

# **Preaching Peace**

A Sermon on Ephesians 2:13-18

Robert W. Bertram

[LSTC Baccalaureate Sermon, June 9, 1985. Later published in Currents in Theology and Mission 13, No. 3 (June, 1986): 155-160. Re-printed with permission.]

Peace be with you!

The graduating class has requested that the sermon this morning should preach "peace."

That is the theme of today's Second Lesson, Ephesians 2:13-18.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ.

For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility,

by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, so making peace,

and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting the hostility to death.

And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near,

for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

## I.

1. There used to be a T-shirt walking around these halls imprinted with a catchy slogan about Des Moines, Iowa. It read, "Des Moines is not the end of the world, but you can see it from there." You might wonder at my reasons for quoting that T-shirt on the occasion of this baccalaureate service. You might suppose that what the T-shirt quipped about Des Moines I am now going to quip about those obscure, faraway villages and hamlets to which some of you graduates have been called as pastors - Latrobe, Pennsylvania; Mohawk, Michigan; Louisville, Nebraska - as if those localities were afterthoughts stranded on the edge of civilization. No, that would be a cheap shot, and terribly parochial. That would imply that places like that are

ecclesiastically "far off" and places like this are ecclesiastically "near." That is exactly the snooty misconception about "far off" and "near" which our text is meant to overcome with its own straight talk about peace.

2. Return to the T-shirt for a moment and imagine that "T" stands for "theology": a theological shirt, a sort of revealing liturgical vestment. To accomplish the revealing, the only adjustment we would need to make in the original slogan is to substitute for the name "Des Moines" the word "church." Thus, "the church is not the end of the world but you can see it from there." The one place in the world from which to see how the world finally ends is that place where Jesus the Christ gathers his believers, the church.

3. Isn't that in effect what our text from Ephesians is saying in the way it locates "peace?" If you want to see a world which ends in peace, come look at the world at that point where it is becoming the church. Not that the church already is the world at peace. It is and it isn't. But there in the church you can see the world on its way to being pacified before your eyes. How you see that is not by staring at the church directly but rather by looking to Christ Jesus, to whom the church also looks, and then first looking back at the church to watch it watching Christ. The church is that much of the world which comes to its end where it sees Christ came to his end - as Ephesians says, "in his body on the cross." And what it sees, in him, is what it gets: peace. The church's Cross-eyed preoccupation with Christ is the best view you can get, for now, of how the world is scheduled to end - peaceably.

## II.

1. What is the alternative? Unfortunately there is a non-peaceable alternative fate of the world, though that is deeply unpleasant to talk about. It is almost too grim to contemplate. If earlier this week you saw ABC's documentary on the nuclear future, "The Fire Unleashed," you have an inkling, but even then, at worst, only an inkling. Ephesians' alternative to peace, its alternative unhappy ending, is summed up in its single word, "hostility." In order for the world to end in "peace" it first has to be rescued from

its opposite, its otherwise certain doom, "hostility." At first that may sound simplistic. Our activist generation has learned to say, "Peace is more than the absence of hostility," "If you want peace, work for justice." Yet in the Scripture lesson before us the diametric antithesis of peace is said to be, quite straightforwardly, "hostility," "enmity."

2. That does sound too simple until we notice what all Ephesians means by hostility. The secret of the world's hostility, what really promotes its divisions and apartheid and antagonisms, or at least exacerbates them by seeming to legitimate them, is something for which the Creator, Godself, is responsible, namely, "the law of commandments and ordinances." There is no breaking down "the dividing wall of hostility" except by "abolishing ... the law of commandments and ordinances." And you know very well who is the Creator of that law. Abolish that? Even to say that takes theological daring, and anyone who does say it either is risking blasphemy or must be awfully sure of a way out. Let's hope our epistle belongs to the latter.

3. The hostility which divides people is of course all too human, but what reinforces human beings' hostility, what seems to justify it is something quite divine, the law of God. The deepest division between people is not the gap between races and nationalities (in Ephesians, between Jews and Gentiles) nor the gap between the sexes or between age-groups or between rich and poor, powerful and powerless. The deepest division is between those who do justice and those who do injustice, the right-minded and the wrong-minded, those who respect the Creator's creation and those who don't, the lawful and the lawless. That most basic division is created, created and emphasized, not just by human beings but by the biblical God. That prior distinction between the just and the unjust permeates all the other lesser divisions between genders and classes and races, it stiffens and strengthens those divisions into hostilities and gives them a show of right.

4. For example, racism. Racism is not just calling attention to our ethnic differences of skin color and culture. By themselves those differences are grounds for rejoicing, part of the very richness and elegance of the creation. What sours those ethnic differences into hostile divisions is the added implication that, down deep, they are really differences

between superior and inferior, between the morally better and the morally worse, between the somebodies and the nobodies. Racism smuggles into ethnicity the secret weapon of the divine law, the element of passing judgment upon human worth. To recognize that she is black could well be a compliment, but to keep her at a distance socially or geographically because she is black is to imply the law's kind of Judgment about her worthiness. If she for the same reason or because she is a woman keeps her distance, on the grounds that that must be her place as an inferior, then she likewise is betraying how browbeaten she is not merely by her ethnicity or her sex but by the power of the law of God to evaluate persons, its power to judge them and to assign them to their appropriate outer circles. "The law of commandments and ordinances," though admittedly it is God's law, is what provides the dividing walls of hostility with their hidden power to wall people off.

