

Birds of a Feather

I am not preaching a normal sermon this morning. There may be those who would say that I never preach a normal sermon but we'll let that go for now. And before I get to the sermon that I am preaching, I want to say a few words about the sermon that I'm *not* preaching.

There are some scholars and preachers who interpret the story I just read about Jesus and the ten lepers to be a thinly veiled allegory about the extension of the Gospel to the Gentiles. You see, there was a region on the east side of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River where there were ten cities established by the Greek-speaking Seleucid Empire which had preceded the Romans as the overlords of the area. Rather unsurprisingly, this Gentile enclave was known as the Decapolis, The Ten Cities. And if you think that Seattle's citizens have an attitude about their neighbors on the east side of Lake Washington, well, that's nothing compared to the bad feelings between the Jews and their cross-water neighbors. So, a story about Jesus preaching to those despised foreigners would indeed be in keeping with many of the other stories in Luke. The problem is that there *are* other stories which are very straightforwardly about Jesus' work in the Decapolis. This story takes place "On the way to Jerusalem... (in) the region between Samaria and Galilee." And if you had a map, you could plainly see that the region between Samaria and Galilee is on the west side of the lake and the river, so the whole Decapolis idea, in my judgement, is kind of silly. So I won't be preaching that sermon.

Nor am I going to be preaching about God's mercy, although I think that would make a good sermon for another time. After all, this is a fine example of a story about how God acts mercifully toward human beings who may or may not deserve mercy. We really don't know anything about these ten lepers other than that Jesus heals them. We don't know for sure, really, what disease they had because the word "leprosy" was used to describe all kinds of skin diseases. It's unlikely, in fact, that these sufferers had what we think of as "true leprosy," technically "Hansen's disease," where flesh rots away from the living body and limbs fall off and so forth. They may have had psoriasis or even bad cases of acne – just enough skin disruption to make them ritually unclean. But, in any case, Jesus healed them. And even when only one returned to say, "Thank you," the rest remained healed. This isn't one of those oh-so-satisfying fables in which the ingrates were struck by God with diseases worse than what they'd been cured of because of their failure of appreciation. God's mercy wins the day. But I'm not preaching that sermon.

Nor am I preaching this morning about how thankfulness is one of the keys to a whole and happy life. That's something, incidentally, that I do believe and this passage among many others from the Scriptures would make a good platform to discuss that notion. My lectionary study group this past Wednesday discussed this theme quite a bit. I suspect the link between gratitude and holistic health will be one of the themes at St. Elizabeth Episcopal Church in Burien today and, because my pal Rev. Paul Mitchell is rearranging the lectionary to fit his preaching on Eric Law's theory of Holy Currencies at Vashon United Methodist, at that church in a few weeks. But, much as I think that we should pay more attention to the aspect of gratitude in our lives, I'm not going to preach that sermon this morning, either.

So, what am I going to preach about? Well, it's often the case that when I read the Scripture over on a Monday to tie down my theme and start picking hymns, I notice connections between the passage and what's going on in the world around us or in my life. And when I read this story

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this past Monday, I thought, “Hunh... 9 Jews and a Samaritan... *That’s* an odd traveling party!” And then I started thinking about how such a thing might have happened, how these miserable folks, cast out from normal society, might have banded together for common protection and comfort. And I remembered how, in an episode of “Doctor Who” that broadcast last fall, Clara whispered to the little boy who would grow up to be the Doctor, “Fear makes companions of us all.” Hey, it’s been a while since I got in a Doctor Who reference...

But what I thought about most of all was how that, under duress, we may join forces with folks that we’d not really seriously considered as companions before and I realized that’s how our Evergreen Association was started. And, since the Evergreen Annual Meeting was Friday and Saturday, cutting into my normal sermon-writing time, I thought I’d give you a bit of a report from that meeting with an eye to connections with this story of the Traveling Lepers Association and their two ethnic caucuses.

My decision was ratified in my mind by a reading from a most surprising source that came up in the work the assembled representatives from Evergreen did this weekend. Our very last plenary session yesterday afternoon was a Sacred Conversation, a tradition we’ve developed over the last few years in which we break up into small groups to discuss a major issue and then report back to each other. This year, the Sacred Conversation was on Gun Violence and I’ll have more to say about it in a few minutes. But the reading that illustrated this connection between the lepers and Evergreen best for me was drawn from the remarks of former U.S. President George W. Bush at the memorial for the fallen Dallas police officers in July. I thought he really nailed it when he spoke of the unity which America needs to rediscover to prevent the kind of violence and bloodshed so evident in Dallas that month. “To renew our unity,” he said, “we only need to remember our values. We have never been held together by blood or background. We are bound by things of the spirit, by shared commitments to common ideals. At our best, we practice empathy, imagining ourselves in the lives and circumstances of others. This is the bridge across our nation’s deepest divisions. And it is not merely a matter of tolerance, but of learning from the struggles and stories of our fellow citizens and finding our better selves in the process. At our best, we honor the image of God we see in one another. We recognize that we are brothers and sisters, sharing the same brief moment on Earth and owing each other the loyalty of our shared humanity. At our best, we know we have one country, one future, one destiny. We do not want the unity of grief, nor do we want the unity of fear. We want the unity of hope, affection and high purpose.”

