

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost/July 4, 2010
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When Jesus sends out the seventy, as we heard in the Gospel reading for today, he tells them: "Remain in the same house... Do not move about from house to house." Jesus seems to value the principle of stability, of remaining in relationship. This is not easy. To illustrate the difficulty, Martin Luther King, Jr. told the following story in a number of places one of which was in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize. He said, "Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested story plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: 'A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together.'" King went on to say: "This is the great new problem of (humankind). We have inherited a big house, a great 'world house' in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterners and Westerners, Gentiles and Jews, Catholics and Protestants, Muslim and Hindu, a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interests who, because we can never again live without each other, must learn, somehow, in this one big world, to live with each other."

The Bible lessons this morning begin and end with the exclamation, "Rejoice!" The first words of Isaiah, "Rejoice with Jerusalem..." Then, Luke's passage ends with the words "rejoice that your names are written in heaven." It is the excitement of having received an inheritance! The check has come in the mail. The wealth of the nations may be found in Jerusalem, Isaiah says, and Jerusalem belongs to all God's children. In Jerusalem the entire world is illumined. Isaiah is not talking about Jerusalem the 3000 year old city where in 2010 Israeli settlements are taking over Arab neighborhoods. The city Isaiah is talking about begins to morph into God who comforts all her children and carries them like a mother and dandles them on her knees. Clearly we are talking about Jerusalem as God's household in which we must learn to live together.

The Gospel of Luke is also talking about an inheritance. The seventy have returned from sharing the kingdom of God, that great mending of creation, with households near and far. They are exhilarated at having seen the power of the enemy to divide and destroy overcome by the mending power of Christ's compassion. Jesus reminds them that it is not this submission of destructive spirits that is the root of joy. The inheritance that is the true subject of their joy is that their "names are written in heaven." Like God's people of old, they too are included in the household of God. That is what is so exciting. We are all in – part of God's mending, God's comfort.

Then it hits us. How are we going to co-exist in this household? We are so widely separated – not just Jews and Arabs. But there is dysfunction in our own families – a father and an uncle not talking to each other over a hurt that is long past. Or even in the church, one person dislikes another and shows it a little too freely. How is it possible to live together in this amazing house that we have inherited? The inheritance is too valuable to be simply rejected, for it is the household where we experience God's freedom and acceptance. So what are we to do?

Jesus says we are to stay put – this is the Christian practice of stability. He tells the seventy, "Remain in the same house. . . . Do not move about from house to house." If there is separation, work toward reconciliation. It takes time. It cannot be done hit or miss. Remaining in the same house is not about winners and losers, as though in Jerusalem Israelis should win over Palestinians or visa versa. No, it is about hanging in there and working toward an equitable solution. If we leave a thing before it is finished we will have failed to learn a great deal about ourselves. When we remain in the house instead of moving about, we are indicating our willingness to be changed and to grow.

It is only possible to "remain in the same house" because God is with us. It is God's house after all. I think of Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." God bears our burdens as a mother comforts her child. I think it is also true to say that we are a help to one another. Paul writes to the Galatians, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." We can remain in the same house, the household of God, because we have one another to lean on when we are hurt or when our future is at risk. My wife and younger son a few weeks ago went to see the movie *Toy Story 3*. Apparently, there is a scene when the toys are on a conveyor belt headed for a fiery furnace and certain destruction. There is no way out. Then one toy figure reaches out to hold another's

hand. They know that whatever is before them, dire as it may be, they will face it together. I think the toys escape (or there wouldn't be a movie), but the moment illustrates Paul's words: "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s illustration aptly describes our situation. We have received this exceedingly valuable inheritance. We all belong to Jerusalem and Jerusalem is God. Our names are all written in heaven. What a cause for rejoicing! And then we realize that we have to "remain in the same house." We celebrate the birth of our nation today. It is a great inheritance. And it has not been easy to remain in the same house. Before a hundred years were up internal separations were so unbearable that Civil War broke out and the President observed that a house divided could not stand. It is only by standing together that any of us can live into the inheritance of a restored people comforted and mended by God. The seventy discovered that the power of the enemy that divides can be conquered by the unifying love of God. We live into this love through stability, hanging in there together. In tough times we offer a hand to be held, burdens to be borne – together, not alone. Then the inheritance is ours; and the first and last word is "Rejoice."

Amen.