have de-emphasized how God has removed the barrier of hostility between us and other human beings. For Jesus came both to reconcile us with God and with each other! We can't understand one without the other! We can't fully reconcile with God without reconciling with our brothers and sisters, and we can't fully reconcile with other human beings without reconciling with God!

This promises to have amazing consequences for our relationships with other human beings (and with God!) For if we believe that on the cross Jesus removed the barrier between us, God, and other human beings, then with the power of faith, and the power that raised Jesus from the dead on Easter, you and I can overcome our hostility with other human beings and be reconciled – even with our enemies! Think of what that would mean for families suffering under the heavy burden of hostility in the midst of divorce and its aftermath! According to this understanding, even those who are divorced are one in Christ! Think of what this means for race relations, and our relationships with those of other cultures, ethnicities and faiths....that any reason for our hostility has been removed by Christ on the cross! Think of our problem with citizens and aliens in our country today, and the hostility many have for undocumented immigrants and those from other countries – our reasons for hostility are removed by Christ! Even our hostility for those who are hostile to us – our enemies and our perceived enemies – has no reason, and has been removed already!

Of course, when you talk about “peace” and an end to hostility, it's easier said than done! “The devil's in the details” we often hear! But the first step to ending hostility, for overcoming our enmity for others, is to realize that the other person is a child of God - even our enemies are children of God, just like us. If we believe that God has broken down the barriers between us – by dying on the cross to bring life and salvation for the whole world – then we can take the next step in trying to imitate our Lord by letting go of our hostility and reaching out to others – in the name of Jesus Christ! So let us follow him, to see one another as brothers and sisters, and reconcile even with our enemies, and bring the peace of Christ into our midst. For he is our peace, and he has come and lived among us to bring God's peace to the whole world! Thanks be to God! Amen.