

Proper 6 - 3 Pentecost – Year C – June 16, 2010 - Homily
1 Kings 21:1-21a; Psalm 5:1-8; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3
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One of the most fascinating sights to see all over England and other parts of the world are follies. Follies are purely ornamental structures made to resemble functional buildings, which actually serve no real function in and of themselves. Some of you may remember me talking about Wainhouse Tower, a folly I used to pass each day on my way to high school. It is a 253-foot tower built for no real purpose, except one. Sadly, it was built to spite a wealthy neighbor. You have heard it said, and it is generally true that good fences make good neighbors. In fact, the metaphor extends well to relationships. Healthy boundaries make for healthy relationships. We are individuals, and when we lose ourselves in other people, when our boundaries are blurred or too porous, it usually results in hurt or resentment. On the other hand, when we lose ourselves in Christ, we retain our unique personality, but find greater clarity of purpose for our lives.

Paul is in the middle of a conflict with his own spiritual neighbors. In fact, the whole Christian community at Galatia is in turmoil because of the stand taken by some of the Jerusalem Christians, most of which are Jewish followers of Christ. The issue at stake is whether or not gentile Christians must also be circumcised and follow the customs and practices of Judaism. As the tone of Paul's letter to the Galatians suggests he is adamant that Christ died for all, and that all we need for our salvation is to accept the gift of faith in Christ Jesus, by God's grace. There are no works of the Law that can add to what Jesus has done for us on the cross. Being right with God, or being justified, is a gift of pure grace through faith. Our messy lives are not straightened out because we do or say something for ourselves, or because we practice certain aspects of our faith that others may or may not also practice. Salvation is never Jesus plus something else. It is not faith in Christ, plus certain religious practices. It is not faith in Christ, plus a certain theological position. Salvation is not faith in Christ, plus a certain income level, or a being a member of a specific denomination or community of worship. Salvation is Christ alone, and what Christ achieved for us on the cross. God's grace is completely unconditional, free to all who wish to accept it.

While the practice of certain traditions may bring us a kind of comfort in the familiarity of our order of worship, we must remember that traditional practices are not essential for faith. Over the centuries, numerous conflicts in the Body of Christ have arisen, not because we differ in believing that salvation is through faith in Christ Jesus by the grace of God, but because we have allowed some tradition or some practice to get in the way of God's gracious hospitality. If tradition starts to become essential for faith, then we are in serious danger of excluding others who also love Christ, but practice their faith in a different way. While the issues in intra-Body conflict have always been complicated, there have been times when new denominations have been formed because a charismatic leader felt that it was wrong for example to sing hymns, drink wine at the Eucharistic feast, put candles on the altar, baptize infants, or even wear vestments. These kinds of divisions, tearing the Body of Christ apart over human made doctrines is nothing short of tragic. The longer the tradition has been maintained like a sacred cow, the harder it is to set aside or find some compromise that is inclusionary. It is like

Wainhouse building a huge tower to spite his neighbor, because they could not agree on a healthy boundary. In his poem, *Mending Walls*, Robert Frost says it this way, “Before I built a wall / I’d ask to know what I was walling in or walling out, / and to whom I was like to give offence.” The Body of Christ is not meant to be separated from one another by human made walls. God’s grace is all-embracing. Jesus’ gift for the world is open to all. Clearly, some early Christian communities retained some of the practices of Judaism, whereas others, notably gentile Christians, did not. Paul’s point here is that the gospel is good news of God’s grace in Christ Jesus our Lord, and that gospel message cannot be replaced by binding customs or moral codes of practice. Not then, and not now.

God’s gracious hospitality is sometimes dizzying – extending far beyond our sightlines, and limited understanding in its gift to the world. The paradox and disorientation of the cross constantly has the power to surprise and shock us. Jesus loved the world so much that He was willing to die rather than compromise his relationship with God, and his unswerving faith and trust in God. And God raised Him up again, conquering sin and death, once for all. The mystery of God is such that we must never make traditional practices into follies that block others’ view of Christ, or stand in the way of divine grace. While there are some healthy boundaries that help us to create and live in blessed community, building a wall of exclusion is not one of them. Practicing God’s graciousness by loving God and loving our neighbor is a great way to remind ourselves of who we really are in Christ. For Paul, it is our faith alone that reorients and centers our minds, hearts, and our spirits. Faith such that we discern God’s will by the power of the Holy Spirit, and so that all our responses flow from that loving intimacy with Christ. Through the indwelling presence of God, we participate in the love of God. Christ dwells in our hearts and has created us to be a community based not on social distinctions, or divisive doctrines, but on love. May the thoughts of our hearts, the words of our mouths, and the deeds of our hands make it so.

Amen.