

Lent 2A

Gen 12:1-4a, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

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March 12, 2017

We Are Family

Last week, 18 of us, both adults and youth from Holy Spirit, attended the Hunger Walk in Atlanta. Most of us left early, so we could head directly to Emmaus House, located just a 1/2 mile from Turner Field. There, we joined youth teams from throughout the Diocese for breakfast, fellowship and Eucharist, before the walk began.

Emmaus House is a special place. Founded 50 years ago, it has a rich tradition of ministry in partnership with its neighbors in Peoplestown. And while a youth-focused Eucharist always includes Camp Mikell music, we also shared in the practices of Emmaus House, particularly as we passed the peace. Their custom is for everyone in the sanctuary to join hands, as we sing together *Let There Be Peace on Earth*. With that Hunger Walk crowd in attendance, we completely lined the walls of chapel space while holding hands.

Some of our youth hadn't heard that song before, but it was pretty easy to pick up, with so many of us familiar with it.

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.

Let there be peace on earth, The peace that was meant to be.

With God as our Father, Brothers all are we,

Let me walk with my brother, In perfect harmony.

I could hear some voices with an alternative lyric: *With God as our Father, we are family.*

And those words struck a chord within me: with God as our Father, we are family.

God the Creator. All of humankind made in God's own image. We are one in God's eyes, one family in God.

And God longs for all God's people to be unified, for us together to be instruments of God's peace, living into God's reality, God's Kingdom, as one world-wide human family.

All of our lessons today, speak to this:

- In Genesis, Abraham was blessed by God, blessed to be a blessing to all families of the earth. All families. Abraham, who is known as the father of all the people of the book — Christians, Jews, Muslims — the father of a multitude of nations. God is blessing God's world-wide human family.
- In Paul's letter to the Romans, we hear that God's blessing of grace comes to us so that we may be a blessing by calling others to live in Jesus' fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and Sarah — to live as one human family.
- And in John's gospel, the beloved words of John 3:16-17, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him would not perish, but have eternal life. Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Jesus came to save the world, for God loves all the world and desires for us to live as one, unified, human family.

This message sounds so simple, but living into it is so hard. The world around us is quick to redefine these words . . . sure, seek out relationships and build community, but be careful. You need to be safe. It's best to have just a few rules, to be clear about who we are. It may even be helpful if we define who we are by deciding who we aren't, by building a few walls, and deciding who's in and who's out.

Nicodemus was an insider: he was part of the religious elite. But before we jump to judgment about those Pharisees and Saducees of ancient times, we need to remember that Nicodemus truly loved God. He wanted to follow God, in love and obedience. He had dedicated his life to God, studying God's word and faithfully living into his faith, trying to listen with the ear of his heart.

He had discerned there was something about Jesus, something that was beyond what he had come to know through his regular religious practices and studies. He was compelled to find out more.

So he sought out Jesus and heard those confusing words: the need to be born anew, from above; that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit, a spiritual re-birth.

And Jesus goes on to reveal more about himself. He reminds Nicodemus of a well-known event – the rebellion of the Israelites in the desert and the way they were saved from punishment by deadly snake bites, by looking up at the bronze snake on the pole that God told Moses to set up. It's here that Nicodemus begins to learn that Jesus is not just another teacher.

Jesus explains he is the Son of Man, sent from heaven, who is to be lifted up so that everyone who believes and turns to God will be saved. God is not a cruel judge, but the savior of the world. The whole world. For we are one human family.

Jesus is breaking down barriers. Barriers that defined who is right with God by how closely they followed the letter of the law. Barriers that said that there must be something wrong with the poor and oppressed or they wouldn't be the poor and oppressed. Barriers that defined who is in and who is as out.

Jesus frees us to see that if we would just stop and listen and believe, we could come to understand that the Son of Man came to save all the world, the whole human family.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a retired South African Anglican bishop and social rights activist, wrote the book *God Has a Dream* back in 2004, sharing the spiritual message that sustained him through the difficult times of apartheid in South Africa. In this book, the Archbishop used his imagination to share his ideas of God's thoughts, echoing the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.

He wrote, "God says, 'I have a dream . . . that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family. In God's family, there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jews and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant ...'" and Tutu's list goes on — for all belong.

This is a message for us to hold in hearts, in our own troubled times. In Christ, we are one family and all belong.

In our time, just as in all difficult times of the past, we need to strive to open our hearts to transformational change. We need to live into our baptism, to be born anew and filled with the Spirit. We need to look up in faith, to God's remedy for our brokenness, to look up to Christ, who shows us what it means to do justice, to love mercy, to live in compassionate caring for all those around us, breaking down the barriers that separate us.

God calls not only Abraham or Nicodemus, but all of us, to begin a journey of faith, one that involves us finding new life together as part of God's human family. Jesus shows us the way, by breaking down those walls that divide us and leading us, through the cross, to better understand of the depth of God's love for all God's creation.

Are we ready to invite the Spirit to transform us?

Are we ready to ask for God to break our hearts broken open, to show us how we can respond as Jesus would respond, as we interact with all those we encounter this week?

Are we prepared to ask the Spirit to help us set aside our own barriers, all that causes us to "other" another beloved child of God, and give us the courage to lean wholeheartedly into God's love for all humankind?

Are we willing to stretch ourselves during this Lenten Season and ask, "How am I being called to live into transformational change in Christ, in this time and this place, to heal our broken human family?"

Amen.