

Wednesday in Holy Week
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Columbia, South Carolina
12 April 2017

SACRIFICIAL DISCIPLESHIP

Ephesians 2:13-22

(Ephesians 2:13 – NRSV) But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For 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. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

(Ephesians 2:13 – The Message) Now because of Christ—dying that death, shedding that blood—you who were once out of it altogether are in on everything. ¹⁴The Messiah has made things up between us so that we're now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody.

¹⁶Christ brought us together through his death on the cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the Father.

¹⁹That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.¹

From Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey with its colt, through his last meal, his betrayal, denial, crucifixion and death we remember this week the earth-transforming events that God brought about for our freedom and salvation. On Palm Sunday, we heard words from Paul's letter to the Philippians that are often thought to be the text of one of our faith's earliest hymns: "Let the same mind be in you

¹ Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: The Bible in contemporary language* (Eph 2:13–22). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave." These words tell us of the Lord who demonstrated that to grasp *earthly* power is the way of weakness. That to empty oneself and choose servanthood is to embrace the way of strength and truth. Following and living this astonishing and paradoxical revelation of God has been the deepest challenge for Jesus' disciples ever since.

And yet, in a refreshing shift for the Episcopal Church, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has called us all to strengthen our discipleship as we walk together in what he calls The Jesus Movement, "following Jesus into loving, liberating and life-giving relationship with God, with each other and with the earth."

As a diocese, we set out on this movement several years ago describing it with a new and easy-to-remember diocesan vision statement. *It is: "Making, equipping, and sending mature disciples of Jesus Christ."* It reminds us that our primary goal is to be always moving toward a deeper, mature and visible relationship with Jesus.

A month ago, the Episcopal House of Bishops, meeting at Kanuga Camp & Conference Center in Hendersonville seized a moment for deep reflection on our *own* discipleship. It was a carefully scheduled and well-planned meeting that was both productive and stimulating. In the morning of our last full day, however, the meeting took an unexpected shift. Before we got started on the agenda, one of our colleagues came to the microphone on a point of personal privilege. It was clear that his heart was heavy.

"There is an elephant in this room," he said. "We've stayed on schedule throughout this meeting. We've done good work. But we've done nothing to address what has happened in our country over the last year. Every one of us is now working in diocesan communities torn apart, not as much by theology as by politics. The air in this room is electric with our anxiety about how to preach, teach and lead in such a poisoned and polarized political environment."

—Only a few weeks earlier, the clergy of *this* diocese had met at Camp Gravatt for our annual pre-Lenten retreat. One of the monks from the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Massachusetts had come down to lead us, following the theme of their nationally-published Lenten curriculum "*The 5 Marks of Love*." It was a deeply thoughtful and spiritually enriching retreat, and yet when began to reflect on the fourth Mark of Love, which was entitled "Transform," we hit the same wall that would face us in the House of Bishops only two weeks later. That fourth Mark of Love is about transforming "unjust structures, challenging violence of every kind, and pursuing peace and reconciliation." Every one of those phrases is rooted in biblical references that have touched on political issues and tensions throughout the ages. But the clergy of this diocese know that transforming structures, challenging violence and pursuing peace and reconciliation are a tall order when many of our parishioners are so distanced from each other—or from friends, neighbors and even family members—about politics they can hardly speak about it. This discomfort, this distance, this painful alienation in our

midst was precisely the elephant in the room with which we we would struggle at the House of Bishops meeting at Kanuga.

Back at the diocesan clergy retreat, we had wondered, "With what words and in what ways can we preach in this environment without just making things worse?" With no good answer to that question, things got very quiet. Everyone in the room felt an engulfing tension—among ourselves and also on behalf of you, the people whom we serve.

On yet *another* occasion less than a week ago, the Fellowship of South Carolina Bishops—formerly known as LARCUM—shared Bible reflection and conversation with Republican and Democratic senators and representatives at breakfast here at Trinity Cathedral. Once again, in real wonder and anxiety, we discussed the dilemma we share as leaders among many who cannot or will not come toward one another in honesty, trust and good will. We could all identify ways in which we have participated in our society's increasing "stuckness." The way out of it was less evident.

Many of us have seen this polarization coming for years—even decades. But there's an element of it that has been darkly strengthening with each new intention of one "side" or the other to do whatever it takes to win it all. That dark element is that unity doesn't seem to matter that much to many Americans anymore. We no longer seem to care as deeply about being one people. It appears that we care much more about winning the argument, about having our way, having power. We seem to surround ourselves primarily—sometimes *only*—with people whose opinions and beliefs are like our own.

—*But...* if we are to call ourselves disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, regardless of our disagreements, the relationship we have in him means we *must* give more care to our relationships with each other in Christ than we do to theological or political purity.

There *is* an answer, and Jesus has given it to us. "Love one another, as I have loved you." But life in the world sets a trap for us with regard to this command. The world tempts us to build for ourselves as many back doors as possible to get out of its implications. They take the form of loyalties to ideologies and like-minded friends. Sometimes our back door comes in the form of "it's just too much trouble and work."

It's no wonder we find ourselves all too willing to oblige the world in finding ways around Jesus' command, because it's the hardest thing he commanded his disciples to do. It's also the most important thing he commanded his disciples to do.

Jesus knew we'd struggle to follow it. Jesus knew we'd mess it up, over and over and over and over again. But if we as his Body in the world treat this command as just a pretty picture on the wall that we can point to and say, "I'd really like to go there some day," we might as well get up, go home and give up.

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Jesus' command *is God's vision*. Jesus' own suffering and death proved he knew how hard his command would be for us. And yet even in our struggle, Jesus steadfastly and abundantly loves us.

