

Proper 11B
July 21-21, 2018
St. John's Cathedral

One of the most vivid memories I have of a month-long pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the 1990s was nestled among dozens of visits to amazing places rooted in the Old Testament or the New Testament. But that one was a village founded in 1970. The biblical sites were amazing and inspiring, but so was this place. The Hebrew name of this village is Neve Shalom (or in Arabic Wahat al Salaam) – a term that means oasis of peace.

This tiny village in the hills between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv was the dream of a Dominican priest Bruno Hussar and it is truly unique in Israel. The village is made up of Jews as well as Palestinian Muslims and Christians who have chosen to live together in peace and understanding and to share what they are learning with others. That's quite a tall order in a country where religious and ethnic tensions have been and continue to be intense.

The village has a worship site that is a neutral territory that all three groups use. Their school calendar is planned with all three Sabbaths and major holy days for all three religions in mind. The residents get together regularly for conversations about their life together.

Our host for the day, Daoud, an Anglican, said those conversations are not easy ones. Their pledge to live together peacefully does not erase the difficult issues that surround them in Israel. But everyone who lives there has a commitment to listening, understanding and learning. Each summer the village also hosts a peace camp for young people of all three faith traditions with the hope that those young people will grow into adulthood with a new attitude toward those of other traditions and backgrounds. My impression was that

this was a village that certainly shared physical space, but also shared a kind of holy space that transcends religious differences.

The memory of this village came back to me this week as I read today's lesson from Ephesians -- a section that addresses some of the tension in the early church between Christians who had been part of the Jewish tradition and those who had not. There were questions, of course, about what made one an authentic Christian. Did someone have to adopt all of the traditions of Judaism before being accepted as authentically Christian? Dietary laws? Circumcision? Or was there also room in the Church for those who were simply Gentiles?

Those were not easy questions. A good many chapters of the book of Acts and the epistles address these tensions, developing the story of how the church emerged.

The passage in Ephesians concludes that it is Jesus who "has broken down the dividing wall" between these two groups. Who has reconciled the two into one body, the Church. The language is eloquent and poetic: 'So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.'

No more questions here about who is 'in' and who is 'out.' No more questions about who might be the superior Christians or who might be interlopers. We are one body. Simple as that.

Of course it wasn't all that simple to work out. Tensions remained, but the teaching, the foundation was there: The proclamation that the two groups are reconciled through Christ.

Neve Shalom, of course, has a much different context -- life as an interfaith community. And certainly the tensions among the residents of Neve Shalom are real and

no surprise as they live in a country with both historic and contemporary religious and ethnic tension and conflict. There is no intention at Neve Shalom that everyone share the same religious tradition. Instead there is a hope for a wider and deeper reconciliation where residents can dwell together in respect and peace – honoring the holiness and validity of one another’s religious traditions and inviting others into the understandings they develop.

I think this is worth noting as we live in a time when we have seen religious, ethnic and racial tensions erupt globally, nationally and even locally.

Sadly, examples are easy to come by. For instance, there is an enthusiastically and publicly anti-Muslim candidate running for a county office in Spokane County – one who calls for 24-hour surveillance for Muslims. A little over a week ago of a man shouting racial slurs at a church group of Latino teenagers at a McDonald’s in north Idaho was arrested for a hate crime. This week a sheriff’s deputy in southwest Washington was dismissed for participating in a militant white nationalist group. All of those things are pretty close to home.

This past year has been a time when some racial justice issues that many of us assumed were part of our past in this country surfaced again. White supremacy groups, that likely dwelled in the shadows for years, emerged into the public again. Those of us who lived in this region during the time that the Aryan Nations community in North Idaho was staging Nazi parades shudder with dread with that memory. This seems to be an issue that has not gone away.

Across our nation the rhetoric of political discourse and debate keeps getting notched up, often polarizing the legislative process that is intended to govern with grace and equity.

How, we might ask, does reconciliation happen in the face of all of this?

Reconciliation is about being brought together – gathered out of our diversity, our difference, sometimes even our hostility --- and coming together.

You may recall what our Prayer Book says about the mission of the church. It is “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” (In other words, the mission of the Church is reconciliation – in the widest sense.) This is our job. It’s a big one.

A broader definition of reconciliation, also from our church, speaks of “striving to heal and transform injustice and brokenness in ourselves, our communities, institutions and society.”

It is a huge issue and we wonder what to do – how to begin to engage in new and helpful ways. We’re thankful for those who are already engaged in this: The Spokane Interfaith Council and, specifically Skyler Oberst who have fostered dialogue and hospitality and -- also Spokane Churches Against Racism.

It is no surprise that earlier this month the General Convention of the Episcopal Church chose to address this serious issue, as it has in past conventions, but with new energy and new direction. An ongoing effort toward racial reconciliation called the Becoming Beloved Community offers some amazing resources for conversation, raising awareness and cultivating healing.

And Michael Curry, our presiding bishop, has also outlined and invited us into something called the Way of Love that includes seven spiritual practices to help us share the good news with others. There is a palpable link, I think, between these two movements.

The spiritual practices that are part of the Way of Love are our inner work -- like the physical training we might do to stay in good shape. These spiritual practices are simple things to do daily, (things we might be doing already) . I commend them to you. Here they are.

Turn: pause, listen and choose to follow Jesus

Learn: Reflect on scripture, especially the life and teaching of Jesus

Worship: Gather in community weekly as we are today

Pray: Dwell intentionally with God each day

Bless: Share faith unselfishly; give and serve

Go: Cross boundaries, listen deeply and live like Jesus

Rest: Receive the gift of God's grace, peace and restoration.

A rule of life is a helpful thing. It keeps us in the rhythm of prayer and open to what God calls us to be and do. It's an intentional effort to live our faith: A simple practice that draws us toward God and others. And it also reflects the spirit of our Ephesians reading today that points us toward practicing reconciliation – discovering those places where we are called and equipped to be healers and peacemakers.

The bottom line, I think, is to be assured of the love of God that surrounds us and also to be encouraged to share that love widely and generously.

We trust that Jesus calls us to help break down dividing walls and get on with the work of restoring all people to unity with God and each other. That's a ministry for our time.

It's what the Church is about. It's our mission. Let's get on with it.