

‘Thinking unity’ - sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 19th June 2009

What is it that puts young people off the church? According to a recent report, one of the major reasons young people give for not being interested in church is the disharmony among church people. In particular, they cite the way in which the church excludes certain groups of people because of their sexual identity. They have the picture of the church as being busy building dividing walls between people. There are those who are in and those who are out. There are ‘us’ and there are ‘them’. In Paul’s day, the greatest division in the church was between Jew and Gentile. In our day, it is between right and left, between orthodox and progressive, between Well, you name it, you can find it. Such exclusion and disharmony are not, of course, peculiar to the church. The whole world is busy building walls. The United States is building barriers along its southern border to prevent illegal immigrants from entering. The Israelis continue to build a wall to separate themselves from the Palestinians. There is talk of erecting a barrier in the region between Pakistan and Afghanistan. So the church is just doing what the world does, trying to keep us secure against those who are not like us. But, wait a minute, who are the ‘us’? Who are God’s people? Might not the young people consulted for this recent report be onto something? Maybe the church ought to be different from the world. Maybe we ought to examine what we mean by our ‘enemies’. Maybe, just maybe, the young people are right in thinking that there is something essentially off-putting about a religious community that somehow seems better at division than at unity.

I don’t know how many of the New Testament letters you have read, but in those written by the apostle, Paul, the theme of unity is vitally important. He wants the readers of his letters to think unity and so he keeps writing about what impedes this unity and what promotes unity. This is especially true of his letter to the church in Ephesus, the letter from which we are reading in our services during July and August. Why is Christian unity so important to Paul? What is he saying to us in our reading from his letter to the Ephesians? Why is it vitally important, if we want to part of God’s people, that we think and practise unity?

Have you ever thought what we are doing when in each of our worship services we ‘pass the ‘peace’. Perhaps you take the moment for ‘the passing of the peace’ as simply an opportunity to say ‘Hi’ to the people near you. But actually, when we shake hands or hug, we are not saying ‘Hi’, we are saying ‘Peace’. We are literally ‘passing the peace’. What is this peace?

As some of you, on our recent trip to the UK, we interred the ashes of an aunt of mine. This aunt, for more than twenty years, had been a missionary nurse in India. She went out under the auspices of the British Methodist Church. In 1947, three years after she arrived in India, the South Indian districts of the Methodist Church and the Anglican dioceses in South India united with the combined Presbyterian and Congregational Churches to form the Church of South India. In 1954, the Church of South India produced one of the earliest examples of the ‘modern’ liturgies for Holy Communion used in most Anglican churches today. Our United Methodist liturgy is in turn based on this. A Methodist minister in Britain, himself a retired missionary, was sharing with me

recently about the huge impact made in the Church of South India when their communion liturgy was introduced. A key element in this liturgy was 'the passing of the peace'. Now it was not that 'the peace' was a new idea. It is an ancient Christian practice referred to in writings concerning the baptismal liturgies. After the baptism and the laying on of hands and anointing by the bishop, the newly baptized were included in the exchange of the peace for the first time. Justin Martyr indicates that during the second century the peace took place before the presentation of the gifts at the Eucharist. In the fifth century, the peace was exchanged at the time of the breaking of the bread prior to communion. In some prayer books, it is still exchanged at this point in the service. I like it that in our church we pass the peace not just when we celebrate communion, but at every service. I think we have the right idea. Paul, we should note, wrote that Christians should 'greet one another with a holy kiss' in his letter to the Romans, in both his letters to the Corinthians, and his first letter to the Thessalonians.

So the passing of the peace has a long history, but just imagine the impact in India where the practice soon became an established part of the liturgy. You may have heard of the caste system in India. Although the Indian constitution of 1950 abolished the caste system, discrimination long continued and, in some areas, still exists. At the lowest of five main social classes are the so-called 'untouchables'. These people employed in what are regarded as polluting occupations are considered polluted. They must, therefore, not come into contact with other people. Imagine then the impact when Christians in the Church of South India were first expected not only to worship with untouchables but also to touch them, to lay a hand on their hand! We should not take the passing of the peace lightly. It is a fundamental expression of unity. Well, now you may be thinking, these are bygone days in a foreign country. We here in 21st century America have no problems passing the peace with anyone, especially if we're just sort of saying 'Hi'. But we are not just saying 'Hi'. We're saying 'Peace'. The passing of the peace is an essentially Christian practice. We are passing the peace of Christ.

