



Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene Ern Warner

2 Samuel 5:1-15, 9-10 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 Mark 6:10-13 Psalm 48

Gracious Lord, grant that on this day, we may be joined together in your love and be strengthened in your vision for all who share in our common world. Amen.

Two hundred forty-eight years ago, a document containing the following words was published: "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union," --it has been a bit of a squabble ever since. Today, the vision for that union varies widely among the people who live in America. Perhaps we might look at today's readings to see if we can glean insight into God's vision for ourselves, for all of creation, and how it might help us create a more perfect union.

Sometimes, when I reflect on mankind's purpose, I turn to scripture and am reminded that we are called to love. This love is the love God shows to all of his creation. Herein lies our monumental challenge: Can we love all, even those unlike us, even those who challenge us, even those who are unfamiliar to us? In our opening meditation, God "executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing." And God tells us, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." And yes, our ancestors were once strangers in America.

Every week, we hear the summary of the Law, reminding us that we are to love God with all our heart, our soul, and our mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus, when asked, 'Who is my neighbor?', told the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritans were a racially mixed society with Jewish and other ancestry who lived in the conquered Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Jews despised the Samaritans, yet in the parable of the Good Samaritan, it was the Samaritan who stopped to help the Jew who had been robbed and beaten. Two Jews, members of the beaten man's tribe, had previously passed him by. The Samaritan shows God's love for the stranger and what Jesus means by love of our neighbor. This week's collect emphasizes this and reminds us to ask for the grace of the Holy Spirit so that we may continue in this love.

The Old Testament reading speaks of the Hebrew tribes becoming united under King David. The stories in scripture tell us that the Kings of Israel were a mixed blessing for the people. They provided leadership and a visible sovereign, but being human, they had their shortcomings. Some more than others. Might these stories remind us that there is only one God, and what consequences can follow when reliance on God is eclipsed by reliance on man? There is a balance that we are called to discern, and the ultimate test may well be how what is being proposed or what is being done conforms with the Love of God.

How do we discern God's love? The Psalm talks about God being on his holy Hill, present in the citadels, and how the people wait in silence for God's loving-kindness in the midst of God's temple. They rejoice because God has promised to be with them forever. Likewise, here we are today, seeking that loving-kindness.

In our Epistle reading, Paul talks about being caught up into the third heaven. How he was caught up or what portion of him was caught up, he is not sure. All he knows is that he was caught up into paradise, and heard things that are not to

be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. One of the potential dangers of a mystical experience is to be given a revelation of such power and then want to share news of that experience. Boasting of such an experience can lead to a fracture in unity, either from people placing undue reliance on the person who has the experience or the opposite, jealousy arising from "Why not me? Am I unworthy?" Paul tells us that to keep him from being too elated, a thorn was given to him in his flesh. He says that he asked to have it removed three times, but the Lord told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Here is an interesting paradox--power being made perfect in weakness. In my own life, I often think, "I've got this," only turning to God as a last resort. I forget to acknowledge that I can do nothing apart from God. Reminding myself of this helps to keep me from becoming overly hubristic. Behind everything is the movement of God.

In the gospel reading, Jesus has been teaching and healing with his disciples throughout the countryside, and then they come to his hometown. The citizens there wonder about him, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" They see him as they remember him, not as he has become, and they take offense at him. Those who have known you for a long time may take offense when they see you as different from the way they remember you. Even though you may want to help lift them into a more fulfilling and loving life, they, in turn, may wish that you were still at the place they knew you from before. One of the more frightening things a person can face is change. I have heard it said that it may be better the devil you know than the angel you don't. But God calls us to change, God calls us to love, and love does change us.

In today's world, strife and division are manifest in people, many of whom are afraid. The pace of change in our world is increasing so dramatically that some people claim to want to return to a time when things seemed better. But was there ever really such a time? Or are we called by love to create that time today? Throughout history, only one moment is common to all events, and that moment is eternal now. History has passed through that moment, and the future has yet to come to it. This moment is where God is present, where he calls us to be co-creators of God's kingdom. This is where God's love is with us, in the eternal now, and this is where we are called to love.

Indeed, there are challenges to love, yet I believe a person can move beyond them. I have often used language such as "That upsets me." or "That makes me so mad." But after reading some Buddhist writings, I realized that those moments did not affect other people the way they affected me. That realization helped me to understand that the emotional disruption I experienced came from within me. I had been judged, found guilty, and was punished—all by myself. I believe this was mainly caused by the fact I did not look at what was happening with the eyes of love. While it is true that there are harmful actions that need to be confronted, it is better to do so from a center of love. There is a saying that we should love the sinner and hate the sin, but perhaps we should love the sinner and try to understand why they sin. I believe an action that comes from a center of love is more healing for the one who loves and the one who is loved.

Even in a community such as our church, not everyone will be in complete harmony with each other. This is one beauty of our community, where we can come to better love our God, each other, and, in doing so, ourselves. This is where we can understand that some people feel differently from the way we do, yet we can be in complete agreement in other areas. And we can break bread together. That can lead to an understanding that not everyone in the world is like us or even thinks like us. However, everyone exists only because they are a part of God's manifestation of creation. Does God create these "thorns in our side" to keep us from being so sure about how things should be? Does God want us to acknowledge that we are weak and should rely on God's strength and each other for our well-being? I pray that while we sit in this place, we might feel God's loving-kindness and receive the grace of the Holy Spirit--so that together, we might answer God's call to love.

Amen.