

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship

July 19, 2009

Anita Rediger

The Household (of God)

One of the delights of traveling is encountering people. Even on an outing to Ft. Wayne, I am aware of being with people whom I have never seen before, and may well never see again. If we travel farther from home this becomes even more apparent.

This summer's opportunity for travel to Greece made me -once again- keenly aware of the many people of the world of whom I do not have awareness of, much less acquaintance with! After departing Ft. Wayne, in the two weeks that I was away, there was only one other person I encountered that I had ever seen before...and I certainly saw plenty of people – in airports, buses and subways!

It's good for us to step out of our usual surroundings and mingle with the people of the world. It's good for us to find ourselves among others who do not share our familiar ways and woes. It's good for us to find ourselves wondering, "Who are these people? Where do they come from? Where do they call home? What are their hopes and dreams, disappointments and desires?" "What's on their minds?" Asking these questions about others often helps us to ask these *same* questions about ourselves! Being with persons of other cultures and experiences challenges us to consider what they might "wonder" about us!

Today's epistle reading from Ephesians brings us into the world of the earliest churches and their invitation to open themselves to folks whom they had always considered "strangers." No longer were they to be living parallel lives – as Gentiles, Jews, slaves, freedmen and Roman citizens. (Maybe something like we do – much more subtly of course- in our own community – with the Amish people, with the "Appalachian" people – keeping safe/comfortable distance – just "knowing" who's one of us and who's not.) This letter goes out to those now knit together with Jesus – those called to be the household of God!

This letter also comes to us, a people knit together with Jesus, "*called to be built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*" (*sign story*) As a household of faith,

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we're looking forward, with great joy, to a service of baptism on August 15. Three of our young people have invited us to share in their profession of faith expressed by baptism.

The next four Sunday's we'll focus on the lectionary readings from Ephesians, a round-robin letter to the early church – a community “*built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.*” These messages from Ephesians are part of our preparation for baptism – not only for Joel, Mia & Alex, but for each one of us in the context of this fellowship to which we belong. By stepping alongside of these early believers we may see **their call** to kingdom work more clearly. As we come alongside of them, may we see **our call** to kingdom work more clearly!

Over the next four weeks, we'll be considering “The Household (of God); The Body (of Christ), The Bond (of Peace) and The Beloved Community.” Today we'll consider the “household” by looking to the first households of the early church. Our reading from Ephesians gives us a descriptive glimpse of life together as the “dwelling place of God.” This “dwelling place” was not an imaginary, mystical “neverland.” It was a *real* household of *real* people in the *real* context of the Roman Empire. Reta Finger (a wonderful traveling companion on my trip to Greece!) notes that in contrast to the USA, with our “ideals” about the equality of all persons (at least the lip-service that we give these values!) *the Romans of the first century [did not embrace such ideals]. The most self-evident truth to the Romans was that people were NOT created equal. You had your place and you stayed in it. If anything, most social movement was downward. At the top was the emperor, then the senators, then the equestrians; all of whom needed to own a certain amount of wealth to keep their status. These groups, along with elites in other cities, comprised perhaps ½ of 1% of the population (Roman Empire). Below them were merchants and people of some wealth, but about 90% of the people lived at or below subsistence. If you happened to be a Roman citizen, you had more privileges than non-citizens. For example (I really like this! ar) if you were condemned to death, you could not be crucified, only beheaded. But throughout the vast Roman Empire, most people were not citizens. Their ethnic groups would have been absorbed into the Empire as*

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conquered peoples. Slaves comprised about a third of the population, with another third freed slaves who were still considered socially beneath free people. Few Jews were citizens, many of them coming from slave background.

Roman households were the economic centers of the Empire and each was a microcosm of the Empire itself, where the oldest male head of the household had complete authority over the rest of the household – his wife, children, slaves and any of his freed slaves who lived nearby. The man had this right because men could think better than women and children and slaves could not think very well, at all. (Upon reaching the age of 12, boys could have authority over their mothers!)

Now think of this hymn-like letter to the Ephesians being read to persons under the authoritarian hand of the Roman Empire. How would have these words jarred their sensibilities about how things work? How does this hymn-like letter, SOUND to us if we lay it alongside the realities of our homes, our places of work and business, life in our broader community and in our country and world?