What is this peace of Christ? Paul mentions it three times in the short passage we've just heard this morning. Firstly, he says of Christ 'He is our peace'. That is, peace is not something that we create. No, says Paul, Christ 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' (v 14). Paul tells the Ephesians, and with them Christians everywhere, that they must give up their old divisions, their old enmities, because Christ has brought all peoples together. When, therefore, they have to get used to meeting together as Christians, whether they are of Jewish or Gentile background, they are not doing God a favor. On the contrary, they are receiving the favor God has given to both peoples – Jews and Gentiles. They are receiving the peace of God. For the unity Paul asks Christians to think about is not just peace with each other. It is nothing less than unity with God. This is the second mention of the word 'peace' in this short section of the letter. He says that in Christ God has abolished the Jewish law, 'that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace'. When Jews and Gentiles, traditionally at odds, join together as Christians in the early church, they are not doing the reconciling. No, Christ himself is reconciling 'both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.' (v 16) Like the higher caste Christians in the

Church of South India who had to get used touching the untouchables, so Christians in Paul's day had to get used to worshipping with and greeting with the kiss of peace people they formerly would not touch or eat with. So, don't let's kid ourselves that Paul would have any time for division in today's church. Our causes of disharmony are as nothing compared with those traditionally between Jew and Gentile in Paul's day. And the walls we erect are as nothing compared with walls that had to be broken down between different social groups in the early days of the Church of South India. The peace of Christ is a shocking reality for anyone who is keen to stress 'my place, my role, my right' over against a common humanity. The peace of Christ deconstructs the dividing wall for our divided selves, divided households, and divided workplaces.

This takes us on to the third mention of 'peace'. Paul writes of Christ: 'So he came and proclaimed peace'. We are to think unity, to pass the peace because Christ has already made peace. It is just being proclaimed. Those young people who find something essentially hypocritical in a church that is hostile to certain groups of people, or where there is much falling-out are absolutely right. They are seeing the contradiction between our claiming to be God's people, a people living out the peace that Christ has accomplished, and our behavior which expresses all the usual tensions and divisions of the world, a world not claiming to be living by Christ.

We have to remember what our primary identity is. It always interests me that when we visitors introduce themselves in our worship services and they say which state they are visiting from there is often a ripple of response from those who are from the same state. Suddenly, there is a fellow feeling, a unity, if you like, between anyone who is from Michigan, or from Ohio, or from Indiana, or wherever. How much more so when we are perhaps visiting another country. The other week, Stephen and I were with Stephen's brother David as he was working his shift at Disney. David said to me: 'Come and meet Sarah. She's from Lancashire.' Now Lancashire is the county in the north of England where I spent the first 18 years of my life. Sure enough, when he introduced us to his trainee, Sarah, she was a Lancashire lass with a Lancashire accent and we spent a few minutes talking about Lancashire life. For that brief time, she and I were suddenly united, both a long way from our homeland, by being rooted in Lancashire. Nationality or region often plays a part in our feeling of identity.

What is at the heart of your identity, I wonder. For Paul, the answer from all us should be obvious. Simply by virtue of our all being here in Christian worship at the heart of our identity should be Christ. When people ask us what we are, we should answer first: 'I am a Christian'. More important than the verbal answer we should give is the demonstration that we are Christian. How do we do this? By the life we live. And what is at the heart of this life? Peace. It is not that we will all have the same views and never disagree about anything. It is not that tensions will never arise. Being individual human beings, we will always be open to differences. The question is how we reconcile them according to the peace of Christ. This peace, you remember, is not what we have created. It is what Christ has proclaimed. Paul says that Christ has 'proclaimed peace to you who were far off - that is, the Gentiles and 'to those who were near', that is, the Jews. He has done this, writes Paul, in the very next verse so that 'you are no longer strangers and aliens, but

... citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.' This is the verse Noni has printed on the front of today's bulletin. Noni has a great knack of picking out what is most important from the draft order of service she is given. This is the heart of the matter for Paul. It is God who has united us in Christ, with each other and with God so that we are all God's people. Others can then look at our household, whether it is a local church community or the worldwide Christian communion and see a reconciled household, a united people, a body of people living out Christ's peace. This is the purpose of the unity that is so important to Paul. It is to create a holy dwelling place for ? For whom? For Jews, for Gentiles, for right or left, for orthodox or progressive. No; for God himself. Yes, you heard it right. The unity we are called for is to create space not primarily for us, for you or for me, but for God himself.

Why is unity so important? Because it is God's gift to us and it is meant to be shared with the world. I don't know if you noticed the last few verses in the reading from Ephesians this morning. Hear them again. This household of God, Paul writes, is: 'built upon the foundation ... with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him, the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place or God'. Where will the world find God? In his dwelling-place and we, folks, are it. Yes, we are God's dwelling place, when we allow ourselves to be built together spiritually. Why is unity so important? Because only when we live and breathe unity in Christ can the church become the place where God dwells. Yes, he dwells there. He doesn't just pop in, now and again. He lives in the church. He lives in the worldwide church insofar as this church is a manifestation of a reconciled community. He lives in the worldwide church insofar as it remembers what is at the heart of its identity. So in the week ahead, when you are tempted in the way you word something about another member of this church to sow disagreement or division, remember that you pass the peace, at least symbolically, with everyone present in worship. Yes, with everyone: those who disagree with you, those who annoy you, those you feel may not take to you, those who have hurt you. Remember none of us is united to God by our own efforts. Christ has proclaimed peace; he has made peace; he is our peace. This peace is not something apart from Christ, some program or policy independent of him. It is not something we Christians need discuss, debate, and construct. Rather, Christ himself and his reconciling of all people to God is the true reality of peace. May we, both in our worship and in our daily lives pass to others the peace of Christ.