

Sixth Sunday of Easter  
May 5, 2013  
Dr. Stephen C. Brewer

## “Shall We Gather at the River?”

Acts 16:9-15 John 14:23-29

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In our gospel lesson this week the author of the Gospel of John is concerned with one of the major themes in the ministry of Jesus—peace. Before leaving his disciples, Jesus said to them, “Peace I leave with you; *my peace* I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”<sup>1</sup> In his farewell address to those closest to him, Jesus left, as a gift, his peace; and it is a gift that is shared with all those who follow him.

But, what is this peace of Jesus? It is an internal, spiritual peace, yes; but it is also an external, social peace. The peace of Christ is the peace of heart and mind for an individual, but it is not limited just to individuals. We also are to experience the peace of Christ in our families, in our congregation, in our community, in our country, and even in the international arena. Peace is opposed to violence, and seeks to overcome it. But peace is not simply the absence of violence; it is a wholeness and a joy which is grounded in the presence of God.

Why is it that some people, faced with the same confusing and complex world the rest of us have to live in, choose not fear and despair, but rather to commit their lives to the common good? What makes a Mother Teresa or a Martin Luther King Jr.?

If the “river” which the Acts passage speaks of today represents that which carries the Peace of Christ, that which brings to each living thing on earth the gift of wholeness and life—if that’s The River—then what is it that enables some and not others to return again and again to that source, to “gather at the river?”

This was the driving question behind the book, *Common Fire*.<sup>2</sup> What the authors found was that such people – those who live in peace in spite of the violence of the world – have several characteristics in common:

1. They are somehow not bound by the legacy of individualism that is one of the hallmarks of our society.

Those who *are* immersed in individualism often find the world a very competitive and lonely place. They find it a very threatening and frightening place. And what do we do when we are threatened and frightened? We “fortify,” we put up high walls; we wear intricate masks in order to protect ourselves and survive.

Two of the most common ways we fortify ourselves are *cynicism* and *tribalism*.

Cynicism should not be confused with *skepticism*, which is a healthy ability to stand back and question, and to consider the facts before making a decision. Cynicism provides the false comfort of the simple conviction that all human motivation can be reduced to selfishness and narrow self-interest.<sup>3</sup> That’s cynicism.

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:27

<sup>2</sup> Laurent A. Parks Deloz, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, and Sharon Daloz Park, *Common Fire*, (Beacon Press, 1996)

<sup>3</sup> Deloz, Keen and Parks, page 12

A second way we often fortify ourselves in this society is through Tribalism. I should temper this by saying that we all have tribes of some kind. We all belong to families, we each have nationality, we may belong to a political party, we have likes and dislikes that are important to us; and many of us have a chosen religion. To use an Oregon tribal phenomenon, some of us identify with the “Ducks” tribe, while others of us are “Beavers.”

This is not necessarily a bad thing: to belong is of vital importance to human beings, as we seek our identity; to know who we are. We all belong to “tribes” of one kind or other; that’s okay. But it is possible to embrace a particular tribe as an escape from the world—that’s what is meant by “tribalism.”

Tribalism is basically the point of view that life is “me and my kind against the world.”<sup>4</sup> That’s Tribalism.

Cynicism and tribalism are ways of hiding from the frightening realities of the world. And it is so much easier to hide behind our locked doors and gated communities than to engage those who look and think differently than we do.

2. Another characteristic of those who were able to “gather at the river”—to live in what John’s gospel describes as the Peace of Christ – was the ability to relate in meaningful ways with those who were different from them.

The way the authors of *Common Fire* put it was “constructive engagements with otherness.”<sup>5</sup> It just means that a person has the ability to cross tribal boundaries without being overcome by feelings that they are in “enemy territory.”

If you want to know what I mean, it’s not necessary to leave the country. If you are an adult in your upper years like me, and you want an experience of crossing tribal boundaries, take a stroll across a high school campus some lunch hour. Or, if you’re white and upper middle class, walk through a West Side neighborhood after dark. If you are a young person, visit a nursing home. Or most any of us could go hang around the Rescue Mission for a few minutes.