Those lepers, it seems to me, likely experienced their enforced unity as a unity of grief and a unity of fear. They were together because no one else wanted them around. They were hurting from their rejection by their communities. They were together because, whether they liked each other or not, they stood a better chance at survival by being ten outcasts traveling together rather than ten outcasts traveling separately. And, it seems to me, that our origins as the Evergreen Association are rather similar. For those of you who don’t remember those days, the precipitating events of Evergreen’s formation were the threatened dis-fellowshipping of University Baptist and Seattle First Baptist by their and our former region, American Baptist Churches of the Northwest. Many of the other ABC churches in the Seattle area found this unacceptable and some were afraid that if University and Seattle First could be kicked out for disagreements over human sexuality, then excuses might later be found for excluding others.

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When the churches of the old Seattle Baptist Union were invited to form their own region, which became Evergreen, the unintended consequences were that, first, First Baptist of Salt Lake City and other ABC of the NW churches came along, again, out of fear they would be next on the chopping block, and, second, ABC churches who'd been dis-fellowshipped by ABC of the West began to join Evergreen to maintain their only possible ABC-USA tie. It was a group founded in fear and grief.

The good news, of course, is that the focus pretty quickly switched from what got churches thrown out to what kept churches together. Our unique structure of doing business in ethnic caucuses and by consensus became a drawing card as churches saw that it safeguarded the opinions and practices of churches that might otherwise be in an untenable minority. As we formed new relationships in the wake of this new way of doing business, our unity went from what Former President Bush described as a unity of grief and fear to what he called "the unity of hope, affection and high purpose." I know I keep saying this but if you've not been to an Evergreen event, particularly the annual meeting, you really owe it to yourself to go and see how 57 very disparate churches have come together to create beautiful friendships and solid working relationships. We come together in the hope that we have received from Christ Jesus, with deep affection for each other, and with a high purpose, indeed. That purpose, codified in our associational mission statement, is this: "Being a culturally diverse people who are one in Christ and who value the liberties of our American Baptist Heritage, the Evergreen Baptist Association will: Build bridges between communities; Provide resources to equip member churches to share Christ and teach God's word; and Translate our unity to the world."

So, how did I see that mission and unity of hope, affection, and high purpose work itself out this weekend? Here are some quick thoughts. We began our time together this year with our business session. After receiving our agenda from our current president, Priscilla Lowe, a laywoman from New Beginnings Christian Fellowship in Renton, we divided into our ethnic caucus meetings: Asian, Black, Euro, and Hispanic. We have found that in most cases this division allows for more free exchange of ideas, encourages voices that are not often heard, and prevents one group from dominating the conversation. Each caucus had mostly the same work to do. In the Euro Caucus, we participated in a data gathering exercise that is part of getting ready for the search for our new executive minister as Rev. Dr. Marcia Patton is retiring no later than two years from now. Together, we read and responded to the Evergreen mission statement in much the same way that we have often used the Kaleidoscope Bible Study technique in worship. For those who haven't experienced that, it's the use of multiple repetitive readings of a text combined with key questions to consider during the reading and sharing of ideas. We then gave our approval of the 2017 budget with a minimum of wrangling, which is a near miracle for our caucus. We also affirmed the inclusion of four new churches: Washington Kachin Baptist Church (another Seattle-area group of Burmese refugees), Morgan Valley Christian Church (another Utah church leaving ABC-NW), San Francisco Bay-Area Chin Baptist Church (more Burmese refugees), and Mt. Pilgrim Metropolitan Baptist Church (a Black Caucus church in Oakland). We also approved Rev. Jodie Tooley, pastor of United Church of Moscow, Idaho, for another term on the association's ministerial standards and concerns committee.

Have I been giving you the impression that Evergreen has completely grown out of its "unity of grief and fear" phase. Yeah, well, not quite... The final piece of business on the Euro Caucus

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agenda was our approval of the Search Committee as nominated by the leadership team of each caucus. That task wasn't accomplished as easily as it might have been. One Euro delegate suggested, appropriately, that the committee as nominated lacked diversity in age and gender. That request for adjustment sent the caucus into about an hour of debate about how the oversight might be rectified, who was in charge of doing so, and why none of the suggestions brought forward by anybody in the room were ultimately acceptable to everybody. When you do business by consensus, that's a problem. We ultimately ended up presenting our dilemma to the regathered business session and sending all four caucuses back to meet to figure out the White People's Problem. I don't mean to sound snarky but honestly, in my experience, it's the Euro Caucus that still has some folks with serious control issues. And control issues, my friends, tend to stem from fear. But in the end, calmer voices managed to convince everyone that the initial proposal only needed a little tweaking which was well in the purview of the association's executive committee.