The epistle to the Ephesians starts out as a message of celebration to be shared among the early Christian communities. It was a message of good news! The chains of a rigid, life-limiting worldview governed by inequalities of power, wealth and status were broken. The tethers of systems founded on the preservation of power and control were undone. Paul proclaims a new way, one of endless possibility. Instead of being held down by the heavy hand of domination and fear, people from all levels of social strata were set free to be in relationship with one another; being in relationship led to sharing of material goods, concern for the welfare of the entire household and the delight of seeing one another as whole persons.

What a contrast to the household order of the Roman Empire! What a contrast to the assumptions which kept Gentiles and Jews at odds with one another! Because of the life and death of Jesus, *now/already*, the dividing walls built by human hostilities could come down. It was a radical message of good news for the early church. This was a

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message of good news that would be lived out in *real* households, with *real* people in the *real* context of the Roman Empire! Just as Jesus had during his earthly sojourn, these simple households would challenge the palaces of Rome and turn everyone's world upside-down!

Looking to the text we see that there was *then*...there was a time when some were labeled as aliens in contrast with those who were citizens. There were outsiders and insiders; there were those who belonged and those who didn't. (If we're really feeling like ones who belong...do we need to check to see if there are some who feel that they don't? Or whose behaviors are telling us- "hey, here I am!" Part of the burden of exclusion is that those who are "in" don't even notice!)

Consider the Temple in Jerusalem – there was an outer fence, about 5 feet tall, that surrounded the Temple Courtyard. It surrounded the inner courts of the consecrated Temple area and was designed to keep Gentiles and other unacceptable people out- such as women and lepers. This fence had pillars with stone tablets carved with this inscription, "A stranger may not continue past this point. He who enters brings a death penalty upon himself." That is, "Stay in your place or it's your own fault if you suffer." (Still sounds familiar! And subtle...blame going to the one excluded...)

Then...there was a "we" and there was a "they." There were those who were near by to God (that is, at least *they* thought they were); there were folks who were far out on the social/religious margins. There was a "then", but because of Jesus' love for *all of them*, there *could* be a "now." The hostilities that arose between diverse groups of people could lose their power. The tensions which held dividing walls in place *could* be resolved and the walls *could* come tumbling down - **if** the way of Jesus would be welcomed. Instead of being labeled Gentile or Jew, outsider or insider, stranger or citizen, slave or free, male or female, from now on, it would be possible to live as "one new humanity," members of the household of God – together. "*But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.* (I read "blood" as the life and death of Christ.) *For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and*

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*has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. Eph. 2:13-14. And this peace was **not** only proclaimed to the “far off.” Rather, “he came and proclaimed peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near.” How did Jesus proclaim this? With his **life**! The Word always becomes flesh! How was the church to proclaim this? With their lives -closely knit with one another, joys and sorrows -shared together. Together with Jesus, they could be “*joined together and grow into a holy temple in the Lord, built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God!*”*

Certainly a reason for rejoicing: differences had been resolved; life together was good! For the time being that is... It also seems to me that one purpose of the letter may have been one of reminder. “So then, remember how it was. Remember the hostilities that you had for one another – simply because you had different stories, differing understandings, different ways...”

The Gentiles understood their relationship to the holy through a pantheon of gods – gods whose impulses and ire weren’t all that much different from their own! Today’s scripture describes the Gentile experience of “being without hope and without God *in the world*.” The Jews had their own struggles, seeking righteousness under the weight of the Law. Many in Diaspora trying to figure out what it meant to live outside of Palestine- seeking to be “faithful” to the law without the Temple.

The letter to the Ephesians, those of early church was a call to remember, that Jesus came - not just to the Gentiles, but also to the Jewish people – offering a new way – a way that didn’t require some to be outsiders so that others could distinguish themselves as insiders. Jesus was as near to one group as to the other – no one could say they had a front row seat or place of greater privilege. No one needed to feel slighted or treated as a “second-class” citizen. The way of Jesus invited everyone to a place in the household, with a seat at the common table. Everyone was invited; it wouldn’t be the same if some were excluded- if some were left out it wouldn’t be the “household of God!”

