

August 24, 2008

The Lesson

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John” – though it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized – he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city named Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

John 4: 1-10

Borders ‘R’ Us

For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made us into one, and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

Ephesians 2:14

Let’s talk about boundaries, fences and borders.

We all know the appropriateness of boundaries; people who don’t. are a problem to us and are in need of help. Robert Frost famously told us that good fences make good neighbors; we are left to conjure what bad fences are doing to us today. There are borders, and then there are borders; some we can do nothing about, like the smog crossing the Kansas border from Oklahoma City and Dallas or the fault lines made in the Mid East and Africa by politicians after World War I. But there are some borders we can do something about, the borders of hostility between us.

Let me suggest that the Church has some responsibility for the problem of these borders today, and some possibility for their healing.

Borders have existed from time immemorial, as old as the flaming gate barring the return to Eden. Much of Old Testament history is about crossing borders, Canaan to Egypt and back, and one of these borders carried down to Jesus' day, the border between Samaria and Judea, each having nothing to do with the other after an ancient break in the family of David's grandson. What John does not tell us is that even Jesus had a problem with borders. His rude refusal to treat the Syrophenecian woman's daughter is a problem for us. He told his disciples, however, that he had other sheep not of their fold; but his understanding was that he was called to minister to his own people, and only in his resurrection will he include all nations.

If you read the opinion line you know the feeling about the illegal crossing of borders – no recognition that this has gone on since Abraham's day, down to Egypt when the crops fail in Canaan, back to Canaan when things get better. CAFTA, NAFTA and WTO are all about borders. Maybe you feel some resentment over people who refuse to speak English. I grew up in a Swedish community in Chicago where the immigrants always tried to speak English in public. They wanted to assimilate. Their accent embarrassed them. It's different today, but business men claim a need for immigrant labor. I have a farmer friend in Georgia who spends a great deal of his time getting green cards for Mexican laborers the chicken industry needs so badly.

So another part of our border problem is that it has developed an ugly us vs. them aspect, a good vs. evil quality. That's actually an ancient thing, as well, as ancient as Babylon – present day Iraq. The belief then was that the world had been created in a battle between good and evil, Ahura Mazda of our present day Mazda car (good) battling Marduk (evil), the result being the creation of Tehom – the deep or sea - always a fearful thing in the ancient world, out of which came the earth. It was against this belief that the captive Israelites taught their children that, no, the world was good, created by a good God in Genesis One. But this good vs. evil quality got transferred to other things, particularly people, and we hear it even today in us *good* them *bad*, the Axis of Evil which included Iraq – the kettle now being called black.

This polarity was picked up in the third century of our era by a man name Mani, also a Persian, and his philosophy, Manicheism, a belief in the radical duality of things,

one good, the other bad; spirit good, body bad, continually fighting each other – again a philosophy carried down to our day in people who have trouble with the physical and want only to pursue the spiritual.

What the problem of Manicheism teaches us is that we have to be careful of dualisms, seeing only good or bad in this or that, in ourselves and in others. This avoidance of an either/or outlook on life is one of the emphases of postmodernism today. If we don't point the finger at ourselves, the danger is that we perpetuate the good/bad ideology of our day. Because George Bush has so often gotten into this, some of his Methodist church folk do not want his historical library at Laura's Methodist University. But if we point the finger at George Bush, we engage in a dualism that sees fault in one person and ignores the truth as Nelson Mandela sees it, that the peculiar characteristic of Americans is to see things only in black and white. George Bush is us. (*Time*, 7/21/08, p. 48) Or as Michael Caine says, American see themselves as Superman, the rest of the world sees them as Batman!

So, not to point a finger I want to suggest that maybe some of our borders of hostility are rooted in the church! Let me tell you how I think this has happened by giving a quick trip through church history.

What we know about Jesus is this: He came in peace to break down the dividing walls among his people. He did this by the way he lived, accepting a drink from a Samaritan woman, eating meals with anyone and everyone, friend, foe, religious and supposed sinners; traveling in the company of women. His religious culture was devoted to purity, which meant eating only with those who shared your views, held your beliefs. Instead, he gathered an eclectic group of disciples – fishermen, a political zealot, a tax collector. He said, ignore kosher food laws, eat whatever is set before you, as he himself ate with tax collectors and sinners. To break these rules was mind boggling and it set the disciples free. They would follow him anywhere.

But it was also the cause of his death: he upset community order and Rome could not have that and arranged to have him crucified. His death was in one sense a sacrifice – it is better for one man to die - but in a larger sense his own choice to die for what he was

teaching about God's rule. Well, the tomb could not keep him, and the first thing we see is that he is eating again, even with Peter who had denied him. "Peter, have some fish."