I am happy to report that hiccup in the business agenda was the only sour note in the whole weekend. Following that tardy end to Friday afternoon's session, we had a delicious meal provided by our local Chin churches. In fact, those churches provided both our Friday dinner and our Saturday lunch free of charge to attendees. Remember what I said about a unity of hope, affection, and high purpose? What a beautiful illustration of that those meals were! Consider that here were two groups of still-fairly-recent refugees, some still without appropriate employment, none with much in the way of tangible assets, who volunteered to provide the meals for all who gathered. And good food it was, too! Our Chin sisters and brothers still feel such gratitude to those who sponsored their immigration, helped them get settled, and helped them establish their congregations, that they gave, like the widow at the Temple, out of their poverty. There's that theme of gratitude coming around again...

Worship services at our annual meetings are always glorious. This group of Baptists loves to sing and we really cut loose on old favorite hymns. There are always moving prayers in a variety of languages and Scripture readings, likewise. We have also, over the years, enjoyed the work of some of the finest preachers in American Baptist life and this year was no exception. Rev. Susan Sparks is rather unique. As the pastor of Madison Avenue Baptist Church in the heart of Manhattan, she is the only female stand-up comic with a pulpit. She's also a former lawyer and, like me, a recovering Southern Baptist. "Her work with humor, healing and spirituality," and I'm quoting now from Madison Avenue Baptist's website, "has been featured in O (The Oprah) Magazine, the New York Times, and on such networks as ABC, CNN, and CBS. A featured blogger for Huffington Post and Psychology Today, Susan's first book, [Laugh Your Way to Grace: Reclaiming the Spiritual Power of Humor](#), was named one of the best spiritual books of 2010 and has sold over 20,000 copies." It's now on my Amazon wish list, in case anybody's looking for a birthday present for me in two weeks. Check with Connie first, though.

In addition to being funny, Rev. Sparks is a truly inspired and inspiring preacher. On Friday night, her text was II Corinthians 6:1-2: "As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For (God) says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" She reminded us that the junk we carry around must be discarded so that the

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grace of God for us is not given in vain. Once we let go of old brokenness and mistakes, one might say of grief and fear, then God can turn the nasty stuff we toss on our mulch pile into good, rich soil.

We also heard from Rev. Sparks yesterday morning, when her theme was “Running with the Horses,” drawn from Jeremiah 12:1, 2, & 5: “You will be in the right, O Lord, when I lay charges against you; but let me put my case to you. Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive? You plant them, and they take root; they grow and bring forth fruit; you are near in their mouths yet far from their hearts... (God’s reply?) If you have raced with foot-runners and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you fall down, how will you fare in the thickets of the Jordan?” We get too caught up in little things and wear ourselves out dealing with them. Then, just as in God’s admonition, we are too tired to deal with big things. We can’t run with the horses if we get involved in every footrace. Or, as Susan Sparks quipped, “WJSHToT? Would Jesus spend his time on this?” And she wasn’t even in the Euro Caucus meeting on Friday.

The remainder of Saturday morning was given over to small group workshops and, as usual, there were so many that sounded interesting that I was hard pressed to make a choice. I ultimately decided to attend one entitled “Future Church” led by Rev. Glynis LaBarre, transformation strategist with American Baptist Home Mission Societies, and, I was amused to learn, yet another Baptist from the South. She had some very interesting ideas about doing ministry alongside the Millennial Generation as they change the nature of “doing church.” In interests of time, I won’t go into detail here, but some of those ideas will likely come up in our strategic planning sessions. Suffice it to say, those of us who are over 35 need to remember that although the core values of that generation are in general actually in alignment with our own values, they tend to have a different approach that is far less concerned with institutions and far more concerned with relationships.

We closed our time together with that Sacred Conversation on Gun Violence I mentioned earlier. In addition to those thoughtful words from President George W. Bush which I quoted, we heard a part of President Obama’s speech from that same memorial service in Dallas. Let me quote just a bit of that: “I am reminded of what the Lord tells Ezekiel: I will give you a new heart, the Lord says, and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. That’s what we must pray for, each of us: a new heart. Not a heart of stone, but a heart open to the fears and hopes and challenges of our fellow citizens... That’s what we must sustain. Because with an open heart, we can learn to stand in each other’s shoes and look at the world through each other’s eyes... With an open heart, we can abandon the overheated rhetoric and the oversimplification that reduces whole categories of our fellow Americans not just to opponents, but to enemies... With an open heart, we can worry less about which side has been wronged, and worry more about joining sides to do right.”

And, I would say, with an open heart, we can leave behind the unity of grief and fear, the unity those lepers showed until they didn’t need each other anymore. With an open heart, we can embrace the unity of hope and affection and high purpose. That’s what Evergreen is doing and we’ve become a new model for Baptist life, one that American Baptists all over the nation are watching with curiosity and longing. I’m so grateful for the wisdom of the leaders of this

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congregation who opted into the new region back in 2002. In Evergreen, we have discovered new ways of translating our unity to the world, a unity, as Cyprian of Carthage wrote in our hymn, that makes many lightbeams into one light in Christ, a unity that gathers us like grain on scattered hillsides and makes of us one bread, one body.

For the unity in Christ brought by the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, thanks be to God.