This encyclical letter celebrated and proclaimed that the chasm between Gentile and Jew had been bridged. Jesus – God with us - bringing peace - to both groups – allowing them to be built together into a dwelling place of God. Yet, the letter also speaks

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as a reminder for the future, “don’t forget the way of Jesus because there will be other hostilities which will likely arise. These hostilities will lead to walls which will divide you. These walls will destroy the household of God.”

Recently, Ben and Alex were in the basement of our neighbors’ home, Jerome and Thelma Flueckiger. Jerome and Thelma are in the process of moving and this house will then become Alex’s home. Ben and Alex were scouting around in the basement and found themselves reading an old newspaper which was underneath jars of canned goods. They came home shaking their heads.

Alex said, “It was a newspaper from 1980, but the headlines talked about unrest in Iran and that Pakistan was concerned about militant uprisings...it’s still the same news today!” (Remember that Alex was born in 1988!) Hostilities continue to arise – even when we make progress in some areas. It’s very easy to look to hostilities far away from us and to pass judgment on their causes and what we would envision as solutions. It’s more difficult for us to examine our own selves and community and to be forthright about the hostilities that are alive among us, laying walls of division and fear. And...what about the very hidden hostilities that we may harbor against our own very selves? That gets really close! (Do not our hostilities toward self find their expression in hostility toward others?)

This epistle to the early church was a radical message of good news – **then**. It is a radical message of good news for us **-now**, for us as ERMF, our particular “household of God.” Like at the time of the writing of the letter called Ephesians, we are experiencing the joy of discovering ourselves at home with one another as a “dwelling place” of God. Yet, as our young fellowship grows and matures, as others join with us we will need to remember that fear, unfamiliarity, uncertainties and perhaps even hostilities will arise.

It seems a normal human response. Deep at the core of our physical bodies is a wisdom which distinguishes between what belongs and what doesn’t belong. Foreign tissues and organisms which are introduced to our bodies are usually met with a strong

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statement of rejection. And yes, in that venue this is good. Yet, it seems our emotional default setting offers a similar alarm when we rub shoulders with those who differ from us. It is a challenge for us to respect that which is “other”; not to want to devour or threaten or run!

Can we trust that the Spirit of Christ goes before us preparing the way for a new humanity, continually putting to death the hostilities between us? If we have power and privilege we need to admit it. If we believe that we are the “insiders” how can we awaken to those whom we exclude? In contrast, if we think of ourselves as not having anything to offer, if we’ve been “told” that our voices don’t matter, we are challenged to step out in faith to share the Spirit’s promptings. In this new humanity all belong, everyone matters, everybody sits at the table – or it isn’t the household of God.

For also, deep at the core of our being, is the wisdom of the body and soul which knows that we need/desire that which is “other.” There are biological examples of this, too! We thrive when we are drawn outside of ourselves by art and story. Music and beauty move us beyond the confines of ourselves and we are transformed. We recognize that our lives are enriched by experiences which take us out of our “comfort zones.” Friends enliven us and give us new eyes with which to view life. As men and women, we delight in the discovery of a life’s partner who, many times, is – in so many ways – other!! And yes this is good!

In welcoming that which is “other” we find new dimension in ourselves. In welcoming one another, marveling at God’s creative expressions, we discover ourselves in the household of God.

Jesus’ promise of reconciliation opens the way for us to relate with one another – even with those whom we feel very “other.” Seeing another person through the eyes of Jesus is a very different lens than viewing them through the eyes of sociological labels. Jesus has “broken down the dividing walls, that *is the hostilities* between us.” This seems a different word than that Jesus has broken down the *differences* between us. In the household of God there is room for a great variety of expression and variety; there is, however, no room for hostility. To be members of the household of God we are not

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required to give up our personhood, our insights or our deepest places of knowing. As members of the household of God, we are invited to make room for those who are “other.” We may not be comfortable, but that’s very different from being hostile!

“A church is a place where we try to think, speak and act in God’s way, not in the way of a fear-filled world. A church is a home for love, a home for brothers and sisters to dwell in unity, to rest and be healed, to let go their defenses and be free...free to laugh, free to cry.” William Sloane Coffin

“Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on someone’s dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was there before our arrival.” Max Warren from John & Naomi Lederach’s sermon of February 2009 (see Emmaus Road web-site).

Quote from Reta Finger taken from her sermon of July 12, 2009, Community Mennonite Church. “When in Rome, DON’T do as the Romans!”.