In the NRSV translation, the letter to the Ephesians reminds us that we have all been "brought near by the blood of Christ," even if we were "far off" from the law—that is, impure, not holy. Eugene Peterson's provocative re-casting of scripture translations into contemporary linguistic idioms gives a sharp edge to biblical texts in his book, *The Message*. He interprets this same passage in Ephesians in this way: "Now because of Christ—dying that death, shedding that blood—you who were once *out of it* altogether are in on everything." The law had created two humanities—one that was "in" and one that was "out." Jesus united them.

According to Ephesians, the wall dividing us that Christ Jesus has broken down, torn down is precisely the "hostility" between us, or, as Peterson puts it, "the wall we used to keep each other at a distance." Continuing, Peterson clarifies the role of Hebrew law for some in this passage by putting it this way, "He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped." In other words, we keep narrowing down our definitions of what people have to believe, act like, and look like in order for us to be one with them in *any* way—much less to be one with them as *Christ* would have us be.

The oneness to which Christ calls us cannot be described as mere civility. Southerners have a pretty good idea about how to be civil in difficult situations. This is harder. This is about *sacrifice*. In a sacrificial unity, all our notions about political correctness or ideological purity are "abolished," by Jesus' sacrifice. Compromise seems the dirtiest of words in some camps, and yet sacrifice as Jesus embodies it and to which he calls his disciple community stretches way past compromise. For Jesus calls us to sacrifice *especially when we disagree*. Jesus call us to act *for* others even when we don't think we should be the ones to pay that price. Jesus calls us to compassion and truth, even hard truth, yet uttered in love.

—We are disciples of one Lord, one faith, one baptism—one God and father of all—and as disciples, we are uniquely chosen, equipped and sent into the heart of today's tensions.

Many years ago I learned an important life lesson in this. I was in seminary at Sewanee, and had gotten into a dispute with one of my professors. I have absolutely no memory of what the disagreement was about, but I do remember that we were both furious at each other. I'm still surprised at the notion that there could have been *anything* that could have made us so deeply angry with each other, but the memory of how I *felt* has always remained as clear as a bell. During that time of alienation from each other, the seminary community met for the weekly Wednesday noon Eucharist in the chapel. I attended, but felt a powerful, seething anger in my heart towards my professor. I knew this was not a good state of mind for worship, and especially

Eucharist, but I also knew I needed to be there. I just didn't think I could take communion.

It happened that that particular faculty member was on the schedule as a Eucharistic minister. Seeing him down front, vested and in place for holy service, I could only think resentfully to myself, "What a hypocrite!"

But the service went on, with singing, psalms, scripture readings, a sermon and prayers of the people. Then the Celebrant made that wonderful declaration, so wisely inserted in the liturgy just at that moment when we know we need to be preparing our hearts to "share rightly in those holy Mysteries, and be nourished by that spiritual Food" of the Eucharist. "The Peace of the Lord be always with you," he joyfully proclaimed.

And I *froze*. I so floundered in my self-righteous indignation that I couldn't even pass the Peace to the person standing right next to me. Then, as if in slow motion, I saw the man who was the object of my stubborn rage begin to move. In those days the seminary chapel at Sewanee was a cylindrical theater-like space, with the altar, lectern and chairs for the ministers down below and the seats rising gradually up to the second floor above.

My seat that day was about halfway up on a side aisle. Through a joyful crowd that was unaware of anything going on between the two of us, he moved with purpose across the floor toward the side aisle near me. Reaching me, he said simply, "Andrew, the Peace of Christ be with you—and with us." We hugged. Wept quietly. And then I took communion, drinking from the cup in his hand.

—He was for me, that day, whom we are all called to be for one another every day. Tearing down the walls of hostility around us. Remembering that we ourselves are the bricks and stones of the holy temple for which Jesus himself is the cornerstone, a dwelling place for God. Deep within us we ache to be that temple. We yearn to serve God above all else.

I'm reminded of that last scene in the Book of Joshua when his conquest of the land was over and Joshua had all the tribes gathered around him. I don't know that he is the best biblical character to turn to right now—with all the violence that characterized his conquest. But if we're honest, we have to acknowledge the emotional violence among *ourselves* in recent years in the presence of wedge politics and identity politics. Even politics-related physical violence has been increasing, both far and near. Nonetheless, in that last scene, Joshua puts a choice before his people about the god they will choose to worship. I wonder if that choice is in some way similar to the choices we face today.

"Choose this day whom you will serve," he said. —Now...*do* think hard before you say in your mind what Joshua himself said out loud, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." It is best not to make our choice glibly. For if you mean it, there may be a cost to you of sacrificing an idea, a principle, a candidate, a dollar—or even many of them—for the sake of the Lord you say you will serve.

Consider in your choosing the Lord's own compassion and the compassion you have or do not have toward your neighbor, remembering the breadth of Jesus' own definition of "neighbor."

Consider your willingness to *seek* forgiveness from someone you have offended, and think of those to whom you could *offer* forgiveness, without condition.

We have all been stuck. We have all despaired about what can be done to remove the walls of hostility that continue to grow between us. All of us. We have been stuck, but we do in fact have a word. That word is already in us, for Christ is in us. —We are indeed Christ's own body in the world. We *are* his disciples. Willingly sacrificial. Unstintingly generous. Abundantly joyful. Humble, even as if your only ride is a donkey. Without fear of friend or foe.

It is the disciple God called you to be. Now, it must be the disciple who you *are*.

—On page 833 in the Prayer Book and let us stand and pray together the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.