

Being Together

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

February 7, 2021

Isaiah 40:21-31

Psalms 147

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last year my wife and I took a vacation in New Mexico and Arizona, and while we were there, we visited the Grand Canyon. It was my first visit, and all I can say is, "Wow!" What an amazing place the Grand Canyon is! Of course, we had seen photos of it but nothing before prepares you for the experience of seeing it in person - it really is one of the wonders of the world. We were fortunate to have a tour guide take us around the perimeter of the Canyon, so we could admire the depth and breadth of it from many different vantage points.

Our tour guide had a fund of stories to tell us, as well. The one I liked best was about the European explorers who encountered the Grand Canyon for the first time. Were they as amazed as we were? Apparently not. Their reaction was less that of wonder and more of annoyance - as they carved a path through the forest, the Grand Canyon was nothing more than a giant hole in the ground, preventing them from traveling onwards.

I guess it all depends on your point of view. What is in our way, and what prevents us from getting to the other side? I thought of the Grand Canyon afterwards as a suitable analogy for our current political situation. Sometimes it feels as though the country is divided into two camps, and in between there is a yawning chasm. The question which arose at our last Bible Study meeting was: "what can we do about it?"

That's a question which will remain a live one for Christians in the coming years. The reason being is that in a church you have to get along with your neighbor. In the world of social media, you can get by without neighbors who have differing viewpoints. Your internet friends can share your own preferences, likes and dislikes. And if, by chance, someone says something that crosses the line? There is a solution - they can be unfriended, blocked or canceled in some other way.

In church, however, you don't have the luxury of being able to surround yourself with people who think the same as you. If someone doesn't share your political point of view, you can't simply expel them for it, although some churches carelessly demonize those whose political views don't match those of the Rector's. This *is* a political question, only because it seems that today *everything* we say or do has a political connotation. It's an unhealthy trend in our society, so we can either give in to it or do something about it. Are Christians simply to fall in line, or do we have something different to offer?

Our Bible Study group was reading St Paul's letter to the Philippians. One of the themes of the letter is that of "sharing", of belonging in community. The Greek word is *koinonia*, which roughly translated means "fellowship." We learn from Paul's letter that in the church in Philippi there is disagreement between two of the church leaders, and Paul is asking the other members of the church to help them, as Paul writes, "to be of the same mind in the Lord." It's somehow reassuring to note that the early Christian churches had their disagreements as much as we do now. We don't know what this particular disagreement was about - all we

know is that Paul is encouraging them to find ways to see eye to eye. Paul knew that division harms the church, and that a divided church attracts few converts.

I want to come back to this question in a moment, but first let's look at our gospel reading this week, because there is an aspect of it which casts a light on our primary question of learning how to get along with each other. Last week, you will remember, Jesus entered the synagogue, astounded people with his teaching and cast out a demon. Today we hear him doing more works of healing: first, Simon's mother-in-law, and then the people of the city who visit him at the house of Simon's mother-in-law. Jesus heals many who were sick.

The first thing we can note about this early account of Jesus' ministry is that we do not hear any teaching. Our first impressions of Jesus are based not on what he says, but on what he does. Jesus is a healer, and a good one. We also note that he is not seeking publicity, but wishes to spread the gospel through works of charity - in the original meaning, of loving works done for the benefit of others.

Also, Jesus does not begin in Jerusalem, but instead ministers in what we would call rural districts, or out of the way places. It underlines the humble nature of Jesus' ministry, which Jesus further confirms when he forbids the demons he releases from spreading his name abroad. There is an important lesson for us in all of this, which takes us back to my original question about our current situation: "What can we do about it?"

Let's start by looking at the world in two different ways, one of which is at the macro level and the other, the micro level. At the macro level, we see the big picture: wars, injustice, the opioid epidemic, Covid, businesses failing, people dying, and a polarized nation that makes us feel unsafe together. The macro view of the world has typically, throughout the centuries, been a negative one. The Bible is filled with prophecies warning the people about impending doom, brought on by their sinful and idolatrous ways. In surveying the macro view of the world, we can often feel helplessly caught up in the sweep of history. I am so small, and the problems so vast and intractable. It is easy to become depressed and to lose hope.

Another way of looking at the world is to take the micro view, which is to focus on things in your own back yard. If one of our chief concerns today are the divisions between people, is there anything in my small patch that I can do to make a difference? At our Bible Study, this was one of the questions that we discussed, and I gave the answer that each person should imagine that they have a garden which they must tend. But now I would like to expand this analogy by saying that, rather than seeing this garden as mine, instead to see it as part of a larger field, where beside me are people also digging the earth, and that together we are working in God's field, to nurture and grow the fruit from the seeds of faith which God has scattered among us.

It may be only one field in a large country, but it is the one we have here at St Martha's. To all intents and purposes, the field is our world, and the success of our venture depends on our being able to work together. Again, let's hear St Paul's advice, which is relevant here: "Be of one mind in the Lord." The key phrase is "in the Lord." Our single most important shared identity is in Christ. In another letter Paul says, "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Last week I spoke about acknowledging the authority of Jesus. This isn't about giving away your freedom to speak or act in the way you want. It isn't about giving away your power to be the person God has called you to be. It's about understanding where your own authority comes from. Acknowledging Jesus' authority means to accept responsibility for your own words and deeds in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In other words, are my words and actions building the community of faith, or creating divisions? To live in Christ means to come out of the shadows of hatred, fear and anger, and live in the light of mercy, forgiveness and love. How do we do this? If God is "this", and I am not "this", then in what way can I move closer to God and live under the authority of Christ?

We do that by following Christ, as he commanded. In this morning's gospel Christ showed us what it means to be an agent of healing, rather than of division. When Christ was healing the people brought to him, he didn't ask them first what they thought of the Roman occupiers, or what they thought of the Zealots, or what they thought of the Temple authorities. He wasn't interested in what side of the political spectrum they stood on. He already knew how divisive such categories can be. Instead, he welcomed them, touched them and healed them because of his love for humanity. Christ taught us that we are all loved by God and worthy of love. That is how we are to treat one another, as Christians.

You know, we have a great opportunity to show the world what it means to live together in peace and concord under one authority, who is Christ the Lord. The psalmist writes, "how good and pleasant it is when people live together in unity." This is our calling, to learn to live and work alongside each other, and accentuate the virtues which bind us, rather than the opinions which can alienate us from each other. It's a hard calling sometimes, because we want to know that we are right in all things, but part of our submitting to the authority of Christ is to acknowledge the wisdom of Christ's way of living. That means to welcome our neighbors and treat them according to our common humanity, as Christ does.

That's the micro answer to the question, "what can we do?" As for the macro answer, start by believing that we aren't really powerless at all, because our true power comes from God, and it is a power of love in the world, focused on healing and making good what is broken in our society. Of course we want to focus on the poor and needy, but first we have to get our own house in order. This is particularly true if we want others to join us. When they come here, what will they find? I hope you will welcome them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no other demand on them, except that they will pray with you and learn to follow Christ, in whom is all glory, now and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Father David Beresford