

Forgiving One Another, Out Loud

Isn't that what we in our congregations act out on Sunday mornings when we come to that point in the service called "The Exchange of Peace" or "Passing The Peace" or just "The Peace"? I mean, aren't we thereby saying to one another, Here, sisters and brothers, is a peace which, though it is also mine, is every bit as much yours - therefore, enjoy? Now I know that that wonderful moment in the liturgy, at least so I think it is, has not always been equally welcomed by all believers. In fact, when the practice of passing the peace was first being introduced among us, twenty to thirty years ago, there was, as some of you will recall, a good bit of resistance.

Thelda, my wife, recently reminded me of that. She is a librarian and, to help me prepare this presentation, she showed me a clipping from Ann Landers' column dated less than four years ago. One of the letter-writers that day, identified as a Lutheran, was obviously upset. "Here in the East," said the angry letter, "it is show-biz time in the Lutheran church. We are asked to 'pass the peace.' People from all sides grab your hand, mutter 'peace be with you,' and the scene resembles a fruit basket upset. ... You might as well be in an amusement park." (Saint Louis Post-Dispatch, 11/16/87)

I picture the offended Lutheran who wrote that letter as one of those who in Paul's congregation in Rome might have been called "the weak," that is, so called by others who thought of themselves as "the strong." "The strong" in this situation would then be those other Lutherans who, as the letter claims, when "we are asked to 'pass the peace,' ... (come at you] from all sides, grab your hand, mutter 'peace be with you'" and generally

make a scene which “resembles a fruit basket upset.” At least so it seems to this stricter, more traditional Lutheran. He, I suppose, goes along with the “fruit basket upset,” maybe even forces a smile as he does so, but enjoys the experience not one bit. In fact, not only does he not feel right about it, the whole transaction strikes him as sacrilegious, displeasing to God. As Paul would say, this believer cannot do what he does “with faith,” hence what he does – what he does – is “sin.”

On the other hand, how about “the strong?” Theirs is the kind of robust faith, I am speculating, which allows them to welcome this new freedom in the liturgy, the freedom to greet one another as itself a part of the Eucharist. And the more neighborly they are about it, the more they feel they have caught the Spirit. So engrossed are they by what they themselves find pleasing that they fail to notice this stray, wounded believer who does not share their exuberance. Or if they do notice him, they may regard him as a wet blanket or a stick-in-the-mud. It might never occur to them that by such an apparently harmless ceremony they are, as Paul says, causing “the ruin of one for whom Christ died,” (14:15) possibly even driving him away from the beloved company. His only recourse, at least the only one his weak faith allows, is to complain to Ann Landers. There he gets a hearing.

I take Paul to be saying, there is a third way, which is neither the way of the offended “weak” nor the way of the self-pleasing “strong.” Nor is it merely some wimpish compromise between the two. On the contrary, it is the truly strong way of the Holying Spirit, whereby the strong use their strength not against the weak but for the weak. In this present case, what might that third way be? Obviously I have no infallible answer to that question. But I can cite an experience (not my own) which deals with just such a disagreement within a Lutheran congregation concerning the passing of The Peace.

Two factions in the congregation had reached a stalemate. The one side said they were all in favor of Christians greeting one another but that that should be saved for the fellowship hour after the service. The other side countered by saying, what better place to greet one another than in the church service where God greets us? Both sides, I suppose, had a point, though "the strong" probably had a stronger "theological" point. We usually do. However, even "the strong" in this case were making the same faulty assumption that "the weak" were making. Both sides were assuming that the passing of The Peace is basically an occasion for greetings. After all, didn't they all shake hands, some even hugging and kissing? Didn't some of them say, not "peace be with you" but "good morning" or "how are you" or even sneak in a quick conversation?

In fact, that seems to have been the very thing that "the strong" liked about the ritual, that it was a greeting, and the very thing "the weak" disliked, that stopping to chat with one another broke the spell of worship. The impasse between the two groups had worsened to the point where one of the so-called "weak" would stay seated during The Peace, with his eyes closed, and would not join in. He at least was still coming to church, which his wife had stopped doing.

The parishioner who came to the rescue was herself one of "the strong," a young woman, a travel agent by profession. In a Sunday morning adult class devoted to the subject she spoke up. She was so nervous she stood up. She began by apologizing for her accent. She told about her childhood days in her parents' home, a Lutheran home in Czechoslovakia. On Sunday mornings after the family had finished breakfast and before they headed off to church, they would rise from the breakfast table, say aloud The Confession of Sin together and then would turn to one another, parents as well as children, and each would speak to the other the forgiveness of sin. Then they would go to church.

Said the young woman, that was before she had ever encountered the exchange of peace in the church service. When that practice was later introduced, she said, she simply assumed that what the worshipers were doing when they said “the peace of the Lord be with you” was forgiving one another – the way her family had done back home. Then she sat down.

The class was moved by what the young woman told them. They asked their pastor to tell them more. The pastor went back to the books. He also got on the phone with an old seminary professor and then returned to the congregation with what he had learned. He even preached about the subject. It seems the old Slovak Lutherans were onto something, said the preacher. The passing of The Peace, while it does have an element of greeting about it, is not meant primarily as a greeting. Primarily it is Christians forgiving one another now that God in Christ has forgiven them. You will notice, by the way, that the worshipers speak their forgiving Peace to one another well after the pastor has pronounced forgiveness on them all as the spokesperson for Christ. Our pastor, by the way, Pastor Janet Peele, opens every service with The Confession of Sin and The Absolution and then later on, when we get to the passing of The Peace, she says, “Let us share a sign of this Peace with one another” – this Peace, I presume, which we had all received a moment before from Christ in The Absolution.

Similarly the preacher in that other, troubled congregation went on to explain. You will notice, he said, that we speak The Peace, the forgiveness to one another immediately before we all come forward for The Holy Communion. That reminds us, he said, of what our Lord once taught us, If you still have unfinished business with some sister or brother, first be reconciled with them and then come to the altar. The passing of The Peace, said the preacher, recalls one of the major themes of the Reformation, the universal priesthood of all believers. We are

all priests to one another. It is what Luther once called "the mutual conversation and consolation of the [sisters and] brothers. It is mutual absolution.

Well, that did it. So I am told. Parishioners on both sides of the controversy were moved to reconsider. Even those who had been most resistive to the passing of The Peace had to admit, at least to themselves, that if what is going on here is forgiveness of sin, nothing could be more churchly than that. And that would not be the sort of thing to reserve for the fellowship hour in the church basement. "The strong" ones likewise could feel better than ever about this new feature in the liturgy. It was better even than greeting one another, which really anyone can do. This was doing what Christ does, forgiving and restoring.

During the week following the preacher's sermon, someone in the congregation made a phone call. The caller was the man who, as I mentioned, had been quietly boycotting the passing of The Peace by sitting it out in his pew. Whom did he phone? He phoned the young Slovak-American woman. Why did he phone her? I am only guessing that it was because he knew strong faith when he saw it. True, he called the woman's home number during the day, when he probably knew she would be away at the office. But he did leave a message on her message recorder. I know, that might not seem to be as up-front and forthright as you would like, But don't knock it. For the message he left was this: "This is Jack Miller (or whatever his name was) from church; Lydia and I just wanted to say, 'The Peace of the Lord be with you.'" The young woman returned The Peace the following Sunday, in person, richly accented.

Isn't that how, in the real church, hope is abounding?

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