January 12, 2014 Norwalk

**Pastoral Prayer**

Embracing God, we come searching, perhaps wrestling with our inner voices, listening to gain some clarity, some affirmation of who we are, where our efforts might best be pointed, and the extent to which we and our efforts finally matter. You come, arms outstretched, drawing us to yourself in blessing, claiming us and defining us as your beloved children with whom you are very pleased. And we are grateful – grateful for the countless ways you touch us with blessing.

But we don’t delude ourselves. Your blessing embrace of us – the pleasure you take in us – does not mean we always get it right. Our choices are, as often as not, driven by selfishness rather than the imitation of Christ. Our interest, as often as not, is pleasure rather than your purpose for all creation. We know how to grab and bite back; we know how to hoard and how to bully, and how to deceive and how to ignore. No, your embrace of us is not because we are perfect – but because you are, gracious God. And we praise you. And recognizing that even in our biggest and best moments we have need of your presence, need of your power, we pray for your touch just now.

We pray for ourselves. We pray for this world, wounded in so many ways, and yet so capable of healing and being healed. May we find in your embrace the courage and grace to stretch our arms, as well, in blessing. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.

**Acts 10:34-43**

*Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows* ***no partiality****, but in every nation* ***anyone*** *who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that* ***everyone*** *who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”*

***“No Favorites”***

I suppose it’s human nature: we are pretty certain that we are right, and therefore better than others. It goes without saying, then, that anyone who disagrees with us is wrong -- and therefore inferior. We spend whole lifetimes drawing lines and then arguing about which side of those lines represents the “outside” and which the “inside.”

I listened with some amusement at the minor controversy that roiled this week between radio commentator Rush Limbaugh and NBC weatherman Al Roker. Rush, you have heard, had labeled all this talk about a “Polar Vortex” supposedly responsible for last week’s bitter cold as a liberal media-inspired “hoax” designed to ratchet up angst about global warming (which he also believes to be a liberal hoax). In response, Al produced a 1959 American Meteorological Society glossary to demonstrate that the phrase is straight out of "Meteorology 101” and has nothing to do with any “political agenda."

 My first reaction was to think, “Oh come on Al. Don’t get sucked into Rush’s whirlwind. Just ignore him. Being ignored would be the worst possible reaction he could abide. It’s not his job, after all, to proctor reasoned discussion. It’s his job to stay in the public eye which he attempts to do by whipping up artificial controversies. As long as people keep paying attention to him he’ll never go away.” But then I realized that liberals need people like Rush Limbaugh as much as Rush needs liberals. Where would we be without enemies -- people to define ourselves against? We have to have something -- or someone -- to demonize and hate. Otherwise we’d just have to get along and where’s the fun in that? So, we keep hanging up bullseyes whenever we feel like our aim might be getting rusty.

And then there is this additional truth I learned in my community organizing training: that there are no permanent enemies and no permanent friends. All that can change. Perhaps you read the article this week about Dick Metcalf, the journalist whose widely-read column on the back of *Guns and Ammo* magazine, who was summarily fired a couple of months ago for suggesting that there might be some legitimate place for the regulation of firearms. “The fact is,” wrote Mr. Metcalf, who has taught history at Cornell and Yale, “all constitutional rights are regulated, always have been, and need to be.” In addition to being dropped from the magazine, his television show was cancelled as well. One might point out that he should have known better. *The New York Times* article that reported the story quoted Richard Venola, former editor of *Guns and Ammo*, as saying, “We are locked in a struggle with powerful forces in this country who will do anything to destroy the Second Amendment. The time for ceding some rational points is gone” (*Banished for Questioning the Gospel of Guns*, By [RAVI SOMAIYA](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/ravi_somaiya/index.html), JAN. 4, 2014).

Don’t think this is leading to some diatribe for or even against gun control. I don’t know what ought to happen on that subject. It depends on which side of the bed I get up on in the morning. All the violence we manage to perpetrate on one another makes me sick and there is a part of me that wishes we could just round up all the guns in the world, dig a big hole, and bury them away. But I also grew up among a family of hunters, have some appreciation for the sport involving guns, and, of course, there are all those rabbits. Plus, I know how aggravated I became when they started regulating my sinus medication. And when airport security adopted their “pro-nudity” policy. So I “get” the nervousness about regulation.

Whatever the subject, however, pretty soon, as Mr. Metcalf learned the hard way, it’s no longer about the issue itself, but about those who line on up one side of the line or the other -- or worse, start to bend the line.

