

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

July 19, 2009
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Ephesians 2:11-22

One in Christ

As in many other professions, the summer is a time to pursue continuing education and professional development events for those working in the church. Our organists, Alison and Joanna, attended the American Guild of Organists conference in Seattle earlier this summer. Our bell choir director, Pat, is currently attending a summer conference in Arizona on the art of handbell ringing. Russell, our choir director is also off to a conference in the midwest this summer. So while the summer is definitely a time for a change of pace, for vacations and such, the change in routine also allows time to get away and pursue some study and professional brushing up.

This summer I participated in two very different continuing education events. Both were excellent, stimulating experiences where I heard some great speakers, engaged in spirited conversations with others, and where I met a variety of people from different places across the country. Each of these events was a week long and required me to travel fairly far to get there. Interestingly enough, each of these events this year was made available to me free of charge, as long as I provided my own transportation to and from the venue.

One of them was similar in format to many others I've attended over the years. I just returned on Wednesday from a week at Hastings College in Nebraska where I participated in the annual Omaha Presbyterian School for Pastors—an event I had not previously attended. This school is made available to Presbyterian pastors from across a 13 state region in the middle of the U.S. There were four distinguished seminary professors who preached and spoke throughout the week to the approximately 100 students. And indeed the classes themselves were reminiscent of my own seminary classes back in the early 80s. One class interested me in particular and I'll tell you a bit about it in just a few moments.

But before I do that I want to mention the other event I attended that was unlike any continuing education experience I've ever had. I was first nominated and then chosen to attend the National Security Seminar at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania the first week of June. I was one of 150 or so civilians from all walks of life from across the country who joined the War College students during their last week of classes before they graduated with their masters degrees. For 5 days I heard nationally recognized leaders from within as well as outside of the U.S. military. I joined in the discussions and conversations with a seminar group consisting of senior officers, most of whom are in the Army, but the other military branches were also represented along with two international fellows, one from the United Arab Emirates army, and one from the Phillipines army. The purpose for civilian input and participation is twofold. It allows the civilians to experience and witness the training of senior officers from the inside. It allows this part of the Army to present itself and help us learn directly without it being filtered through the media. The second reason for our participation is for the War College students to get some input and insight from those outside of the military on a wide range of issues. By the time a student matriculates at the War College he or she has been in the military for at least 12-15 years and may have become disconnected from the larger society—living

in a military bubble of sorts. So there was a genuine interest on the part of the students to hear the perspective and commentary that the civilians have to offer. It was a fascinating week for me and I surely greatly expanded my understanding of and appreciation for the work of the officers in our U.S. military. One bonus was an amazing 6-hour tour of Gettysburg led by an expert on the Battle of Gettysburg.

As I pondered the scripture reading for today's service, I found that my thinking and reflecting had both of these continuing education events come to mind. It's interesting to note that while the school is named the U.S. Army War College, many of the publications that bear that name have a tag line that almost follows as a sort of subtitle, "Not to promote war but to preserve peace." Peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace preservation are all at the front and center of the curriculum and teaching at the college. While war is an eventuality for which preparations must be made, it is to be avoided by the use of many other strategies and tactics. It was clear to me that there is a high value on peace at the U.S. Army War College.

Peace is something for which we long. True and lasting peace while frustratingly elusive at times, is nevertheless one of those ideals to which humans strive. While we may find that some of our basest emotions and impulses may move us toward aggressive behavior at odds with peace, at a more profoundly human level, at our best, peace and concord, cooperation and community are ideals to which we strive and for which we long.

Within our faith peace is even more profound which is what is referenced in the letter to the Ephesians in which they are reminded (and in so doing, we're reminded) that peace and reconciliation between disparate human communities has already been accomplished by Christ Jesus. In this case the apostle is speaking of how the divisions between the Jews and Gentiles have been eliminated and erased. The Jews here were the people of God who had come to believe in Jesus, but who have been in relationship with God through the history leading up to the coming of Jesus—it's what we read about in the Old Testament in our Bibles. And in this case the Gentiles are those who have come to believe in Jesus but had not been part of the Jews previously. The conflict arose over who could become Christians. Could anyone become a Christian, or did you have to first be a Jew who came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah? The declaration here is that with the coming of Jesus there is no longer any distinction of the sort. "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." (Eph. 2:14)

At a very basic level, this conflict was really about who was better than the other. It's a human sin that creeps into our thinking and relationships. It did back then and it happens today. Have you ever heard it said that there are some churches that are more faithful than others? Or have you heard that there are some Christians who are more authentic than others?

Last year our own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) lost 34,340 members in 25 congregations nationwide that left our denomination for other denominations. These losses are the result of a rupture of the peace that is referenced by the apostle in Ephesians, a failure to recognize and acknowledge the oneness that we have in Jesus who again, "broke down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

A key word in this passage is in the very beginning in verse 11, “So then, *remember*” Use of the word “remember” is a powerful reminder that the reconciliation and peace that Jesus brought has already happened. It’s not being prophesied or predicted. It’s not being suggested as a worthy goal toward which to strive. It has happened with the coming of Jesus into the world. It is the new reality that we have in Jesus.

How easy it is for us to fall back into old ways and patterns. How easy it is for us to distinguish ourselves—especially in light of the failings or weaknesses that we perceive in others, whether they be true or not. This passage on reconciliation is humbling in that it shakes us awake from our narrow myopia and places us again in our place in the larger context that is the church of Christ Jesus.

As wonderful as that reminder of this truth is, there is something even more remarkable in what is said here. It was to do with the dwelling place of God. And that brings me to the event I attended last week at Hastings College.

Professor Anna Case-Winters, of McCormick Theological Seminary, was one of the faculty members who last week spoke on the topic, “Science and Christian Theology: The Big Questions.” In one of her lectures she spoke of how scientific inquiry and research in no way need be seen as a threat to our Christian faith. In fact, increasingly these two fields can be understood to be in tandem with one another. Nowhere was this more apparent to me than when she spoke to us about the advancements in astronomical research that looks back in time by studying the light that is streaming toward us in the night sky. I say look back in time, because if the light we see is coming from stars that are millions of light years away, the light that we see began its journey toward us millions of years ago. So what we see is what happened those millions of years ago. Furthermore, there is increasingly conclusive evidence that our universe is expanding at an increasing pace. This expansion, astronomers suggest, began at a single point in time in a single place hence the term the Big Bang. From a theological standpoint, that moment and that place was the moment and location where our Creator God was at work. She also pointed out that with the power of the Hubble telescope and the analysis it provides, astronomers are now capable of seeing to the outer edge of the universe, and beyond. The power of this telescope is such that it can see farther than there is anything to see. And beyond that universe edge is nothing, absolutely nothing, the nothingness into which the universe is expanding.

For Christian believers this knowledge of the incredible awesomeness of the universe is cause for awe and wonder of the God who is the source of the cosmos themselves.

But coming back to Ephesians there is one more gem of understanding that is on par with the discovery of the edges of the universe. And that is the declaration that the dwelling place of God is not in the Jewish Christians, and not in the Gentile Christians, but rather in the new community that is made up of all who look to Jesus. This breaking down of the wall that divides is not a breaking down where one side of the wall wins and the other side capitulates. It is rather a breaking down of the wall to welcome all into a new community, made one with God and one with another.

That’s the true definition of the church. We have come to think of the church as a place and a location and a building to which we come. But these physical structures really

only serve to house the church—the church that is you and me and all those others who we know and don't know that makes us one.

The peace that we have in Jesus is the peace that emanates from our God who loves the cosmos so much that we no longer need live alone and estranged but together in relationship and community, one in Christ.