

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 13, 2011
St. John's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Susan J. Latimer

Some days I give thanks to God
that the Episcopal Church
does not subscribe to a literal interpretation of Scripture.

This is one of those days.

Even those folks who SAY that they take every word in the Bible literally,
must skip over some of these passages -
or else we'd have a lot of people running around with eye patches and only
one hand....

There are too many themes to choose from in today's Gospel.

I have decided NOT to preach about adultery and lust, divorce,
or swearing an oath.

Instead – I will focus on something even more difficult, even more radical –

Reconciliation.

***“So when you are offering your gift there before the altar,
if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,
leave your gift there before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your
brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”***

The mission of the Church is reconciliation.

It can be a very difficult mission.

Reconciliation cannot happen when only one person or group is willing to
forgive – or ask forgiveness.

True reconciliation requires both parties at the table.

In our Catechism (BCP 855):

The mission of the Church

is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

All of us, in our baptism, are commissioned

to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world.

We can think about this work on a world-wide scale – or with the Anglican communion, or the Episcopal church, or our nation, or the Diocese,
We can think about it with our state, or our city, or our school, or class,
or workplace, or the parish.

In all of these areas there is a need for God's spirit to work with us for healing and reconciliation.

But today I challenge all of us to do the most difficult thing of all

– to look at ourselves and how we are living.

What are we doing to work for reconciliation?

Where are we stuck – unable, or unwilling, to reconcile with someone?

Who have we hurt – and who has hurt us?

Some of these hurts are years old – some are newer, and some are probably very fresh.

We are human – that means that sometimes we hurt each other, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes on purpose.

We are human – that means that sometimes we are hurt by other people's words or actions – no matter their intentions.

What are we doing to work for reconciliation?

Where are we stuck?

I invite you to think about that today, during the sermon, during the peace, during the eucharist, and after you leave the service today.

There are some tools for us in our liturgy, specifically to help us with reconciliation. One of these is The Peace.

Some of you have been around long enough to remember when the Episcopal Church started “passing the peace”.

Yes, as strange as it may sound to some of you, there was a time, at least in most parishes, when no one moved at the Peace.

This was back in the time of the 1929 Prayerbook, and before.

It’s probably when the phrase “the frozen chosen” started being used for Episcopalians.

It was a different piety – a different theology of worship.

Everyone was concerned with their own experience of the service.

The communal aspects were a necessary evil, to some.

The Peace was a completely different experience.

There were no handshakes, no hugs, no looking at each other.

In the 70’s, when the “new” prayerbook (now over 30 years old!) came out, we expected people to change this overnight.

I’m not sure what happened here at St. John’s during that time

– some of you were here, and can tell those stories.

But now the Peace is a favorite part of the service for many.

There are 3 Broad expressions of the Peace – and I see 2 of them quite often at St. John’s.

1 – we pass the peace to our friends and acquaintances

This is wonderful – and can go on forever, if we let it!

2 – we pass the peace to people we don’t know – guests and newcomers and people who are very different from us

This is very important. How would you feel as a guest if, during the Peace, no one offered you the Peace? Hopefully we are doing a good job of including all the people sitting around us when we pass the peace.

Sometimes you may even need to move in order to greet a new person.

So #1 – people we know - #2 – people we don't know - but there is an important #3 here that needs to be highlighted.

“So when you are offering your gift there before the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

The Peace is in the service just before the Offertory. Imagine that. The Peace comes just before we offer our selves to God - our money, and our whole selves, just as we are, each of us with a longing to be more faithful, with a longing to live our lives closer to God.

The Passing of the Peace is meant to be a liturgical expression of Matthew 5:23-24.

So #3 Peace is reaching out to people who have hurt us and people whom we have hurt.

As Ian Markham, Dean of Virginia Seminary puts it, The Peace exists so that, ***“rather than harboring anger and resentment toward others, we need to let the Peace of the Lord bring a calm that enables growth”***

Of course, not all of these people are right here in the service with us.

In fact, Dean Markham suggests that clergy might sometime invite the congregation to use the Peace to make a cellphone call to someone who has upset you at work, or school.

Whether or not we step out to make a phone call,
we can intentionally use The Peace for the work of reconciliation.

We can decide that we are going to invite “the Peace of the Lord” into our relationships.

We can decide to surrender the pain, misery, and anger that we have been carrying around, and invite God to bring a calmness and peace to our lives.

We can take the risk to offer the Peace of the Lord to someone who has hurt us, or whom we have hurt. No other words are necessary – just an intention to bring Christ’s healing power into your relationship

– “The Peace of the Lord be with you” - or “Peace be with you”

This isn’t magic. It doesn’t mean that all hurts are completely gone. It doesn’t mean that all is forgiven, or that you immediately become buddies with someone you have had differences with.

What this practice can do, however, over time,
is mold us into more faithful people.

If we practice this #3 Passing of the Peace at St. John’s,
along with #1 and #2,
God will be able to work even more powerfully with and among us.

I challenge all of us to bring an intentionality to the way we practice the Peace. Pray about it. Have courage to take a risk. Be open to the way that God is working in and among us.

If you’re not quite ready to reach out with a #3 passing of the Peace, try praying to God for the will to do so.

Offer your own hesitancy, your own brokenness,
to God during the Offertory,

and as you come forward to receive the bread and wine.

Do that for a few weeks, and see what happens in your heart and mind.

We have a great gift in our liturgy. It is meant to mold us into more faithful followers of Christ, and it will do so, when we are faithful in attendance and in our intention to grow.

Our Liturgy is truly the “work of the people”.
When we are faithful in our attendance and practice,
God’s Spirit will be enabled to work more powerfully in our lives
and in our congregation.