A few years ago, the congregation of which I was a part began to wrestle with one of those popularly volatile issues, and we came across an old documentary that we watched together and discussed over the course of a few weeks. The movie was made in Omaha, Nebraska in the late 1960’s, and followed a Lutheran congregation’s deliberation around the issue of race. The filmmakers were granted extraordinary access to the church’s inner workings -- Board Meetings, congregational meetings, committee meetings, even conversations in private homes between husband and wife -- all over the pastor’s recommendation that a few volunteers be recruited to have a conversation with some of the members of an African-American congregation across town. You heard me correctly: the issue on the table was whether or not to permit the pastor to solicit some volunteers to have a conversation with some black folks from another church. And the conflict almost destroyed the church.

I can’t speak for you, but to my ears that sounds almost laughable. What a puny hill to fight over. How archaic! How small-minded. How bigoted. But as we watched the clips of that congregation’s various meetings -- and family arguments -- we heard the exact same words and reasonings and arguments that we, ourselves, had been voicing around “our” issue coming out of their mouths around “theirs.”

“It’s contrary to scripture!”

“Maybe someday, but this is moving too fast.”

“It’s unnatural.”

“What next?”

In the movie those interracial conversations did eventually take place, but at a high price. It might not surprise you that in the end the pastor had to leave. He had expended all his political capital on the controversy and there was nothing left of the pastor/parish relationship. And we, in our own situation 40 years later, were forced to confess that we hadn’t travelled very far from that congregation that had initially seemed so parochial, prejudiced and small minded.

I rather think that Peter would have sympathized. We are loathe to give up our enemies. When his colleagues saw him tempering his views on one of the fundamental planks of identity orthodoxy -- erasing lines, and jumping fences -- they almost kicked him out of the fold, too. Here is the situation.

In the story that precedes and gives rise to Peter’s little sermon in our biblical headlights this morning, two visions occur followed by two conversions. One pair centers around a Roman centurion named Cornelius who is described as devout and loving God. The vision that comes to him includes the assurance that God has received his prayers -- no small confirmation since Cornelius is a gentile about whom the general consensus was that God didn’t much care, and therefore to whom God wasn’t much expected to listen -- and that he should send for this person named Peter. Cornelius apparently isn’t told what his business is to be with Peter, but nonetheless he sends representatives to where Peter is supposed to be staying, with the invitation that Peter come.

Meanwhile, Peter, over in a nearby town, also receives a vision. In it he sees what looks like a kind of sheet descending from the heavens, transporting all manner of critters -- 4-footed animals, reptiles, birds -- and Peter hears a kind of heavenly voice instructing him to fire up the grill and get ready for supper. Peter, a good and observant Jew, balks at the prospect given that there are included in the menagerie some animals labelled “unclean.” The heavenly voice replied, “What God has made clean you must not call profane.” Just to drive the point home, that heavenly hammer struck that theological nail three times.

As Peter was contemplating the meaning of the vision, Cornelius’ emissaries knocked on the door. Beginning to suspect that perhaps the vision wasn’t really about animals and ritual particularities after all, but people, Peter returned with them, and in the course of his interactions with Cornelius and his associates, delivers the words we have read together this morning that eventually conclude with the clear movement of the Holy Spirit and the baptism of these gentiles.

Two visions, then, and two conversions -- one of Cornelius, and one of Peter who, despite the political fallout that ensued, would never look at people quite the same again.

“Now I understand that God shows no partiality.”

You might also notice the other words that suddenly shine out of this passage --

“Anyone”

“Everyone”

“All”

Reflecting on this story, I recall the little poem by Edwin Markham:

*“He drew a circle that shut me out-*

*Heretic , rebel, a thing to flout.*

*But love and I had the wit to win:*

*We drew a circle and took him In !”* (From the poem " Outwitted”)

No Partiality. No Favorites. Drawing circles that take others in. It begins to seem like a whole other way of viewing life. And in this increasingly polarized, Balkanized world of global and party and religious politics, it begins to sound like an increasingly important passage to read.

God shows no partiality. There is only one river, and it flows through you and it flows through me. This might be one of those instances when swimming against the flow is the wrong way to go.

**RIVER OF JORDAN**

Peter Yarrow*- ©1972 Mary Beth Music, ASCAP*

I traveled the banks of the River of Jordan

To find where it flows to the sea.

I looked in the eyes of the cold and the hungry

And I saw I was looking at me.

I wanted to know if life had a purpose

And what it all means in the end.

In the silence I listened to voices inside me

And they told me again and again.

There is only one river. There is only one sea.

And it flows through you, and it flows through me.

There is only one people. We are one and the same.

We are all one spirit. We are all one name.

We are the father, mother, daughter and son.

From the dawn of creation, we are one.

We are one.

Every blade of grass on the mountain

Every drop in the sea

Every cry of a newborn baby

Every prayer to be free

Every hope at the end of a rainbow

Every song ever sung

Is a part of the family of woman and man

And that means everyone.

We are only one river. We are only one sea.

And it flows through you, and it flows through me.

We are only one people. We are one and the same.

We are all one spirit. We are all one name.

We are the father, mother, daughter and son

From the dawn of creation, we are one.

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