

C Proper 9

St. Stephens, Belvedere

July 3, 2016

Not Walls, But Bridges

“I have a rocket in my pocket, I have no time to play;

Oops! There it goes! I burnt my toes! It’s Independence Day!”

Before we reflect on Making America Great Again (does this sound familiar?) I would like our attention to remain on the gospel that we have just heard proclaimed.

In the portion of the gospel according to St. Luke that we just heard—the beginning of Chapter 10-- Jesus is sending out 70 emissaries to do what he has been doing: proclaiming and acting out God’s love for all people.

Last Sunday’s gospel was the beginning of chapter 9 of Luke in which Jesus sent out the twelve. First it was just Jesus. Then it was twelve more. Now it is 70 more. So it seems that additional forces are needed to accomplish the task. By extension you might say that we ourselves are among the latest addition to the troops.

There is a great deal of overlap in Jesus’ instructions to the 12 he sends out, and also to the 70; they are travel light—no purse, no knapsack, even go barefoot—and eat whatever is set before them. Do you know what vegetarian Buddhist monks eat when they are traveling? -Whatever is set before them. Jesus’ disciples are to do the same. It’s like the Buddhist principle of “No Fuss.” The focus is to be on the message—not upon us.

There is a second aspect of the literary context of today’s gospel that is significant: It is preceded and then followed by references to a group of people that Jesus’ hearers loved to hate: the misguided apostates called “Samaritans.”

When in the verses just before today’s reading, disciples report to Jesus that a town of Samaritans had rebuffed them, these miffed disciples ask Jesus’ permission to call down fire

from heaven to annihilate those who rejected them. Jesus' response: Jesus rebukes his disciples, and goes on.

The next reference to these scorned Samaritans is the one we will hear next Sunday: Jesus tells a parable which up-ends his hearers' expectations. In the parable, the supreme models of Jewish religion (a priest and Levite) are rebuked and the hero of the story to be emulated turns out to be none other than a reviled Samaritan.

I believe that there are three things that we may learn from this.

The first, in Jesus sending out others to do as he has been doing, it is as if Jesus is saying, "It isn't about me—Rather, it's about you: about how much God loves you and forgives you."

Our "selfie" generation might want to take this into account: It's not about ME—it's about YOU, and how much God loves you. The ultimate point seems to be, not to focus on worshipping Jesus (whatever that might mean) but rather to live as Jesus lived and loved—to go forth and show the love that Jesus lived out.

The second take-away for me from this passage is the peace that is bestowed upon us by accepting God's forgiveness is a peace that is indestructible. I gather this from this instruction of Jesus both to the 12 and then also to the 70, when he says:

"Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house." And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you."

Share your peace. If your peace is not accepted, don't lose it. Don't make the mistake of saying therefore, "The hell with you!" Rather, simply let your offered peace come back to you, and you will be whole as before. (Perhaps this is also an example of the Buddhist principle of "No Fuss.")

The third and final take-away for me from this extended portion of Luke's gospel is: No Enemies. Samaritans are the most extreme example of the sort of people who get under your skin, who repulse you, who stand for everything that you revile. Yet who was it, in Jesus' telling, who proved to be neighbor to the guy who got mugged and left for dead at the side of the

highway? The one who proved to be neighbor was not the priest or the Levite, the bishop or the Episcopalian but rather the Samaritan-- the transgendered person in the restroom cubicle next to yours, the Muslim, the Trump supporter.

If we do not find Jesus to be shocking, then we have not rightly understood his message. If we do not find Jesus to be sometime offensive and unsettling, then we have not yet begun to live his gospel.

Now I would like to back up from these reflections on today's gospel lesson, to ask what this gospel might have to say to us especially on this weekend in which annually we observe the birthday of our nation. What do we do on a loved one's birthday? We celebrate their life and give thanks for them. July 4 is the Uncle Sam's birthday, and so today we pause to give thanks for the blessings of our nation. Here is how I propose to do this....

On a recent sailing voyage I noticed that my shipmate and good friend who is a voracious reader (even in the most lumpy seas!) was reading a hardcover book on religion and the United States Constitution. Since I realize that this topic of religion and the Constitution can be a hot-button issue for some people, I looked somewhat cautiously at the dustjacket of the book and I saw that the name of the Texas publisher of the book was "Wallbuilders."

"Wall builders." This name seemed to me to be somewhat unsettling. I suppose that I have always been more drawn to BRIDGE builders, than to WALL builders.

After all, so much of the thrust of Jesus' ministry and of Christian faith seems to me to be more about building bridges-- bridges connecting heaven and earth, bridges connecting people who are otherwise estranged from God and from one another. Indeed, at the heart of our worship is the ritual and the experience not of a wall but rather of a Holy Communion. The very word "religion" has as its etymological root the Latin work "ligio"—as in "ligament"—that ties things together, that allows various body parts to work together to accomplish what they were designed to accomplish.

I wonder if any of you recall poet Robert Frost's poem, "Mending Wall"? This is a brief poem that begins with the line: "Something there is that does not love a wall...." And speaks of the winter frost that swells the earth and heaves the stone walls of New England, toppling the stones upon the ground.

"Something there is that does not love a wall"—the effect of this line was electric when Frost recited it live in Moscow in the days of the Berlin Wall. The more so when, at the poem's conclusion he returned to consider:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
 What I was walling in or walling out,
 And to whom I was like to give offence.
 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
 That wants it down.

Contrasting walls—that separate us from others—with bridges—that connect us with others, it must be admitted that walls are important. Walls are essential to having a home. You can't just have a roof, you also need to have walls to hold it up and enclose the interior space. But walls can also make a prison or a fortress.

Maintaining appropriate boundaries is an essential requirement for a healthy person. Or a healthy nation. But walling one's self in and walling others out can be a recipe for disaster—whether one is a person or a nation.

Voters in Great Britain—as well as elsewhere—seem to be shocked that they voted to put up a wall. The Brits seek to separate themselves from Europe and from the hordes of displaced migrants seemingly banging on their door. This move echoes voices in our own country who would wall out immigration and foreign manufactures.

The alienation of those wanting to wall out what threatens them was poignantly expressed by David Axelrod when he pointed out, in response to Brexit, that:

There's a fundamental issue that all developed economies have to confront, which is that globalization and technological changes have meant that millions of people have seen their jobs marginalized and wages decline. And so lots of folks want to turn the clock back and make America, or their country, great again."

Are not these some of people—whether those who “feel the Bern” or wave the flag-- to which we need to build bridges?

As bridge-builders instead of wall-builders, when we consider what it would mean to make American Great Again, I think of the lines that are inscribed on our front door, in New York harbor, on the pedestal that supports Lady Liberty who was herself a gift to us from another nation:

"Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

It seems more important now than ever to remember that the Statue of Liberty holds a torch—not a musket.

As Christians, Jesus sends us out just as he sent first the 12 and then the 70, to be witnesses to God's love for all people—but especially for those who are dispossessed, and most in need of a word of welcome and acceptance.

It is this word of welcome and acceptance that Jesus speaks to each one of us this morning, as he invites us – whoever we are—to come to the Table of his grace.