

The newly formed Mission Team here at First Plymouth has chosen the most fascinating theme for this coming program year. As most of you know, when we reduced the size of our Council from 41 members to a more manageable 9, we no longer had the Ministry and program committee chairs present at the table. Thus, the moment the chairs of those groups went off of Council, we began a new vehicle for mission delivery, namely the Mission Team. And their self-chosen theme for this year is *Finding Grace in Chaos*. Now, I don't know about you, but it took me a bit to get my head around this. Yet as I listened by became fascinated by the wisdom of the group. You see, as they looked about our metro Denver community, as they looked at a tanking global economy, as they looked at the proliferation of nuclear weapons in unstable governments, as they looked at the impact of climate change, as they looked at the growing threat of cataclysmic terrorist attacks, . . . they looked chaos straight in the face and did not flinch. In essence their questions were, "What will our witness be amidst all this chaotic news? What will our ministry be amidst these overwhelming needs? What will our good news be in response to the chaos in our midst?" In other words, as our world gets increasingly smaller, as the reality and impact of a global village are grasped and lived, how will we, as a beloved community gathered in the name of the God of Love, respond?

This actually is no small question because other people, and especially religions, are already answering it in myriad ways, and those ways are having serious global consequences. If I may be so bold to say this, particularly as a religious leader: as the world is getting smaller, so are its religions; they are getting downright puny, speaking only for their own tribe, their own nation, their own self-interest, everyone else be damned, literally. Speaking specifically about Christianity it has been startling to watch a retrenchment into orthodox and even ultra- orthodox practices and proclamations. And remember here precisely what 'orthodox' means: *ortho* means *correct* and *doxa* means *praise and belief*. Orthodox means 'correct praise and belief.' And it's as if everyone thinks their orthodoxy is right and everyone else's is wrong. So in this time of chaos when there is such an urgent need to shatter the bounds of parochialism, to hear other languages and world views and to be a global community negotiating diversity, we are instead watching as increasing numbers of Christian communions are doing the opposite: actually shrinking the sphere of what is acceptable and what is not, claiming they have the market on what is right and wrong. And apparently this applies not only to how other religions are wrong, but even to how other Christians are wrong. And I suppose this is only logical after all, for once orthodoxy is defined, everything else is, by definition, wrong; that is, after all, the purpose of establishing orthodoxy. So instead of meeting the expansive challenges of a global community, many Christians communions are strengthening the dividing walls of separation and parochial interests. How sad this is. And not only is it sad, it is deeply unbiblical.

Take, for example, our scripture lesson for today. It begins, "For this reason I bow my knees before the father . . ." For what reason? We have come in on the middle of a discourse, in the middle of what was intended to be a sermon for the community of believers in Ephesus, and we need to be reminded not only of what the "reason" was for the bowing of the knees, but the reason for the sermon at all. That reason is given earlier in the discourse. You see, the church in Ephesus was badly divided between Jews and Gentiles. Church conflict is not something that we 21st century Christians have a market on. Oh no. The moment there was a church, there was conflict, because everyone claimed s/he was right (orthodox) while the others were wrong (or "wrong-o-dox"). Conflict was particularly pronounced in early Christian churches because they

were trying to do what no religion had ever done before: to proclaim a God that transcended the national and tribal, and thus to invite into a new kind spiritual fellowship peoples who for centuries had been religious enemies. This new religion, this nascent church was inviting Jew and gentile, WITH NO DISTINCTION. As it said earlier in chapter two, speaking to a diverse community of Jews and non-Jews: " For [Christ] is our peace; . . . he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us . . . so that he might create in himself 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." *For this reason I bow my knees before the father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named . . .* Love so powerful that it can overcome hatred. Love so full that it can unite enemies. Love so deep, broad and high that it breaks down dividing walls and creates one new humanity. For this awe-inspiring reason . . .

And lest there be any mistake here, the Greek is far more clear than the English, for there is a play on words that is non-translatable between the two languages. In the Greek the words 'father' and 'family,' have the same root and sound similar: *πατέρα* and *πατριᾶ*. For this reason I bow my knees before the *πατέρα*, from whom every *πατριᾶ* in heaven and on earth is named. Or, to translate it differently, For this reason I bow my knees before the family-maker, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named . . . so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.

