



5 PENTECOST (PROPER 9)

14 Ordinary
4 July 2004

Isaiah 66:10-14
Psalm 66:1-8
Galatians 6:(1-6) 7-16
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

It's happened more times than I can begin to count. I'm in some sort of social or professional setting and somehow it comes up that I'm a Christian—and all of a sudden a heavy and embarrassed silence falls into the middle of the conversation. To further admit that I am an ordained member of the clergy is, in these settings, somewhat akin to announcing that I have a particularly noxious form of a highly contagious and perhaps lethal disease. The thing is, I understand this reaction. I'm also inclined to suspicion when I hear someone else identify her- or himself as a Christian.

Nor am I alone in this. My mom worked in Campus Ministry back in the days when state universities distributed religious census cards. Among my mom's tasks was sorting these religious census cards by denomination or tradition. There were piles for Lutherans—then broken down according to LCA, ALC, WS, and LCMS. And there were Baptist piles, Southern and American; a Roman Catholic pile; an African Methodist Episcopal pile; Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jewish piles; and so on and so forth. Then there were the cards where students classified themselves generically as "Christian." "What do I do with the Christians?" Mom asked. "Be afraid," one of her bosses said, "be very afraid. They're the ones who will tell you that unless you behave and believe *their* way, you're going straight to hell, do not pass *GO*, do not collect \$200.00."

It is of course sloppy thinking to make such a huge generalization about those who call themselves "Christian." It is, however, a generalization that does have some grounding in both the past and present. It is, after all, so-called Christians that have made the lives of our Jewish brothers and sisters a living hell for the past two-thousand years. It was European Christians that terrified Muslims during the Crusades and burned at the stake free-thinkers of any sort during the Inquisition. And it was at the behest of the Christian rulers of the "old world" that the native inhabitants of the "new world" were baptized at the point of a sword—"be baptized, or off with your head."

Nor are Lutherans off the hook by any means. There are those for whom the term Lutheran means swastikas, goose-stepping soldiers, and the smell of incinerating flesh. More than a few Lutherans found fuel for their anti-Semitism in the bitter and senile rantings of the aged Martin Luther. This has led the Lutheran World Federation to denounce all of Luther's anti-Jewish writings and to ask for the forgiveness of all who have suffered as a result of Luther's intemperate rants.

In our own time too, there are far too many who have experienced Christianity to be an intolerant tradition and Christians as strident, angry, judgmental people intent on stamping out any and all forms of thought, conviction, and teaching that do not conform to their interpretations of a supposedly infallible book or infallible leader—that includes Martin Luther.

And I must confess to God Almighty in the presence of you my brothers and sisters, that I too think vengeful, condemnatory thoughts about those children of God who do not conform to *my* particular understanding of the Christian faith—many of whom are headquartered an hour or so south of here. Yes,

critical assessment of such groups is always in order, but hate and intolerance in the name of justice, mercy, and peace is nothing more or less than to stand judged by the very judgment one has cast upon another.

And Jesus sent them out in pairs. He said to them, “Whatever place you enter, say, ‘Peace to this place.’ Those who are people of peace will receive your greeting of peace. But if that peace isn’t well-received, no matter—my peace is still with you. Wherever you go, care for the sick and the outcast and say to people that the reign of God—the God of unconditional love and forgiveness—is upon you. But if they do not receive you, *your* only protest is merely to shake the dust off your feet and move on.”

There is in Jesus’ commissioning of disciples and apostles no room for condemnation, no room for intolerance, and no room for judging the faith of another. There is no room whatsoever for baptizing anyone at the point of the sword, for burning at the stake people who think different or unusual thoughts, and there is certainly no room for annihilating people of different races, creeds, colors—be they Jewish, Native American, or Muslim.

Jesus speaks: “When you go out, say ‘Peace to this place.’ Cure the ills of society. Embrace the outcast. Bring the reign of God’s unconditional love and mercy near to others.”

When Jesus says this, it is not a command, it is not a law, it is not a list of “shoulds.” Rather it is a description of who we are. It is a description of what every one of you became in God’s eyes when you were baptized. You are the disciples and apostles whom Jesus sends. You are people who spread peace, healing, grace, and mercy wherever you walk. And like Christ, in whose image you are reborn, we will not lift a hand in vengeance when your words of grace, mercy, and peace are rejected—like the Christ of God, we too would rather die than be known as a vengeful and rejecting people. The only thing to do when grace, mercy, and peace are rejected is to walk with Christ to the cross and pray there, “God, forgive them.”

And so, I announce to you this day: The reign of God is here, now, in this very house—where Christ appears, giving to you his body and blood that you and the whole world may know that your sins and the sins of all humanity are now forgiven.