And here is what we know about the New Testament Church. They began eating together as they had with Jesus. They were called the Way. They invited friends in to supper to hear their story, and those stories have become our gospels. This was their assembling – not yet church – not yet institution. But underneath the assembling a question of identity popped up. Hadn't Jesus ministered only to his own people and should we then keep kosher? Should Peter eat with Cornelius? Two camps arise. Yes, said Peter. No, said James. The fact that Luke tells this story twice in detail suggests how it was ripping the community apart. Yes, said Paul – let's welcome the Gentiles – there is no difference in Jew or Greek, slave or free, man and woman: the truth of the resurrection is all encompassing.

Unfortunately, gathering storms affect the course of belief. Persecution makes the believers circle the wagons. If you are betrayed by visitors, you deny them entrance. If things are not going well, you begin to blame your selves – have we somehow missed the Way in not keeping the old ways? Is it possible that Jesus had to die for our failures, not because he asked us to live a new way?

We do not have strict textual evidence and have to do some surmising: The arguments at the Jerusalem Council in Acts Chapter 15 suggest that part of the community, perhaps led by James, want the old ways kept. If by the year 103 church history tells us that only a bishop is allowed to celebrate communion, you know something has happened: the elements have become holy and the meal is a sacrifice. The stories of the birth of Jesus, unknown to Mark and Paul, begin to circulate, making the new Christians wonder if bread and cup are a mystery they have not quite understood. As Century Two opens the Way no longer eats freely with anyone and everyone, it has become a closed circle.

A funny thing had happened to the Way. The open circle had closed, borders were again the order of the day, the community turned in upon itself, making the supper a sacrifice for sin rather than a welcoming banquet.

And this is what we know happened when the New Testament closed: Where the supper had been a time of communal sharing, now it becomes a heavy time of sacrifice, a time subject to borders. The results are at least two fold.

One: Where the Way had received a call to go forth to the world, the church now turns in upon itself. Questions arise: Is this the physical body and blood of Jesus? Is Jesus' flesh being eaten? Or is it a welcoming meal, a testimony to the way we are to share our lives? Fences become the order of the day. Children no longer commune, when it was a lad who had offered his lunch to feed the multitude. Divisions arise. In the East the iconostasis – the beautiful screen of the faces of believing Apostles in our Orthodox churches, saints and martyrs – fences off the lay believer – a border. In the West the altar is also fenced – perhaps you have seen the beautiful filigreed fences in European cathedrals – keeping the laity from the altar. The church splits over the meaning of body and blood – a monstrous border splits the church.

Two: Where borders arise, violence follows. Violence is needed to maintain borders and the cross becomes misunderstood as a blessing of violence, a solution for disagreements. “In this sign conquer,” and on to the crusades. We may be appalled by the violence of our day, by its continuing rise in society – drive by shootings in our neighborhoods, genocide in Africa, a terrible war in Iraq. We are appalled but also fatally attracted: torture is endorsed as a means of dealing with enemy combatants and wildly accepted on our TVs – the Fox show 24 justifies torture, in its first five seasons it had 67 scenes of torture, and some of our leaders, Antonin Scalia, Bill Clinton, Dick Cheney, have admiringly spoken of 24 when discussing US torture. Torturer Jack Bauer is a hero (Christian Century, 6-3-08, p.11). Violence is needed to maintain borders.

I want to suggest to you that it is this misunderstanding of Holy Communion, which has justified borders at the deepest and most fundamental place in our lives, which has in turn justified accepting borders in life, a paradigm. The paradigm for the church becomes the paradigm for society. It says, borders are justifiable, bishops may fence off politicians from the table who disagree with them – as a Kansas Bishop has recently done to the Kansas Governor; churches may close communion fellowship to their own kosher kind. Because we, the church, accept this, so does our society.

Borders 'R' Us. At the core of our churchly being we accept the borders of religious divisions. It is no longer an argument over the core belief of Holy Communion but a justification of myriad denominations. By not confronting division in the church, we let borders form our outlook on life and society follows suit: afraid to counter the claim that Mexicans are taking away our jobs, that NAFTA and CAFTA are not helping our unemployed but neither are they ameliorating the poverty of the Third World, that gays are ruining conventional marriage.

I am an outsider to your traditions but I am confident that your Congregationalism gets caught on a *borders "r" us* ideology: we are not them. We may not say it so forthrightly, but we are not them. We are University Congregational, we are not Plymouth Congregational. The healing of our society rests in getting over this acceptance of dualism; seeing us in them and them in us.

Let us pray: Reconciling God, you hold the brokenness of the world in your embrace: restore us to your side, that we may offer healing beyond our borders. In the name of Jesus who taught us to pray, Our Father – (please use *forgive us our transgressions as we forgive those who transgress against us [crossing our borders]*)

Donald R. Steelberg