5. Nowadays of course we are all savvy enough about bigotry, "hostility," to be able to see that bigots don't really respect God's law but merely manipulate it to their own ends. They are not lawful at all, they are legalists. Their dividing walls of hostility are a violation of "the law of commandments and ordinances." Obviously. So then, what do we do about them? Obviously, we invoke God's law all over again, this time against the bigots and this time justly. With the help of that law we brand the sexists and the oppressors for what they are, as we must. Their divisive practices and institutions we publicly deplore, as we must. The bigots themselves we try to remove from centers of influence, as we must. We invoke God as well, as we must, warning the bigoted world that such intra-human hostility vexes and angers the Creator and that there is hell to pay for that kind of divisiveness amongst us. In other words. God too can be hostile and divisive, and for good and lawful reasons.

6. So in the end, one way or the other, unjustly or justly, the divine "law of commandments and ordinances" keeps erecting always new dividing walls of hostility, if only by the way it sets itself righteously against the existing unrighteous hostilities. Even the doing of justice creates new divisions. Like a black hole in the universe, human society seems infinitely fissionable, thanks of course to its own petty bigotries but

mightily compounded by the Creator's incessant, indignant critique of these bigotries. Whether it is the oppressors who abuse the law to rationalize their own cruelty or their courageous critics who expose the cruelty by means of that same law, whether it is unjust war or just war, persecution or righteous schism, it is still war, schism, hostility - not peace. If you want peace, work for justice? Right. But if you do work for justice, as you must, you'll not really get peace either, but new divisions. There is no place in the world where this hostility really ends; or almost no place. There is no place from which even to see the end of it; or almost none.

### III.

1. Almost no place. But there is one place. It is that strange and desolate place which Ephesians locates by such graphic terms as "in Christ Jesus" (v. 13), "in the blood of Christ" (v. 13), "in his flesh" (v. 15), "in one body through the cross" (v. 16). You cannot help but notice, sisters and brothers, that also that place of "cross" and "blood" and "flesh," situated so deep within the world, is itself a scene of worldly hostility. This cruciform place where the world ends, though it ends there in peace, is no escape from the world. It is not a place for those who flee reality, those who shrug off the hostilities, those who cannot stand the sight of blood. It is the place where the righteous and the ungodly, the legitimate and the illegitimate, the lawful and the lawless finally clash.

2. But at this place of the cross their clash is with him, Jesus, no longer with one another. For he dares to deny the difference between them. He challenges whether in fact they are all that different from one another, first of all as sinners but more than that, as precious and righteous. Exasperated, they demand of him, Well, then, are we somebodies or nobodies? Yes, he answers, disarming them. Not some of you somebodies and others of you nobodies nor each of you a little of both, but all of you nobodies are, through me, one great somebody. Isn't that something!

3. By challenging the differences between them Jesus challenges whether the law of God really has the last word after all, now that he has come along. Without ever

demeaning that law of commandments and ordinances but on the contrary promoting it, he does nevertheless demote it. And for that there was hell to pay. That is why there was a "cross" and "blood" and a "body." He suffered the indignation himself, and suffered it out of existence. The black hole is closed. And out puffs Pentecost. Jesus the Christ presumed to bring home with him not only the highborn from the suburbs but the riffraff and the bastards from the barrios and the underworld. He had the audacity, the sheer naeve chutzpah to palm them all off on God, his motherly Father, as though these tagalongs were all one and the same - not merely equal (for which the world would be willing to settle) but rather one. "one new humanity in place of the two."

4. In response to this preposterous homecoming, would you believe it, the Creator throws open the doors of home, rolls back the stone, raises the dead Jew and seats him and his whole dubious following (including us) in a place of cosmic favor forever, and entrusts to us the administration of this hostile world during this its final phase. ". . . So making peace." And to think that the cunning old Creator had been in on this whole magnificent scam from the very beginning. It is difficult even to tell that hilarious story without cracking up. But cracking up is what the wall of hostility is doing.. Can't you see it from here?

5. Is the end of the world far off? Or is it near? Sisters and brothers, you know I don't know the answer to that. But I do know that you and I have been far off, on the yon side, the wrong side of the Creator's law of commandments and ordinances - again and again we have been - and that we as well "have been brought near in the blood of Christ." I also know that far-offs like ourselves who are continually being brought near have a special feel for the world's other far-offs: The warmongers (not only their victims but the damnable warmongers themselves), a special feel for the sexists (not only those they abuse and demean but the abusers themselves), a special feel for the gluttons (not only the bloated children whom they starve but the bloated gluttons and the greedy), a special feel for the bureaucrats and intellectuals (not only for the illiterates whom they scorn but for the pathetic scorners themselves). It takes one to know one. It takes one far-off to know another far-off.

6. And it may well take you, take you to a cross, to bring other far-offs near. Why else do you keep looking to that One who majored in those who were far off, the One who refused to be deterred even by "the law of commandments and ordinances?" My friend, Ed Lisson - big Father Ed Lisson - works with the dying, the dying young and the dying elderly. As he chuckles, all 300 pounds of him, he observes, "The young insist on justice, the old settle for mercy." You, sisters, and brothers, can give them both. If you want peace, work for justice - mercifully. The world wants peace, so promise them justice but give them mercy. Why else do you insist on covering yourself with the sign of Christ, scarcely counting the cost for the joy that is set before you? Why else do you keep tasting him week-in, week-out? Why else are you splashed with his Spirit spanking wet? It must take one to know that One. Spanking wet, what a revealing theological shirt you are. You may not be the end of the world, but I can see it from where you're looking.

Peace!

Robert W. Bertram  
LSTC  
6/9/85