

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for World Communion, October 2, 2011
Lessons: Isaiah 44:1-9 and Matthew 8:5-13

WORLD COMMUNION AND PEACEMAKING IN BRIDGE TOWNE

This town is Bridgeton, perhaps historically Bridge Towne, because we quite literally depend upon bridges to hold us together. This summer, after the August 14 deluge, we learned anew the importance of the bridges. I drove twenty-seven miles to get to Regional Medical Center. That's three times the normal distance. Bridges were out, and roads had crumbled. We had lost bridges I had not even realized were bridges because the streams (or "runs" such as Beebe Run) had been hidden beneath the roadway until they suddenly swelled and made their presence quite clearly known.

This morning, we dedicate our annual Peacemaking Offering, dating back to 1980 when the Presbyterian Church adopted and put into action a report titled, "Peacemaking, the Believer's Calling."¹ As followers of Jesus who entrust our lives and hopes to him, we are chosen and called to serve as peacemakers. There are, however, two radically different ways to go about the task of making peace. The more popular way conquers and silences the opposition. The result is an imposed peace, which is a contradiction. Imposed peace is not peace at all but is like a bandaged wound that has not been disinfected. Any apparent healing is false, and there is more serious trouble coming as the infection deepens and spreads. The other way of making peace is by building bridges which in human relations often means becoming a bridge between people or groups in conflict.

The world builds walls to keep people apart. Churches are called to build bridges to span the divides that separate people from each other and, therefore, from God. Why also from God? Here's the mystery: God is always on the other side of the wall built to keep people apart. How can that be so? Doesn't God have to be on one side of the wall and, therefore, not on the other? No, that's not the way it works, because the question of where God is to be found is always relational, never absolute. The Bible speaks of God only in relation to the people: God with us, God for us, God angry at us or grieved over us, God calling us home. So, when we wall each other out, *God for us* is on the other side of the wall we have build. It's not a hard concept if we let ourselves think in terms of love. When grownup sisters or brothers have fought and estranged themselves from each other, where are their parents? They are emotionally and relationally on the other side of the wall from each, calling for it to be broken down.

God is like the Parent. The children are divided against each other. *Which side are you on, God?* The answer: “I’m on the other side, of course.” *The other side from which of us, God?* “From each of you, my children. I’m on the other side from each of you as long as you remain estranged from each other. Don’t you see? When you persist in being alienated from each other, you alienate yourselves from me. You’re keeping me on the far side of the wall from each of you.”

The centurion is Jesus’ enemy, a battle-hardened commander of a hundred soldiers.² The centurions were not the officers sitting away from the front where the soldiers clashed and killed each others; they were the leaders in the thick of the fighting holding their men together. When a centurion said, “Stop,” the soldiers stopped, “Go,” the soldiers went. The Roman legions were known for their discipline. Being who he is, Jesus responds to the soldier of his people’s enemy by agreeing to go to the man’s house and heal his servant, but being who he is, the centurion sees no need for Jesus to go there in person because his word will be enough. Jesus is dumbfounded. His own people are demanding signs and proofs, but all this stranger, his enemy, wants is his word.

I wonder how angry and disgusted the people on Jesus’ side of the wall might have become when he called the centurion’s faith greater than theirs. We practice contempt for the people we wall out of our lives. We train ourselves and our children to look upon them as disgusting. A recent study suggests that religious disgust literally puts a bad taste into our mouths. People who self-identified as Christian were asked to copy by hand passages from the Qur’an and from Richard Dawkins’s book that attacks faith in God. Before writing, they were given a beverage to drink, and after having copied the passage, they were given another beverage. The second drink they identified as disgusting to the taste, but it was really the same beverage as the first. Copying by hand from the Qur’an or from Dawkins had physically put a bad taste into their mouths, a disgusting taste. That reaction is what we are up against if we respond to Christ’s call to be peacemakers.³

In Roman society, it was considered extremely boorish and low-class even to mention crucifixion in polite company. The very purpose of crucifying someone was to make the person shameful and disgusting in the eyes of others. It was Rome’s way of taking out the human garbage. So, Jesus became disgusting with all the people considered human garbage, the trash of society.

As our national politics heat up for election time, we have been hearing cries of enraged disgust, and much of the propaganda flying around has been aimed at arousing disgust toward other groups of people in American society. The poor, as always, are most easily targeted, as are people of other so-called “race,” sexual orientation, religion, or native language. It’s like the crucifixion mentality of ancient Rome: make the other person or other

group appear disgusting. Put a bad taste in people's mouths so that even what is really the same, the common needs and feelings of human beings, now tastes disgusting when it belongs to "them," like the second beverage which was really just the same as the first.

"Taste and see that the LORD is good." Communion is the taste of redemptive love, willing to sacrifice himself for us and all the world's people. But wait, didn't Jesus suffer pain, humiliation, and death itself for the sake of the special people on the right side of the wall? No, for all of us, he suffered for the sake of the people on the *other side* of the wall. He was executed outside the holy city with all kept outside the holy.

Bridgeton needs bridges. Do we ever! And not just over the Cohansey River and all the little runs that can rip out roads when they swell. As followers and companions of Jesus, we are called to build bridges over human divides, which will sometimes mean reaching out and becoming the bridge. There is risk because reaching out to those deemed disgusting can contaminate us in the eyes of those on our side of the river. Yes, that's what belonging with God's Crucified One does. But God remains the Parent whose heart is always across the divide that separates God's children, and like a parent, God is not healed in the heart until the wall is breached or the gap spanned. Peacemaking is not light work, but Jesus still says to us, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." Amen.

Notes:

1. "Peacemaking: the Believer's Calling, <http://oga.pcusa.org/publications/peacemaking.pdf>
2. I have found several articles which indicate that a "century" of soldiers commanded by a centurion rarely came up to the full nominal 100 men, but the title remained. Centurions also seem to have borne various levels of rank and prestige, but they were leaders in the thick of battle.
3. Primarily, http://uofisocialcognitionlab.x10.mx/Papers/Ritter_Preston%28inpress%29.pdf
See also:
<http://www.montrealgazette.com/life/Moral+disgust+carries+foul+flavour+researchers/5465880/story.html#ixzz1ZGhT8hoO>