These experiences cross tribal boundaries. They will place us right in the middle of a different culture. To live in Christ’s Peace is to ask, what would it take for us to relate in meaningful ways to the folks we might encounter in these situations?

There were several other characteristics mentioned that were present in people who are somehow able to experience this deep peace Jesus spoke of to his disciples:

- a) compassion, the ability to “suffer with;”
- b) creating, maintaining and drawing strength from a nurturing community;
- c) the ability to use imagination in approaching challenges;
- d) a sense of being called by a source outside oneself; and
- e) the ability to admit and learn from our mistakes.

I believe the question the author of John lays before us in this passage is, can we embrace this “Peace of Christ?” Do we have what it takes? Will we hide in cynicism or behind the protection of our respective tribes, or will we gather at the river of Christ’s Peace?

Paul had a vision. A Macedonian, a Greek Gentile was calling out to Paul, “Come over... and help us.” Take the message of Jesus to Gentiles, to pagans? This was a horrifying idea to the founding church in Jerusalem. Greeks had no understanding of all

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pg. 13

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pg. 215

that Christianity was based on. They knew nothing of the Torah, the law. They knew nothing of the history of God's people, the Jews. *They were a different tribe.*

Against the pressure from the *Powers That Be*, Paul did go to Macedonia. And there (as it happens, by a river) Paul met and spoke with a woman whose name was Lydia. She listened to Paul and eventually had her whole household baptized. As far as we know, she was the first European to receive the gospel and be baptized.

What if Paul had not had the gifts necessary to cross the boundaries of his "tribe?" What if Christianity never had been taken out of Jerusalem? What if Paul had hidden in cynicism or the safety of his Jewish "tribe?" How did he manage to overcome such obstacles?

I couldn't help but notice how many of the characteristics Paul had of those who dedicate their lives to the common good.

He certainly had the ability to relate in meaningful ways with those who were different from him, or he wouldn't have been able to present the gospel to Greeks and pagans. Respecting the Greek culture, he argued to the home church in Jerusalem that these people should not have to become Jews first, before accepting the gospel. The Jewish law, Paul insisted, should not be imposed on Greeks and pagans, for whom it had no meaning.

Paul also was gifted with compassion, imagination, and the ability to learn from his mistakes. He drew constantly on the nurturing community of the church for support and strength, and he understood clearly that he had been called by a source outside himself.

These are qualities we need to cultivate as we move into our own unknown future as a congregation. Now, as downtown Medford undergoes significant social and cultural changes, it is tempting to retreat into cynicism rather than believe that our actions can make a difference in this neighborhood or the world. Now, more than ever, we would love to find shelter among those who are just like us—who look like us and act like us. More than ever we would like to fortify ourselves behind these hallowed walls against a threatening and uncertain future. And we might hide for quite some time and convince ourselves that we are safe. But what would be the price?

Another John, from the island of Patmos, wrote of this vision:

Then an angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal flowing from the throne of God... through the middle of the street of the city. On either side is the tree of life..., and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.<sup>6</sup>

The healing of the nations. The Peace of Christ. The river of the water of life. That is where we should be. That is our calling as God's people—not to seek shelter in cynicism or hide within the safety of the familiar—but, like Paul, to extend the welcoming arms of acceptance, of healing, of compassion, of hope even to places we thought we dare not go. Even to people we may not understand. Even to those who, like the Macedonian woman, call out to us.

The Peace of Christ has been entrusted to us. But it loses its sweetness if we keep it to ourselves, for it is not just a personal peace, but a peace for the healing of the world.

And so I invite you to breathe in; fill your lungs and your soul with the Spirit of God; the Spirit which brings to each living thing on earth the gift of wholeness and life; the Spirit that calls us into a life in the Peace of Christ.

Grace, mercy and peace. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Revelation 22:1-2