

Emmaus Road Mennonite
July 26, 2009
Anita Rediger

The Body (of Christ)

It's been a wonderful July for open windows – the usual heat and humidity that cause us to shut up the house as if it were a deep winter's night – has been unusually absent. I feel like my mind works better when the windows are open *and* am I ever grateful for the windows in my Swiss Village office! With the windows open I enjoy the outdoor air and the sound of the birds – that is, mostly the chirping of the sparrows! Even if it isn't all that melodic, I like their happy sounds. Just this week I noticed a nest of young sparrows in the lilac bush outside of my window. A couple in the flock could be seen tending fledglings which appeared to be just about ready to fly. With downy wings aflutter, the little ones were taking important next steps, venturing out onto the thin branches of the bush. Even though it is a common sight in every backyard, it is a delight to witness the mother and father birds placing food into the outstretched mouths of their offspring-chicks now nearly as big as their parents! This scene took my thoughts to the nursing care unit. There, young people gently offer spoonfuls of food to old ones; persons totally dependent on others for the essentials of life as they anticipate their own “next steps.” On our Swiss Village campus, both on the outside and on the inside, we have wonderful expressions of care for others!

The scripture is filled with such imagery from creation! Psalms such as Psalm 36 (17, 57, 91) give us descriptive word pictures of God's loving care, inviting us to understand that God's steadfast love - *offered to all people*- is like *taking refuge in the shadow* of a mama bird's *wings*; God's tenderness is described as that of a shepherd – one *who gathers the lambs in His arms, and carries them in his bosom as He gently leads those who are with young.*”.(Isaiah 40:11 NKJV)

“God's steadfast love-*offered to all people...*” “*This is the reason...*” that Paul, in this encyclical letter known as “Ephesians,” declares himself a prisoner of Christ Jesus! Through the years it has been thought that Ephesians was written by Paul -late in his career and from prison cell in Rome. The thought of Ephesians being written from a dungeon only adds richness and irony to this opening sentence of Chapter 3. Paul, perhaps a prisoner of the Roman Empire, perhaps even in stocks and chains... declares himself *not* captive to these powers, rather he writes – and more than once – that he is, Paul, a *prisoner* of Christ Jesus. The reason that he is “captivated” by Jesus is because of the unquenchable power of Jesus' love *offered to all persons*. No longer are some outsiders while others are insiders. No longer are there those that are “far off” and those who are “near by.” As we noted last week, the way of Jesus has the power to break down – not simply that walls that divide us, but the “hostilities” that lead to dividing walls. The walls between individuals, families, church groups, nations and our in relationship to creation, too, crumble when they are tested by the way of life incarnated through Jesus.

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Paul is held captive by this Mystery of Christ, the grace-filled, lordship of Jesus – “*in whom and through faith in whom we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*” (Eph. 3:12 NIV) Paul is a prisoner to one who gives freedom and confidence – how crazy is that! How upside down! (Reference the play “The Upside Down King!”) Isn’t it delightful!

Let’s continue...

Paul describes himself as *prisoner* to this liberating Lord, yet also as his *servant*. His servanthood, however, does not come out from social position- the result of bad luck or indebtedness- that’s all been leveled, that’s all been forgiven. Instead, his posture of servanthood is an expression of thanksgiving for the awareness of a great gift- the gift of grace; the invitation to experience “the boundless riches of Christ.” This experience of grace- **that’s why Paul couldn’t be quiet.** (Revisit Acts 9 experience, also recalling Saul’s participation in the stoning of Stephen.)

Our experience of the *boundless riches of Christ- that’s why we’re here!* We come to worship together, because there really *isn’t any other way to express* our gratitude for the gift of God’s grace in our lives. As part of our weekly worship, we share together in the common meal. We share the cup and the bread together, because *we don’t have words* to express our delight...our joy...our gratitude in **knowing** that each one of us is welcome at this table. “*this is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*” (Eph.3:9-10) In other words, this welcome is for everyone – across the spectrum of human experience – even if those in high places don’t like it! For this is “*in accordance with the eternal purpose God has carried out in Christ Jesus, our Lord.*” (Eph 3:11) And once again, Paul will say “*For this reason...*” “*For this reason, (Paul) I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.*” (Eph 3:14)

On Thursday, it was a wonderful privilege for me to meet with Mia, Joel and Alex. These three young people are requesting that we, the community known as Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship, bear witness to their baptism. We met at Earthen Treasures, enjoying lunch together and talking together about baptism and our upcoming baptismal service. We mused together about this strange act... a group of modern-day people, gathering together, surrounding certain ones as they participate in a service which includes prayers, songs, blessing and baptism with *real* water...water poured over their heads in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit! Why this service?

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Why this act with water? -because there aren't words to express the tender stirrings of the Holy Spirit in our innermost being. Participating in worship with the community of faith, sharing together at the Lord's Table, bowing our knees as we are baptized gives "voice" to the sighs and longings which come from our inmost places, from the place where we *"know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge."* (Eph 3:19)

Holy signs of our incarnate God...made known through unlikely strangers such as Ananias who ventured by faith into an encounter with a blinded Saul; made known by trusted companions on familiar roads; made known in the breaking of the bread, made complete when we share our lives *"rooted and grounded in love."* (Eph. 3:17) Through the power of God's love, fleshed out among us in Jesus – we are *"members together of one body and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus."* (Eph.3.6) It's hard to fathom the wonder of this reality! Could it really be true? Could it be that it's "OK" that *the love of Christ for us- for everyone...surpasses our comprehension...that Christ's power within us really can accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine!!* (Eph. 3:19)

Just as we need more than words to celebrate and share the Spirit of Christ at work within us – individually and as a fledgling faith community - Paul's words of testimony to the richness to God's mercy finally also can't be contained by regular words of prose. A doxology pours from his pen; a prayer of blessing and thanksgiving for the small, scattered house churches across Asia Minor...brothers and sisters, receive them as a blessing for you, for us, as well!

"My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit- not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength – that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all Christians the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God. God can do anything, you know – far more than (we) could ever imagine or guess or request in (our) wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us." (Eph.3:14-20 *The Message*)

"Beyond our small hopes, beyond our small lives, beyond our meager imaginations, God is at work..." - Karen Chakoian "to him be glory in the church (the body of Christ) to all generations, forever and ever, AMEN."

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Quotes:

“It seems to me that in joining a church you leave home and home town to join a larger world. The whole world is your new neighborhood and all who dwell therein- black, white, yellow, red, stuffed and starving, smart and stupid, mighty and lowly, criminal and self-respecting, American or Russian – all become your sisters and brothers in the new family formed in Jesus. By joining a church you declare your individuality in the most radical way in order to affirm community on the widest possible scale.”

William Sloan Coffin, from *Credo* pgs. 142-143.

“My tradition tells me that social institutions should be judged not no how they maximize money and power but on how they maximize love and caring and kindness and generosity and awe and wonder and radical amazement at the grandeur of the universe.”

Rabbi Michael Lerner