

“Built on Peace”

“There is an old story that has often been re-told in especially the Eastern Orthodox part of the church. According to the tale, a devout abbot from a monastery decided to take a prolonged spiritual retreat in a small cabin located on a remote island in the middle of a large lake. He told his fellow monks that he wanted to spend his days in prayer so as to grow closer to God. For six months he remained on the island with no other person seeing him or hearing from him in all that time. But then one day, as two monks were standing near the shore soaking up some sunshine, they could see in the distance a figure moving toward them.” **“It was the abbot, walking on water, and coming toward shore.”** “After the abbot passed by the two monks and continued on to the monastery, one of the monks turned to the other and said, **‘All these months in prayer and the abbot is still as stingy as ever. After all, the ferry costs only 25 cents!’**” (Scott Hoezee, Comments and Observations on Mark 6:30-56.)

That tale humorously exposes the tendency of us human beings to let personal prejudices and animosities control how we see and relate with one another and others. For example, the monk could observe the abbot being so full of faith and power so he could walk on the water but the monk’s self-serving comment showed his petty animosity, “the abbot is still as stingy as ever. After all, the ferry costs only 25 cents!” Unfortunately, many self-described Christians continue to allow their prejudices and perceived slights to so color how they think of others that they have refused to accept persons, who are not like themselves, as bonified members of the Body of Christ – the Church. **Indeed, many supposed Christians have aligned themselves with politicians, who espouse unjust and hateful messages and actions toward people they consider to be undesirable because they want to get to rid of those they have judged to be “sinners” or unacceptable.** Those who are the subjects of such injustice and hate are often afraid to even visit a local church for fear of facing such attacks and rejection. Some, even succumb to those negative evaluations of themselves and respond with anger and/or self-abasement.

The Apostle Paul was called by Jesus on the Road to Damascus to minister to one large group of the outcasts of his society – the non-Jews – the Gentiles. He sought to facilitate their integration into the Body of Christ and to lift up their self-identity as he wrote in verses 19-22, **“So then, you Gentiles are not foreigners or strangers any longer; you are now citizens together with God’s people and members of the family of God. You, too, are built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, the cornerstone being Christ Jesus himself. He is the one who holds the whole building together and makes it grow into a sacred temple dedicated to the Lord. In union with him you too are being built together with all the others into a place where God lives through His Spirit.”**

Unfortunately, the unity of the Body of Christ, the Church, is suffering! Over the years, the Church has split into numerous denominations and independent groups. Further, Peace is lacking between Christians because of the tendency and temptation to exclude and reject certain people, sometimes referred to as “sinners”. Paul explained the Body of Christ – the Church is built upon the Peace we have through Jesus Christ. However, in the many expressions of the Church, peace suffers because of prejudices and the desire to puff oneself up at the expense of the welfare of someone different.

Agreeing, Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt wrote, “one does not have to think too hard to come up with the many painful things which divide us today, many of which have profound bearing on who we are as Church. For instance:

We categorize ourselves and one another

by race,

by gender,

by sexual orientation,

by class,

by citizenship status.

We are deeply aware of our differences in

political party

and theological position

and church denomination.”

Hunt elaborated, “And the wall seems to grow only higher as too much of the time, many of us listen only to those who already agree with us, afraid of being tainted or convinced or proven wrong, perhaps. As a result, we do not allow our positions and therefore our hopes and dreams – indeed, our very lives, to be refined by the fires of simple conversation back and forth.” Hunt continued, “Oh yes, there is so very much that divides us that we sometimes even find ourselves hesitant to bring up the controversial, fearful that our false sense of peace will be disrupted.” Hunt remembered, “And so here is where my memory has been returning in these days.” **“I am recalling a time when difference threatened to divide, and in the end, did not.”** It was twenty five years ago, but it could have been yesterday I remember it so well. It was in that time between Thanksgiving and Christmas when plans were being firmed up for the next family gathering. My sister had come out to us just a few months

before. Now in those days, at least in my family, we hardly had language for this and we were still discerning what to make of it. As I recall, I was standing with my dad in the living room of our childhood home.” **“We had just received word that another part of the family was threatening not to come for Christmas if she was there.”**

