

## “FOR THE UNITY OF ALL”

A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2016

Text: Acts 16:16-34

For the world to be “saved” means . . . for the world to become one. One household. For every person to live as though we are all brothers and sisters, one family. On the Christian view, the goal of God is not to save people from people, but to help us regain one another.

We long for this in our prayers when we say (in the Kyrie) “For the peace that is from above, for the well-being of the church of God, and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord—Lord, have mercy!” Lord, have mercy—and make us one with each other. Especially, make us one with the people we make fun of, or hate, and people who despise us. Make our neighbors and enemies love us, and make us love our neighbors and enemies, so there will be no more enemies but only neighbors. Then the world will be saved, the world will be safe.

Paul reflected on this unifying dynamic of salvation in his letter to the Ephesians, where he says:

God . . . made us alive together in Christ . . . and raised us up together and seated us together . . . so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. [my own translation, modifying NRSV]

He “made us alive together,” “raised us up together,” “seated us together,” only three words in Greek. It is a perfect summary of the work God is doing in Christ, to cure holistically a sick and broken world.

In his “high priestly prayer” in John 17, Jesus prayed that his church might be the starting point for such global unity. Every year, on the Seventh Sunday of

Easter, we read a portion of that prayer. Today we heard Jesus say:

I in them and you in me, that [those who believe in me] may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Of course, we also pray for unity in the Lord’s Prayer, when we say “Your kingdom come.” Also when we say “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us,” we are not praying for something else. We are praying for the unity of all.

The same urgent desire of God can be expressed in the form of a story, as in today’s first reading. Acts 16:16-34 reports on an incident which illustrates how the gospel of Jesus Christ is about people becoming one.

It happened as some disciples of Jesus were out in the real world trying to make the gospel known. Paul got annoyed at a poor slave girl who followed them around for days telling everyone to listen to them. Don’t know why it bothered him, but it did.

So you have this tiny offense, hardly an offense at all, an annoyance, exasperation, and because of it someone loses his temper, somebody loses a few dollars of income, next thing you know the disciples are being beaten and taken to court and thrown in prison. In the innermost room, their feet in stocks.

But then, an earthquake occurs.

You may have seen before and after pictures from an earthquake? We can do that.

Before the earthquake we see in a nutshell “how the world is”: People bothering each other; rivalry;

greed; revenge; exploitation of women; anxiety about the future (people paying big bucks to a fortune-teller); slavery; “hope of making money”; emphasizing differences; xenophobia; violence against peaceful people; false testimony; scapegoating; “the law” favoring the local establishment; injustice; mob action; imprisonment. Does any of that sound familiar?

But then, an earthquake.

Now for the after picture: Freedom (shackles come off, doors open). Forgiveness, and caring for one another (Paul tells the jailer not to hurt himself, and the jailer washes the wounds of the prisoners. Oh, and light--don't forget, the jailer “called for lights.” Calm. Faith. Baptism. “Communion”: Prisoners being served a supper at the jailer's own table. Plus, the magistrates came and apologized to Paul and Silas and ordered them officially set free.

“Before” and “after”: A study in the effects of an earthquake.

Of course, the real earthquake . . . was not a mere matter of moving rocks. The extraordinary power at work in the moment, in the real world, in the aftermath of hurt and injustice, was the word of God in the hearts of Paul and Silas. The earthquake in their hearts was something inside them that moved them, in that dark innermost room, to sing hymns and pray. Not to curse the darkness, but to let that little gospel light of theirs shine in spite of the darkness. And that earthquake was an aftershock of the earthquake which took place when their Lord was crucified and rose from the dead after he was arrested, like Paul and Silas, for bringing good news to the world.

Luke wrote this story as an example for us. We live in quite a different place and time, but we are in most respects just like people in this story. We have our settled way of life, we have people we prefer, we have our views on things. When these come into conflict with the ways and views of others, we are

also coming into conflict with the will of Jesus that we should all be one as he is one with the Father. The earthquake which can change the climate of the world has already happened in Jesus Christ. In him, God has raised us up together, given us life together, and made us sit together in what Paul calls “the heavenly places,” which means wherever our Lord is making his kingdom break into this world.

When we listen to our Lord and seek to make his peace in the world, settled prejudices will dissipate, established barriers fall down, habitual contempt dissolve, and we will find ourselves living as one.

And we have a foretaste of that unity when we gather on Sunday in the name of our Risen Lord. God's work of salvation touches each of us personally in baptism, but communion makes it clear to the world that God is not working secretly but publicly and socially to bring his people together.

“For the peace that is from above, for the well-being of the church of God, and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord—Lord, have mercy!” Amen.