So what does this have to do with us? Biblical scholar Walter Wink believes that the greatest religious issue of our day is contained in today's lesson: How is it possible to live together as family members of God rather than as enemies of each other? He writes, "I submit that the ultimate religious question today should no longer be the Reformation's question, "How can I find a gracious God?" but rather, "How can we find God in our enemies?" What guilt was for Luther the enemy has become for us: the goad that can drive us to God."¹

As in no other time in history, our failure to do as Christ bade us and love our enemies has cataclysmic potentialities. Wink argues, in fact, that in our age there is no other way to God except through our enemies, because loving our enemies has become a key to human survival. The Cold War may in fact be over, but we are watching as unstable governments build nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them to targets at great distances; we are watching as terrorists are trying very hard to get their hands on those weapons and, in the name of God, kill their enemies; we are watching as diminished religions proclaim their tightening orthodoxy and potentially ignite massive destruction and death.

Thus the question that today's text raises for us is, as a community that defines itself as theologically progressive, how are we living and proclaiming the gospel so that we can be an expansive witness to an increasingly constrictive orthodoxy? How can we be a visible, tangible manifestation of the one new humanity proclaimed in Ephesians? In the midst of larger, louder and more orthodox churches, how do we proclaim the gospel not as a test of orthodoxy, but

¹ Wink, Walter; *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*; Minneapolis; Fortress Press; 1992; pp.263-264.

rather an invitation to orthopraxis, that is, of right practice? This is what our tradition has always proclaimed as the true test of Christian community. Walter Wink writes:

Jesus' teaching about nonviolent direct action and love of enemies are the acid tests of true Christianity. Just as in the lore of exorcism the devil cannot bear to utter the name of God, so our false prophets today cannot tolerate the mention of the love of enemies. The Rev. Greg Dixon, a former state chair and National Secretary for the Moral Majority, recently urged his followers to pray for the death of their opponents, claiming, "We're tired of turning the other cheek ... good heavens, that's all we have done." No false prophet can ever conceive of God as being God also of the enemy.²

I propose to you that we must be in the business of countering that unbiblical theology. I propose to you that living into the "breadth and the width and the height and depth" of today's text is an urgent need of this and many other pockets of diverse religions and philosophies. God is God, no matter what name we and other pockets of faithful people provide. We and they have a proclamation of expansive love that we need to share with the world. We and they have a faith that responds to the urging of the Spirit rather than fear of enemies. Thus we unite with others different from us in belief, but not in praxis, and that practice is to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, and to proclaim and live a love that has as its goal one new family of humanity, one created not in the image of one religion, but in the image of God from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.

Lest we think this is easy, let me give you one very small example of how hard it will be, because sometimes it is easier to conceptually love our enemies at a distance, than to concretely love our family and friends beside us. And if we find it hard to love our family beside us

I received a letter from a one-time visitor to our church whose son was in a wheelchair. She noted that our church was a bastion of unwelcome to a boy who wanted to be included with the other children, but could not in a sanctuary that provided her child a wheelchair space off to the side in the back, on the outside looking in. Only once in the four years I have been here have we broached the potential need for sanctuary renovation. And it was clear to me how hard it is to love the church family beside us. Because once we begin to apply inclusive theology to the very way we structure our space, our worship, our life together, we learn that what God asks of us pushes us sometimes outside our comfort zones. Yet is this not what this expansive theology proclaimed in today's text does by definition—push us beyond our comfort zones, even with those with whom we have promised to walk the pilgrim way of discipleship? If we are to proclaim love of enemy and then practice it, we must first love each other.

I would like to close the sermon with one more observation about the text. God works through Christ to form and shape the church into the image of God. And this entire passage is a taste of the fullest form the Christian life. Even the use of the verbs is critical here, for it prays that we will "know" God, using the same word that is biblically used when husband and wife "know" each other and produce life. That "knowing" in this passage is that intimate. And that is the breadth and length and height and depth of what we are being invited into: God as the lover with whom we have union, and thus create life, God as the one who loves even enemies.

² *ibid.*, page 264

Τούτου χάριν κάμπτω τὰ γόνατά μου πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ἐξ οὗ πᾶσα πατριὰ ἐν οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς ὀνομάζεται.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Patera, from whom every patria in heaven and on earth is named,

that, according to the riches of his glory God may grant you to be strengthened with might through the Spirit in the inner being, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith;

that, being rooted and grounded in love, you may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge,

that, you may be filled with all the fulness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. George Anastos