Hunt shared, “Now I seldom saw my dad angry, but his eyes were flashing then as he insisted, ‘No one tells one of my children she can’t come home.’” Hunt continued, “It still brings tears to my eyes to remember it. He who truly hardly knew how to begin to understand this and honestly was more than a little uncomfortable talking about it, sided with love and with welcome, even if it cost. I have never been prouder that he was my dad. And yes, let me say, my mother was in those words as well. He just happened to be the one speaking them that night. ... And you know that Christmas so long ago?” **“Everyone came. Even those who threatened they would not. For they, too were welcome.”** (“Jesus: Our Peace” by Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt posted on dancingwiththeword.com)

“For they, too were welcome.” Rev. Dr. Janet Hunt had a very helpful insight when she wrote that last sentence, for the peace her family experienced points to how the Church is Built on Peace. Let’s look again at our Reading. **Paul wrote in verses 13-14 and 17, “But now, in union with Christ Jesus you, who used to be far away, have been brought near by the sacrificial death of Christ. For Christ himself has brought us peace by making Jews and Gentiles one people. With his own body he broke down the wall that separated them and kept them enemies. ... So Christ came and preached the Good News of peace to all — to you Gentiles, who were far away from God, and to the Jews, who were near to Him.”**

All people have been given Peace – been reconciled with everyone else, who has become part of the Body of Christ, when they respond to Jesus’ Good News because of his sacrificial death – his embodiment of God’s Agape Love for all persons – the whole world. This Peace in the building of the Church comes about because Christ provided us the ultimate proof of God’s Agape Love – of Forgiveness, Healing, Invitation, Welcome, Acceptance – and Reconciliation with everyone in the New Relationship with God and the New Life in Jesus Christ! **That Total Manifestation of our Divine Parent’s Suffering and Self-Giving Agape Love in Jesus’ death for us opens our eyes to God’s Extravagant and Radical Invitation and Welcome of All People into the New Relationship with God – the Body of Christ – the Kingdom of God.**

During the time of Paul’s Ministry, this bringing of peace to and among all people in the Church was most dramatically demonstrated by the unity of Jews and non-Jews or Gentiles in the Body of Christ. **Unfortunately, over almost 2,000 years of history since the Self-Giving Death of Jesus on the Cross, many self-professing Christians have given into the temptation to let their prejudice and their desire to be seen as better than others lead local congregations and many denominations to manifest division, rejection, and judgmentalism, against persons, who aren’t just like themselves, just as did Jesus’ adversaries, the Pharisees, Scribes, and Teachers of the Old Testament Law.** The tendency to follow that legalistic approach had already started among the local congregations the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, either started or ministered to. That was the root cause for division and anger among the local church members.

The Apostle Paul understood all that and so he also wrote in **verses 15-16 of our Scripture, “He abolished the Jewish Law with its commandments and rules, in order to create out of the two races one new people in union with himself, in this way making peace. By his death on the cross Christ destroyed their enmity; by means of the cross he united both races into one body and brought them back to God.”** Saying the Jewish Law – the Bible says only certain types of people are acceptable to God is not the way of Jesus’ Peace and the Unity his Body – the Church is to manifest.

Dr. Hunt summed up the peace we need as the Church is built by asking a series of questions. “How are we called to talk about this and so many other matters which threaten to divide?” **“How might we rely on the certain truth that ‘Jesus is our peace’ and the promise that what divides us has already been broken down in him?”** “Is it possible that it is not my job, not your job, to remove the bricks from the wall because Jesus has already done so?” **“Is it so that all we have to do is walk through the opening which Jesus has already created for us?”** “Certainly, that is what these words to the Ephesians seem to say. ...”

Hunt continued her questions, “How does the certainty that Jesus’ first response was never judgment, but welcome – especially for those on the margins, for those outcast by the rest, inform us now?” **“What difference does it make if our defining values are love and welcome?”** (“Jesus: Our Peace” by Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt posted on dancingwiththeword.com)

Friends, the Church is being built on the Peace of Jesus Christ at Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ because we seek to follow the Teachings and Example of Jesus Christ. He was not judgmental toward those different from himself, he welcomed the outcasts and rejected by society. He welcomed the foreigners and even the oppressors. **He gave his life for all of us to prove God’s Great Agape Love for everyone and that our Divine Parent’s Will is for all of us to be reconciled, loved – loving, invited – inviting, welcomed – welcoming, forgiven and forgiving!** God Is Still Speaking – still inviting and calling us to Invite and Welcome all people into the Body of Christ because Jesus has given us the Peace we need to build and be the Church. **Look for the opportunity to invite family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers to join us in this being built into the Church with the Peace of Christ.** Amen.